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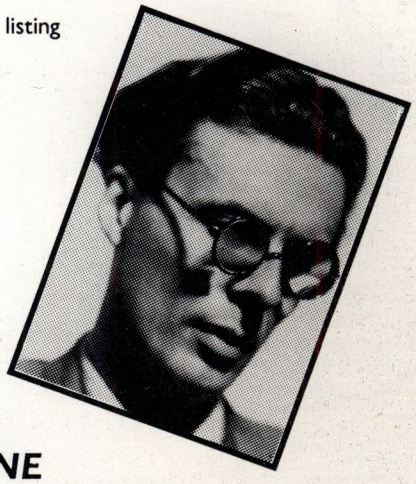

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Back-issues are available at £2.50 each in the UK (£2.80 each overseas), postage included. (US dollar price: $5 surface mail.) All issues are still in print *except* numbers 1, 5, 7, 17 and 22. Order them from address above.

Submissions: stories, in the 2,000-6,000 word range, should be sent singly and each one *must* be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope of adequate size. Persons overseas please send a disposable manuscript (marked as such) 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. Submissions should be sent to *either* of the following addresses: *Lee Montgomerie*, 53 Riviera Gardens, Leeds LS7 3DW *David Pringle*, 217 Preston Drove, Brighton BN1 6FL

interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 54 **December 1991**

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Interface
David Pringle

A number of readers have complained about the recent *Interzone/MILLION* "merger" (our issue 51 – see this issue's letter column). Meanwhile, others have praised it as an interesting change and have taken out subscriptions to our sister publication, *MILLION: The Magazine of Popular Fiction*, as a result. As usual, this mixed response proves that it is difficult to please all readers all of the time.

To reassure those who did not appreciate the crossover issue, with its largely non-fictional content, let me restate here that new fiction most certainly remains the *raison d'etre* of *Interzone*: short stories are the heart of this magazine, and we shall never abandon them. The fact that issue 51 consisted mainly of non-fiction should not be read as some sort of signal that we are about to change course. It was a one-off. Having moved from bimonthly to monthly publication less than two years ago, we still enjoy the luxurious feeling of *space* and *freedom to experiment*. Twelve magazines a year gives one a lot of room to manoeuvre – or so we felt until recently – and if one or two of those twelve issues per annum are somewhat off the beam, well, no harm is done...

However, we must admit that our timing was unfortunate. The *MILLION* swap issue (number 51) came too soon after the *Aboriginal* swap issue (number 47), and as a result readers may now be wearying of such experimental ventures. You want to know what you are getting when you buy *Interzone*. Fair enough. No more swap issues, crossover issues or unusual special issues are planned for the foreseeable future. We hope to be celebrating our tenth anniversary in some fashion next March, but that should take the form of a stronger than usual line-up of fiction, no more. Meanwhile, *Interzone* is back on a "normal" course, with plenty of new sf short stories (six in this issue, seven in our next), with work from established names and opportunities for new writers to break into print.

So keep reading. (And all those who did enjoy the interviews and comment which filled our issue 51 are encouraged to read *MILLION* for much more of the same – its sixth issue appeared recently, and is available from the same address as *IZ*.)

LOTS AND LOTS OF AWARDS

The 1991 **John W. Campbell Memorial Award** winner (for the best science-fiction novel of last year) is **Kim Stanley Robinson** for his *Pacific Edge*. Runners-up were Greg Bear for *Queen of Angels* and James Morrow for *Only Begotten Daughter*. The **Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award** for best sf short story went to Terry Bisson for his "Bears Discover Fire."

The 1991 **Bram Stoker Awards** for best horror fiction in the preceding year were given as follows:

Novel: *Mine* by **Robert R. McCammon**
First novel: *The Revelation* by **Bentley Little**
Novelette: "Stephen" by **Elizabeth Massie**
Short story: "The Calling" by **David Silva**
Collection: *Four Past Midnight* by **Stephen King**
Non-fiction: *Dark Dreamers* by **Stanley Wiater**
Life Achievement: **Hugh B. Cave** and **Richard Matheson**

And the 1991 **Hugo Awards** for science fiction should have been announced long before you read this. Unfortunately, we haven't received them in time for this editorial; we'll be reporting on those next issue.

(David Pringle)

Interaction

Dear Editors:
I am writing, belatedly, to say "thank you" to the 69 readers who took the time to respond to *IZ*'s 1990 story poll, and especially to the 16 (possibly more) who gave a positive mention to my story, "Learning the Language." I hope you have room to print this letter, because it means a lot.

It means a lot, even though I have a fundamental dislike of popularity polls. The reason for this dislike, I think, is that my taste as a reader often runs counter to everyone else's. (My favourite, Lisa Tuttle's "Lizard Lust," placed dead last.) So, while I am thrilled to see my story tied for tenth (thereby placing me in a state of quasi-equality with Famous Author David Brin), I am neither thrilled nor unthrilled that my story placed above some by other Famous Authors. I know darned well that, if I were to do my own rankings, "Learning the Language" might well drop a few rungs.

Nevertheless, it feels good to know that a collection of total strangers took the time to read a new author's story, and then thought enough of it to give it a good mention. Unfamous Authors have to wedge their writing time between work and/or children and/or daily chores. Most give up before they're ever published. We who keep going do so, because we hope that some – not everyone, certainly, just some – will get a bit of intellectual and emotional pleasure out of our efforts. (Sure, we want money for our efforts too – it's another form of validation – but that's long and slow in coming. It's never the primary motive.)

So I thank you again; you've helped to keep me going!
Marti Hood
Irvine, California

Dear Editors:
I have been reading *Interzone* since you switched to a bimonthly schedule and first appeared in my local W.H. Smith's. Since then, I have bought each issue, read it and looked forward to the next. Until now, that is. Being in a hurry, I made the mistake of purchasing *IZ* 51. Mistake? Definitely. I buy *Interzone* because I like to read sf. While the articles and reviews are often interesting, particularly Nick Lowe's film reviews and Wendy Bradley's TV deconstruction, they would not persuade me to buy the magazine.

I had considered sending for a copy of *MILLION*, to see if it would be of interest. Frankly, I am glad I didn't bother. Apart from the Terry Pratchett interview (which should have appeared in *Interzone* anyway), the contents of this issue were of minimal interest. The man who created Rambo? No thank you. Romantic fiction?? Are you kidding?

Until now, I had planned to take out a subscription to *Interzone* at some stage. But if you are going to pull stunts like this, I shall hold on to my money, and check each issue carefully before buying. In answer to your editorial, no, I did not enjoy the issue, and I certainly would not consider subscribing to *MILLION*.

If you had wanted to give *Interzone* readers a taste of *MILLION*, surely it would have been better to have included a small selection of articles over a few issues, rather than replacing a whole issue of *Interzone*. Why should *Interzone*'s regular readers be asked to subsidize a magazine which is of little or no interest to many of them?

I am sorry to have to complain so bitterly, especially as I had been meaning to write in praise of the contents of *IZ*. While not every story every month is to my taste, on the whole, I think you've got it right. So please keep on doing what you're (very) good at – publishing sf. If you have the time and resources to produce *MILLION*, fine, go ahead. But don't expect me to help pay for it.

Les Bessant
Gateshead

Editor: *Sorry you were displeased by issue 51. We don't have the newstrade sales figures in yet, but anecdotal evidence suggests that sales in some bookshops may actually have gone up for* IZ *51/*MILLION *5. But don't worry: we're not planning any more stunts, and you're safe in sending us your subscription cheque if it's sf stories you want.*

Dear Editors:
I have just received issue 51 and my reaction was one of great disappointment – only one story. I started my subscription in order to extend the range of my reading, to tackle stories by authors whose books I might not buy. Your magazine has been enjoyable for that purpose.

I do not want a magazine of articles only.

As I say this was my first reaction, but I have read a large part of the issue and must concede that I enjoyed certain articles and found others useful. I like being given a favourite author's bibliography (Terry Pratchett) and I found the article on Edgar Rice Burroughs interesting. His books about Mars were amongst the first sf that I read as a boy. I also liked "100 Significant Scientific Romances." I have read one or two and will use the list to choose to widen my reading.

I would still however like my stories back, so could you spread your articles around a bit?

E. Butterworth
Pinner, Middx.

Dear Editors:

Advanced Publishing Examination
(Part I: Multiple-choice)
Time Allowed: 2 Hours
Answer all questions

For the purposes of this paper, assume that you are the publisher of a well-established monthly science-fiction magazine. Assume also that you have recently started publishing another, bimonthly, magazine, with a potentially bigger readership.

Question 1
You decide to name your new magazine with its hoped-for circulation. Would you call it:
a Hundred
b Thousand
c Million
d Billion

Question 2
Something goes disastrously wrong in the production of your monthly magazine. You cannot possibly meet the deadline. Do you:
a Send an apologetic note to your subscribers explaining that the magazine will be late this month
b Return to a bi-monthly schedule to give yourself more time
c Cannibalize material from your other magazine, whose circulation needs boosting anyway, and hope that no-one will notice
d Take the money and emigrate to South America

Question 3
Assume you answered (c) to question 2. An astute subscriber rumbles your little game and, finding his subscription reminder inside the magazine he didn't ask for in the first place, seriously considers allowing his subscription to lapse. Do you:
a Send him a placatory letter, offering to extend his subscription by an issue
b Say "Fuck you, I've got 2000 other subscribers!"
c Send him another subscription reminder, mentioning all the marvellous stories you might print in forthcoming issues if you can get your act together
d Suggest that he subscribe to your other magazine instead

Hints
- Remember that delaying or cancelling an issue will disturb your cash-flow
- No-one *really* wants to read science-fiction stories anyway
- There isn't enough money in magazine publishing to buy an air ticket to Brazil

For the Board of Examiners
Mr P.W. Thompson
Bristol

Editor: *"Something has gone disastrously wrong in the production of your magazine" – actually, it did, as I explained in the Editorial of* IZ *52: we took on new typesetters and designers who proved to be incompetent (issues 49 and 50) and had to sack them at short notice. Hence, we had no illustrations ready in time for a normal issue 51 and the idea of a* MILLION/IZ *"crossover" seemed a godsend to get around that problem. But there were other valid reasons for the swap, as explained in the Editorial of issue 51 itself – and we stand by them, Mr Examiner, sir.*

Dear Editors:
Thank you for your note reminding me that my subscription to *Interzone* has expired with issue 50.

After several years as a subscriber, I haven't really enjoyed the fiction element in the magazine very much for a long time. There are always exceptions of course, but the story content is so often down-beat, I don't get past the first page. Clearly the sort of sci-fi I'm looking for is not currently in vogue, probably because I don't fit into the category of the average *Interzone* reader, ie male, in mid-20s. I really don't want graphic descriptions of dismemberment or the hopelessness of existence interspersed with cheerless fucking. I want a bit of zap and vitality. And the circle of writers chosen seems to have become a very closed one too, churning out more of the same unremarkable, unmemorable pieces, month after month. Gradually, I have been reduced to reading the non-fiction sections and nothing more.

Sorry, but after giving the matter some thought, I have come to the conclusion that if it comes to financing my subscription to the Society of Authors or *Interzone*, from now on *Interzone* will have to be the loser.

Judith M. Johnstone
Cumbria

Editor: *Sigh. Perhaps Judith Johnstone would have been one of the readers who would have most enjoyed the "non-fiction" issue 51; but, alas, she didn't receive it, as her sub lapsed with issue 50.*

Dear Editors:
The Wessex School of science fiction is to you a "controversy." To me it's a bit of a "mystery." Why do you shrink from naming names? We know which writers are *not* members of the school: Bob Shaw, Ian Watson, J.G. Ballard and John Brunner have been ruled out altogether, and more selectively so have Brian Aldiss, Michael Moorcock and Keith Roberts. Not many Brits of that generation left, are there? Let's have your list from those who remain.

Your "Wessex" editorial of course represented a welcome first for *Interzone*: after 48 thrilling editorials about questionnaires, subscriptions and the preparation of manuscripts you finally got around to stating a policy. Could

Continued on page 31

Black, as deep as night is black between the stars.

Deeper than that. Night isn't really black, but a solemn, utter shade of red.

As black, then, as Tenembro Nought, which drinks all colour, texture, substance from around it, giving back only its awful depth of presence.

But no. She had found redness of an immeasurably profound hue, emerging from that awful pit in space. Not even the singularity was pure enough to typify true blackness. Nor was Isola's own dark mood, for that matter – although, since the visitors' arrival, she had felt smothered, robbed of illumination.

In comparison, a mere ebony lustre of skin and hair seemed too pallid to dignify with the name, "black." Yet, those traits were much sought after on Pleasence World, one of many reasons a fetch ship had come all this way to claim the new life within her.

The foetus might know blackness, Isola thought, laying a hand over her curved abdomen, feeling a stirring there. She purposely used cool, sterile terms, never calling it "baby," or a personalized "she." Anyway, when is a foetus's sensory innervation up to "knowing" anything at all? Can one who has never seen light comprehend blackness?

Leaning toward the dimly illuminated field-effect mirror, Isola touched its glass-smooth, silky-cool, pseudo-surface. Peering at her own reflection, she found at last what she was looking for.

That's it. Where light falls, never to emerge again.

She brought her face closer still, centring on one jet pupil, an inky well outlined by a dark iris – the universe wherein she dwelt.

"It is said nothing escapes from inside a black hole, but that isn't quite so."

Mikaela was well into her lecture when Isola slipped into the theatre, late but unrepentant. A brief frown was her partner's only rebuke for her tardiness. Mikaela continued without losing a beat.

"In this universe of ours, the rules seem to allow exceptions even to the finality of great noughts..."

Isola's vision adapted and she discreetly scanned the visitors – six space travellers whose arrival had

Illustrations by SMS

disrupted a quiet, monastic research routine. The guests from Pleasence World lounged on pseudo-life chaises overlooking Mikaela and the dais. Each sleek-furred settee was specially tuned to the needs of its occupant. While the three humans in the audience made little use of their couch amenities – only occasionally lifting fleshy tubes to infuse endorphin-laced oxygen; the squat, toadlike Vorpal and pair of slender Butins had already hooked up for full breathing symbiosis.

Well, they must have known they were coming to a rude outpost station, built with only a pair of humans in mind. Isola and Mikaela had not expected guests until a few months ago, when the decelerating starship peremptorily announced itself, and made its needs known.

Those needs included use of Isola's womb.

"Actually, there are countless misconceptions about gravitational singularities, especially the massive variety formed in the recoil of a supernova. One myth concerns the possibility of communicating across a black hole's event horizon, to see what has become of all the matter which left this universe so violently and completely, long ago."

Mikaela turned with a flourish of puffy sleeves toward the viewing tank. Winking one eye, she called up a new image to display in mid air, above the dais. Brilliance spilled across Mikaela's fair skin and the visitors' multi-hued faces, causing several to flinch involuntarily. Isola smiled.

Titanic fields enveloped and deformed a tortured sun, dragging long shreds of its substance toward a spinning, flattened, whirlpool – a disc so bright it searingly outshone the unfortunate nearby star.

"Until now, most investigations of macro black holes have concentrated on showy cases like this one – the Cygnus A singularity – which raises such ferocious tides on a companion sun as to tear it apart before our eyes. In galactic cores, greedy mega holes can devour entire stellar clusters. No wonder most prior expeditions were devoted to viewing noughts with visible accretion discs. Besides, their splashy radiance made them easy to find."

Isola watched the victim star's tattered, stolen

essence spiral into the planate cyclone, which brightened painfully despite attenuation by the viewing software. Shimmering, lambent stalks traced magnetically directed plasma beams, jetting from the singularity north and south. As refulgent gas swirled inward, jostling and heating, it suddenly reached an inner lip – the edge of a black circle, tiny in diameter but awesome in conclusiveness. The Event Horizon.

Spilling across that boundary, the actinic matter vanished abruptly, completely. Once over the edge it was no longer part of the reality. Not *this* reality, anyway.

Mikaela had begun her lecture from a basic level, since some of the visitors weren't cosmogonists. One of these, Jarlquin, the geneticist from Pleasence, shifted on her chaise. At some silent order, a pseudo-life assistant appeared to massage her shoulders. Petite, even for a starfarer, Jarlquin glanced toward Isola, offering a conspiratorial smile. Isola pretended not to notice.

"Most massive noughts don't have stars as close neighbours, nor gas clouds to feed them so prodigiously and make them shine." Closing one eye again, Mikaela sent another command. In a flickered instant, the ostentatious display of stellar devouring was replaced by serene quiet. Cool, untroubled constellations spanned the theatre. Tenembro Nought was a mere ripple in one quadrant of the starry field, unnoticed by the audience until Mikaela's pointer drew attention to its outlines. A lenslike blur of distortion, nothing more.

"Solitary macro-singularities like Tenembro are far more common than their gaudy cousins. Standing alone in space, hungry, but too isolated to draw in more than a rare atom or meteorid, they are also harder to find. Tenembro Nought was discovered only after detecting the way it bent light from faraway galaxies.

"The black hole turned out to be perfect for our needs, and only fifty-nine years, shiptime, from the colony on Kalimarn."

Under Mikaela's mute guidance, the image enlarged. She gestured towards a corner of the tank where a long, slender vessel could be seen, decelerating into orbit around the cold dimple in space. From the ship's tail emerged much smaller ripples, which also had the property of causing starlight to waver briefly. The distortion looked similar – though on a microscopic scale – to that caused by the giant nought itself. This was no coincidence.

"Once in orbit, we began constructing research probes. We converted our ship's drive to make tailored micro-singularities..."

At that moment, a tickling sensation along her left eyebrow told Isola that a datafeed was queued with results from her latest experiment. She closed that eye with a trained squeeze denoting ACCEPT. Implants along the inner lid came alight, conveying images in crisp focus to her retina. Unlike the digested pap in Mikaela's presentation, what Isola saw was in real time... or as "real" as time got, this near a macro black hole.

More rippling images of constellations. She subvocally commanded a shift to graphic mode; field diagrams snapped over the starry scene, showing Tenembro's mammoth, steepening funnel in spacetime. An uneven formation of objects – minuscule in comparison – skimmed toward glancing rendezvous with the great nought's eerily bright-black horizon. Glowing traceries depicted one of the little objects as another space-funnel. Vastly smaller, titanically narrower, it too possessed a centre that was severed from this reality as if amputated by the scalpel of God.

"...with the objective of creating ideal conditions for our instruments to peer down..."

Columns of data climbed across the scene under Isola's eyelid. She could already tell that this experiment wasn't going any better than the others. Despite all their careful calculations, the camera probes still weren't managing to straddle between the giant and dwarf singularities at the right moment, just when the black discs touched. Still, she watched that instant of grazing passage, hoping to learn something –

The scene suddenly shivered as Isola's belly gave a churning lurch, provoking waves of nausea. She blinked involuntarily and the image vanished.

The fit passed, leaving her short of breath, with a prickle of perspiration on her face and neck. Plucking a kerchief from her sleeve, Isola dabbed her brow. She lacked the will to order the depiction back. Time enough to go over the results later, with full-spectrum facilities.

This is getting ridiculous, Isola brooded. She had never imagined, when the requisition-request came, that a simple clonal pregnancy would entail so many inconveniences!

"...taking advantage of a loophole in the rules of our cosmos, which allow for a slightly offset boundary when the original collapstar possessed either spin or charge. This offset from perfection is one of the features we hope to exploit..."

Isola felt a sensation of being watched. She shifted slightly. From her nearby pseudo-life chaisse, Jarlquin was looking at Isola again, with a measuring expression.

She might have the courtesy to feign attention to Mikaela's presentation, Isola thought, resentfully. *Jarlquin seems more preoccupied with my condition than I am.*

The Pleasencer's interest was understandable, after having come so far just for the present contents of Isola's womb. *My anger with Jarlquin has an obvious source. Its origin is the same as my own.*

An obsession with beginnings had brought Isola to this place on the edge of infinity.

How did the universe begin?

Where did it come from?

Where do I come from?

It was ironic that her search would take her to where creation ended. For while the expanding cosmos has no "outer edge," as such, it does encounter a sharp boundary at the rim of a black hole.

Isola remembered her childhood, back on Kalimarn, playing in the yard with toys that made pico-singularities on demand, from which she gained her first experience examining the warped mysteries of succinct event horizons. She recalled the day these had ceased to be mere dalliances, or school exercises in propulsion engineering, when they instead became foci for exaltation and wonder.

The same equations that describe an expanding

universe also tell of a gravity trough's collapse. Explosion, implosion... the only difference lay in reversing time's arrow. We are, in effect, living inside *a gigantic black hole!*

Her young mind marvelled at the implications.

Everything within is aleph. Aleph is cut off from contact with that which is not aleph. Or that which came before *aleph. Cause and effect, forever separated.*

As I am separated from what brought me into being.

As must separate from what I bring into being...

The foetus kicked again, setting off twinges, unleashing a flood of symbiotic bonding hormones. One side effect came as a sudden wave of unasked-for sentimentality. Tears filled Isola's eyes, and she could not have made image-picts even if she tried.

Jarlquin had offered drugs to subdue these effects – to make the process "easier." Isola did not want it eased. This could be her sole act of biological creation, given the career she had chosen. The word, "motherhood," might be archaic nowadays, but it still had connotations. She wanted to experience them.

It was simple enough in conception.

Back in the 18th century, a physicist, John Mitchell, showed that any large enough lump of matter might have an escape velocity greater than the speed of light. Even luminous waves should not be able to escape. When John Wheeler, two hundred years later, performed the same conjuring trick with mass *density*, the name "black hole" was coined.

Those were just theoretical exercises. What actually happens to a photon that tries to climb out of singularity? Does it behave like a rocket, slowing down under gravity's insistent drag? Coming to a halt, then turning to plummet down again?

Not so. Photons move at a constant rate, one single speed, no matter what reference frame you use. Unless physically blocked or diverted, light slows for no one.

But tightly coiled gravity does strange things. It changes *time*. Gravitation can make light pay a toll for escaping. Photons lose energy not by slowing down, but by stretching redder, ever redder as they rise from a space-time well, elongating to microwave lengths, then radio, and onward. Theoretically, on climbing to the event horizon of a black hole, any light wave has reddened down to nothing.

Nothing emerges. Nothing – travelling at the speed of light. In a prim, legalistic sense, that nothing *is* still light.

Isola spread her traps, planning tight, intersecting orbits. She lay in a web designed to ambush nothing ...to peer down into nowhere.

"You know, I never gave it much thought before. The whole thing seemed such a bother. Anyway, I always figured there'd be plenty of time later, after we finished our project."

Mikaela non-sequitur came by complete surprise. Isola looked up from the chart she had been studying. Across the breakfast table, her colleague wore an expression that seemed outwardly casual, but studied. Thin as frost.

"Plenty of time for what?" Isola asked.

Mikaela lifted a cup of *port'tha* to her lips. "You know... procreation."

"Oh." Isola did not know what to say. Ever since the visitor-ship announced itself, her partner had expressed nothing but irritation over havoc to their research schedules. Of late her complaints had been replaced with pensive moodiness. *So this is what she's been brooding about*, Isola realized. To give herself a moment, she held out her own cup for the pseudo-life servitor to refill. Her condition forbade drinking *port'tha*, so she made do with tea.

"And what have you concluded?" she asked, evenly.

"That I'd be foolish to waste this opportunity."

"Opportunity?"

Mikaela shrugged. "Look, Jarlquin came all this way hoping to requisition your clone. You could have turned her down –"

"Mikaela, we've gone over this so many times..." But Isola's partner cut her off, raising one hand, placatingly.

"That's all right. I now see you were right to agree. It's a great honour. Records of your clone-line are on file throughout the sector."

Isola sighed. "My ancestresses were explorers and star messengers. So, many worlds in the region would have –"

"Exactly. It's all a matter of available information! Pleasence World had data on you, but not on a semi-natural variant like me, born on Kalimarn of Kalimarnese stock. For all we know, I might have what Jarlquin's looking for, too."

Isola nodded earnestly. "I'm sure of that. Do you mean you're thinking –"

"– of getting tested?" Mikaela watched Isola over the rim of her cup. "Do you think I should?"

Despite her continuing reservations over having been requisitioned in the first place, Isola felt a surge of enthusiasm. The notion of sharing this experience – this unexpected experiment in motherhood – with her only friend gave her strange pleasure. "Oh, yes! They'll jump at the chance. Of course..." She paused.

"What?" Mikaela asked, tension visible in her shoulders.

Isola had a sudden image of the two of them, waddling about the station, relying utterly on drones and pseudo-life servitors to run errands and experiments. The inconvenience alone would be frightful. Yet, it would only add up to a year or so, altogether. She smiled ironically. "It means our guests would stay longer. And you'd have to put up with Jarlquin –"

Mikaela laughed. A hearty laugh of release. "Yeah, dammit. That is a drawback!"

Relieved at the lifting of her partner's spirits, Isola grinned too. They were in concord again. She had missed the old easiness between them, which had been under strain since that first surprise message disrupted their hermits' regime. *This will put everything right*, she hoped. *We'll have years to talk about a strange, shared experience after it's all over.*

The best solutions are almost always the simplest.

Within a sac of amniotic fluid, a play is acted out according to a script. The script calls for proteins, so amino acids are lined up by ribosomes to play their roles. Enzymes appear at the proper moment. Cells divide and jostle for position. The code demands they specialize, so they do. Subtle forces of attraction shift them into place, one by one.

It is a script that has been played before.

A script designed to play again.

The pair of nano-draughts – each weighing just a million tons – hovered within a neutral gravity tank. Between the microscopic wells of darkness, a small recording device peered into one of the tiny singularities. Across the room, screens showed only the colour black.

Special fields kept each nought from self-destructing – either through quantum evaporation or by folding space round itself like a blanket and disappearing. Other beams of force strained to hold the two black holes apart, preventing gravity from slamming them together uncontrollably.

It was an unstable situation. But Isola was well practiced. Seated on a soft chaise to support her overstrained back, she used subtle machines to manipulate the two funnels of sunken metric toward each other. The outermost rims of their spacetime wells merged. Two microscopic black spheres – the event horizons themselves – lay centimetres apart, ratcheting closer by the second, as Isola let them slowly draw together.

Tides tugged at the camera, suspended between, and at the fibre-thin cable leading from the camera to her recorders. Peering into one of those pits of blackness, the mini-telescope saw nothing. That was only natural.

Nothing could escape from inside a black hole.

A special kind of nothing, though. Nothing that had formerly been light, before being stretched down to true nothingness in the act of climbing that steep slope.

The two funnels merged closer still. The microscopic black balls drew nearer.

Light trying to escape a black hole is reddened to nonexistence. Nevertheless, virtual light can theoretically escape one nought, only to be sucked into the other. There, it starts blue-shifting *exponentially, as gravity yanks it down again.*

Between one event horizon and the other, the light doesn't "officially" exist. Not in the limiting case. Yet ideally, there should be a flow.

They had not believed her on Kalimarn. Until one day she showed them it was possible, for the narrowest of instants, to tap the virtual stream. To squeeze between the red-shifted and blue-shifted segments. To catch the briefest glimpse –

It happened too fast to follow with human eyes. One moment two black spheres were inching microscopically toward each other with the little, doomed instrumentality tortured and whining between them. The next instant, in a sudden flash, all contents of the tank combined and vanished. Spacetime backlash set the reinforced vacuum chamber rocking – a side-effect of that final stroke which severed forever all contact between the noughts and this cosmos where they'd been made. In the instant it took Isola to blink, they were gone, leaving behind the neatly severed end of fibre cable.

Gone, but not forgotten. In taking the camera with them, the singularities had given it the moment it needed. The moment when "nothing" was no longer nothing but merely a deep red.

And red is visible...

This was what had won her funding to seek out a partner and come here to Tenembro Nought. For if it was possible to look inside a micro-hole, why not a far bigger one that had been born in the titanic self-devouring of a star? So far, she and Mikaela hadn't yet succeeded in that part of the quest. Their research at the micro end, however, kept giving surprising and wonderful results.

Isola checked to make sure all the secrets of the vanished nano-nought had been captured during that narrow instant, and were safely stored in memory. Its rules. Its nature as a cosmos all its own. She had varied the formation recipe again, and wondered what physics would be revealed this time.

Before she could examine the snapshot of a pocket universe, however, her left eyelid twitched and came alight with a reminder. Time for her appointment. Damn.

But Jarlquin had shown Isola how much more pleasant it was to be on time.

The temperature of the universe is just under three degrees, absolute. It has chilled considerably, in the act of expanding over billions of years, from fireball to cosmos. Cooling in turn provoked changes in state. Delicately balanced forces shifted as the original heat diffused, allowing protons to form from quarks, then electrons to take orbit around them, producing that wonder, Hydrogen. Later rebalancings caused matter to gather, forming monstrous swirls. Many of these eddies coalesced and came alight spectacularly – all because the rules allowed it.

Because the rules *required* it.

Time processed one of those lights – by those selfsame rules – until it finished burning and collapsed, precipitating a fierce explosion and ejection of its core from the universe.

Tenembro Nought sat as a fossil relic of that banishment. A scar, nearly healed, but palpable.

All of this had come about according to the rules.

"We've liberated ourselves from Darwin's Curse, but it still comes down to the same thing."

The visitor made a steeple of her petite hands, long and narrow, with delicate fingers like a surgeon's. Her lips were full and dyed a rich mauve hue. Faint ripples passed across her skin as pores opened and closed rhythmically. A genetic graft, Isola supposed. Probably some Vorpal trait inserted into Jarlquin's genome before she was even conceived.

Fortunately, laws limit the gene trade, Isola thought. *All they can ask of me is a simple cloning.*

Over Jarlquin's shoulder, through the window of the lounge, Isola saw the starscape and realized Smolin Cluster was in view. Subvocally, she ordered the magni-focus pane to enlarge one quadrant for her eye only. Flexing gently, imperceptibly by other visitors across the room, the window sent Isola a scene of suns like shining grains. One golden pinpoint – Pleasence Star – shone soft and stable. Its kind, by nature's laws, would last eons and never become a nought.

"You see," Jarlquin continued, blithely ignorant of Isola's distraction. "Although we've pierced much of the code of Life, and reached a truce of sorts with Death, the fundamental rule's the same. That is successful which continues. And what continues most successfully is that which not only lives, but multiplies."

Why is she telling me this? Isola wondered, sitting in a gently vibrating non-life chair across from Jarlquin. Did the biologer-nurturist actually care what her subject thought? Isola had agreed to disrupt her

research and donate a clone, for the genetic benefit of Pleasence World. Wasn't that enough?

I ought to be flattered. Tenembro Nought may be "close" to their world by interstellar standards, still, how often does a colony send a ship so far, just to collect one person's neonate clone?

Oh, the visitors had also made a great show of scrutinizing their work here, driving Mikaela to distraction with their questions. The pair of Butins were physicists and exuded enthusiasm along with their pungent, blue perspiration. But Jarlquin had confided in Isola. They would never have been approved to come all this way if not also to seek her seed. To treasure and nurture it, and take it home with them.

As I was taken from my own parent, who donated an infant duplicate to Kalimarn as her ship swept by. We are a model in demand, it seems.

The reasons were clear enough, in abstract. In school she had learned about the interstellar economy of genes, which prevented the catastrophe of inbreeding and spread the boon of diversity. But tidal surges of hormone and emotion had not been in her syllabus. Isola could not rightly connect abstractions with events churning away below her sternum. They seemed as unrelated as a sonnet and a table.

Two pseudo-life servitors entered – no doubt called when Jarlquin winked briefly a moment ago – carrying hot beverages on a tray. The blank-faced, bipedal protoplasmoids were as expressionless as might be expected of beings less than three days old... and destined within three more to slip back into the vat from which they'd been drawn. One servant poured for Isola as it had been programmed to do, with uncomplaining perfection no truly living being could have emulated.

"You were speaking of multiplication," Isola prompted, lest Jarlquin lose her train of thought and decide to launch into another recital of the wonders of Pleasence. The fine life awaiting Isola's clone.

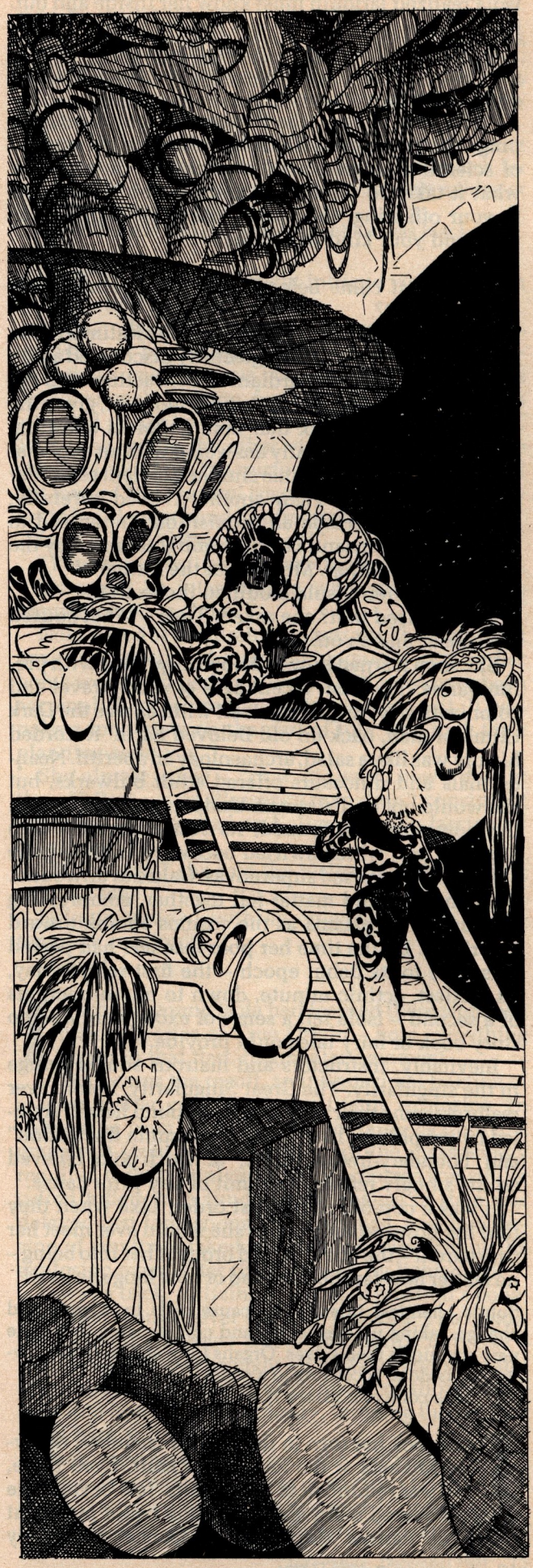
"Ah?" Jarlquin pursed her lips, tasting the tea. "Yes, multiplication. Tell me, as time goes on, who populates the galaxies? Obviously, those who disperse and reproduce. Even though we aren't *evolving* in the old way – stressed by death and natural selection – a kind of selection is still going on."

"Selection."

"Indeed, selection. For traits appropriate to a given place and time. Consider what happened to those genes which, for one reason or another, kept individuals from leaving Beloved Earth during the first grand waves of colonization. Are descendants of those individuals still with us? Do those genes persist, now that Earth is gone?"

Isola saw Jarlquin's point. The impulsive drive to reproduce sexually had ebbed from humanity – at least in this sector. She had heard things were otherwise, spinward of galactic West and in the Magellanics. Nevertheless, certain models of humanity seemed to spread and thrive, while other types remained few, or disappeared.

"So it's been in other races we've formed symbioses with. Planets and commonwealths decide what kinds of citizens they need and requisition clones or new variants, often trading with colonies many parsecs away. Nowadays you can be successful at reproduction without ever even planning to."



Isola realized Jarlquin must know her inside and out. Not that her ambivalence was hard to read.

To become a mother, she thought. *I am about to... give birth. I don't even know what it means, but Jarlquin seems to envy me.*

"Whatever works," the Pleasencer continued, sipping her steaming tea. "That law of nature, no amount of scientific progress will ever change. If you have what it takes to reproduce, and pass on those traits to your offspring, then *they* will likely replicate as well, and your kind will spread."

What came before? And what came before that?

As a very little girl, back on Kalimarn, she had seen how other infants gleefully discovered a way to drive parents and guardians to distraction with the game of "Why." It could start at any moment, given the slightest excuse to ask that first, guileless question. Any adult who innocently answered with an explanation was met with the same simple, efficient rejoinder – another "why?" Then another... Used carefully, deliciously, it became an inquisition guaranteed to provoke either insanity or pure enlightenment by the twentieth repetition. More often the former.

To be different, Isola modified the exercise.

What caused that? she asked. Then – *What caused the cause?* and so on.

She soon learned how to dispense quickly with preliminaries. The vast, recent ages of space travel and colonization were quickly dealt with, as was the Dark Climb of man, back on old Beloved Earth. Recorded history was like a salad, archaeology an aperitif. Neanderthals and dinosaurs offered adult bulwarks, but she would not be distracted. Under pestering inquiry, the homeworld unformed, its sun unravelled into dust and gas, which swirled backward in time to be absorbed by reversed supernovas. Galaxies unwound. Starlight and cold matter fell together, compressing into universal plasma as the cosmos shrank toward its origins. By the time her poor teachers had parsed existence to its debut epoch – the first searing day, its earliest, actinic minute, down to micro-fractions of a second – Isola felt a sense of excitement like no story book or fairy tale could provide.

Inevitably, instructors and matrons sought refuge in the singularity. The Great Singularity. Before ever really grasping their meaning, Isola found herself stymied by pat phrases like "quantum vacuum fluctuation" and "boundary-free existence," at which point relieved adults smugly refused to admit of any prior cause.

It was a cop-out of the first order. Like when they told her how unlikely it was she would ever meet her true parent – the one who had brought her into being – no matter how far she travelled or how long she lived.

Subtle chemical interactions cause cells to migrate and change, taking up specialties and commencing to secrete new chemicals themselves. Organs form and initiate activity. All is done according to a code.

It is the code that makes it so.

Isola took her turn in the control chamber, relieving Mikaela at the end of her shift. Even there, one was reminded of the visitors. Just beyond the crystal-covered main aperture, Isola could make out the long, narrow ship from Pleasence, tugged by Tenembro's tides so that its crew quarters lay farthest from the singularity. The implosion chamber dangled towards the great hole in space.

"Remember when they came into orbit?" Mikaela asked, pointing toward the engine section. "How they pulsed their drive noughts at a peculiar pitch?"

"Yes." Isola nodded, wishing for once that Mikaela were not all business, but would actually talk to her. Something was wrong.

"Yes, I remember. The nano-holes collapsed quickly, emitting stronger spatial backwash than I'd seen before."

"That's right," Mikaela said without meeting Isola's eyes. "By creating metric-space ahead of themselves at a faster rate, they managed a steeper deceleration. Their engineer – the Vorpal, I'q'oun – gave me their recipe." Mikaela laid a data-sliver on the console. "You might see whether it's worth inserting some of their code into our next probe."

"Mmm." Isola felt reluctant. A debt for useful favours might disturb the purity of her irritation with these visitors. "I'll look into it," she answered noncommittally.

Although she wanted to search Mikaela's eyes, Isola thought it wiser not to press matters. The level of tension between them, rather than declining since that talk over breakfast, had risen sharply soon after. Something must have happened. *Did she ask Jarlquin to be tested?* Isola wondered. *Or could I have said something to cause offence?*

Mikaela clearly knew she was behaving badly and it bothered her. To let emotion interfere with work was a sign of unskilled selfing. The fair-skinned woman visibly made an effort to change tacks.

"How's the... you know, coming along?" she asked, gesturing vaguely toward Isola's midriff.

"Oh, well, I guess. All considered."

"Yeah?"

"I... feel strange though," Isola confided, hoping to draw her partner out. "As if my body were doing something it understood that that's totally beyond *me*, you know?" She tapped herself on the temple. "Then, last night, I dreamt about a man. You know, a male? We had some on Kalimarn, you know. It was very... odd." She shook her head. "Then there are these mood swings and shifts of emotion I never imagined before. It's quite an experience."

To Isola's surprise, a coldness seemed to fill the room. Mikaela's visage appeared locked, her expression as blank as pseudo-life.

"I'll bet it is."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. This episode had disrupted their planned decade of research, but now there was more to it than that. A difference whose consequences seemed to spiral outward, pushing the two of them apart, cutting communication. Isola suddenly knew that her friend had gone to Jarlquin, and what the answer had been.

If asked directly, Mikaela would probably claim indifference, that it didn't matter, that procreation had not figured in her plans, anyway. Nevertheless, it must have been a blow. Her eyes lay impenetrable under twin hoods.

"Well. Good night, then." The other woman's voice was ice. She nodded, turning to go.

"Good night," Isola called after her. The portal shut silently.

Subtle differences in heritage – that was all this was about. It seemed so foolish and inconsequential. After all, what was biological reproduction on the cosmological scale of things? Would any of this matter a million years from now?

One good thing about physics – its rules could be taken apart in fine, separable units, examined, and superposed again to make good models of the whole. Why was this so for the cosmos, but not for conscious intellects? *I'll be glad when this is over*, Isola told herself.

She went to the Suiting Room, to prepare for going outside. Beyond another crystal pane, Tenembro Nought's glittering blackness seemed to distort a quarter of the universe, a warped, twisted, tortured tract of firmament.

There was a vast contrast between the scale human engineers worked with – creating pico, nano, and even micro singularities by tricks of quantum bookkeeping – and a monster like Tenembro, which had been crushed into existence, or pure *non*-existence, by nature's fiercest explosion. Yet, in theory, it was the same phenomenon. Once matter had been concentrated to such density that space wraps around itself, what remains is but a hole.

The wrapping could sometimes even close off the hole. Ripples away from such implosions gave modern vessels palpable waves of spacetime to skim upon, much as their ancestors' crude ships rode the pulsing shock-fronts of antimatter explosions. The small black holes created in a ship's drive lasted for but an instant. Matter "borrowed" during that brief moment was compressed to superdensity and then vanished before the debt came due, leaving behind just a fossil field and spacial backwash to surf upon.

No origin to speak of. No destiny worth mentioning, That was how one of Isola's fellow students had put it, back in school. It was glib and her classmate had been proud of the aphorism. To Isola, it had seemed too pat, leaving unanswered questions.

Her spacesuit complained as pseudo-life components stretched beyond programmed parameters to fit her burgeoning form. Isola waited patiently until the flesh-and-metal concatenation sealed securely. Then, feeling big and awkward, she pushed through the exit port – a jungle of overlapping lock-seal leaves – and stepped out upon the station platform, surrounded by the raw vacuum of space.

Robotic servitors gathered at her ankles jostling to be chosen for the next one-way mission. Eagerness to approach the universal edge was part of their programming – as it appeared to be in hers.

Even from this range, Isola felt Tenembro Nought's tides tugging at fine sensors in her inner ears. The foetus also seemed to note that heavy presence. She felt it turn to orient along the same direction as the Visitor Ship, feet toward the awful blankness with its crown of twisted stars.

Let's get on with it, she thought, irritated by her sluggish mental processes. Isola had to wink three times to finally set off a flurry of activity. Well-drilled, her subordinates prepared another small invasion force, designed to pierce what logically could not be pierced. To see what, by definition, could not be seen.

The colour of the universe had once been blue. Blue-violet of a purity that was essential. Primal. At that time the cosmos was too small to allow any other shade. There was only room for short, hot light.

Then came expansion, and a flow of time. These, plus subtle rules of field and force, wrought inexorable reddening on photons. By the time there were observers to give names to colours, the vast bulk of the universe was redder than infra-red.

None of this mattered to Tenembro Nought. By then, it was a hole. A mystery. Although some might search for colour in its depths, it could teach the universe a thing or two about futiginal darkness.

For all intents and purposes, its colour was black.

"I thought these might intrigue you," Jarlquin told her that evening.

There was no way to avoid the visitor – not without becoming a hermit and admitting publicly that something was bothering her. Mikaela was doing enough sulking for both of them, so Isola attended to her hosting duties in the station lounge. This time, while the other visitors chatted near the starward window, the nurturist from Pleasence held out toward Isola several jagged memory lattices. They lay in her slender hand like fragments of ancient ice.

Isola asked, "What are they?"

"Your ancestry," Jarlquin replied with a faint smile. "You might be interested in what prompted us to requisition your clone."

Isola stared at the luminous crystals. This data must have been prepared long ago: enquiries sent to her home world and perhaps beyond. All must have been accomplished before their ship even set sail. It bespoke a long view on the part of folk who took their planning seriously.

She almost asked – *"How did you know I'd want these?"* Perhaps on Pleasence they didn't consider it abnormal, as they had on Kalimarn, to be fascinated by origins.

"Thank you," she told the visitor instead, keeping an even tone.

Jarlquin nodded with an enigmatic smile. "Contemplate continuity."

"I shall."

In school, young Isola had learned there were two major theories of True Origin – how everything began in that first, fragmentary moment.

In both cases the result, an infinitesimal fraction of a second after creation, was a titanic explosion. In converting from the first "seed" of false vacuum to a grapefruit-sized ball containing all the mass-energy required to form a universe, there occurred something called *Inflation*. A fundamental change of state was delayed just long enough for a strange, negative version of gravity to take hold, momentarily driving the explosion even faster than allowed by lightspeed.

It was a trick, utilizing a clause in creation's codebook that would never again be invoked. The conditions would no longer exist – not in *this* universe – until final collapse brought all galaxies and stars and other ephemera together once more, swallowing the sum into one Mega Singularity, bringing the balance sheet back to zero.

That was how some saw the universe, as just another borrowing. The way a starship briefly "borrows" matter without prior existence, in order to make small black holes whose collapse and disappearance

repays the debt again. So the entire universe might be thought of as a *loan*, on a vastly larger scale.

What star voyagers did on purpose, crudely, with machines, Creation had accomplished insensately but far better, by simple invocation of the Laws of Quantum Probability. Given enough time, such a fluctuation was bound to occur, sooner or later, according to the rules.

But this theory of origin had a flaw. In what context did one mean "...given enough time...'? How could there have been time before the universe itself was born? What clocks measured it? What observers noted its passage?

Even if there was a context... even if this borrowing was allowed under the rules... where did the rules *themselves* come from?

Unsatisfied, Isola sought a second theory of origins.

Black.

Within her eye's dark iris, the pupil was black. So was her skin.

It had not always been so.

She looked from her reflection to a row of images projected in the air nearby. Her ancestresses. Clones, demi-clones and variants going back more than forty generations. Only the most recent had her rich ebony flesh tone. Before that, shades had varied considerably around a dark theme. But other similarities ran true.

A certain line of jaw...

An arching of the brows...

A reluctant pleasure in the smile...

Women Isola had never known or heard of, stretched in diminishing rows across the room. Part of a continuity.

Further along, she found troves of data from still earlier times. There appeared images of *fathers* as well as mothers, fascinating her and vastly complicating the branchings of descent. Yet it remained possible to note patterns, moving up the line. Long after all trace of "family" resemblance vanished, she still saw consistent motifs, those Jarlquin had spoken of.

Five fingers on each clasping hand...

Two eyes, poised to catch subtleties...

A nose to scent... a brain to perceive...

A persistent will to continue...

This was not the only design for making thinking beings, star travellers, successful colonizers of galaxies. There were also Butins, Vorpals, Leshi and ten score other models which, tried and tested by harsh nature, now thrived in diversity in space. Nevertheless, this was a successful pattern. It endured.

Life stirred beneath Isola's hand. Her warm, tumescent belly throbbed, vibrating not just her skin and bones, but membranes, deep within, that she had never expected to have touched by another. Now at least there was a context to put it all in. Her ancestors' images nourished some deep yearning. The poignancy of what she'd miss – the chance to know this living being soon to emerge from her own body – was now softened by a sense of continuity.

It reassured her.

There was a certain beauty in the song of DNA.

Perched in orbit, circling a deep well.

A well with a rim from which nothing escapes.

Micro-noughts, spiralling toward that black boundary, seem cosmically, comically, out of scale with mighty Tenembro, star-corpse, gate-keeper, universal scar. What they lack in width, they make up for in depth just as profound. Wide or narrow, each represents a one-way tunnel to oblivion.

Is it crazy to ask if oblivions come in varieties, or differ in ways that matter?

Rules were a problem of philosophical dimensions when Isola first studied origins.

Consider the ratio of electric force to gravity. If this number had been infinitesimally higher, stars would never grow hot enough within their bowels to form and then expel heavy nuclei – those, like carbon and oxygen – needed for life. If the ratio were just a fraction *lower*, stars would race through brief conflagrations too quickly for planets to evolve. Take the ratio a little farther off in either direction, and there would be no stars at all.

The universal rules of Isola's home cosmos were rife with such fine-tuning. Numbers which, had they been different by even one part in a trillion, would not have allowed subtleties like planets or seas, sunsets and trees.

Some called this evidence of design. Master craftsmanship. Creativity. Creator.

Others handled the coincidence facilely. "If things were different," they claimed, "there would be no observers to note the difference. So it's not surprise that we, who exist, observe around us the precise conditions needed for existence!

"Besides, countless *other* natural constants seems to have nothing special about their values. Perhaps it's just a matter of who is doing the calculating!"

Hand-waving, all hand-waving. Neither answer satisfied Isola when she delved into true origins. Creationists, Anthropicists, they all missed the point.

Everything has to come from somewhere. Even a creator. Even coincidence.

Mikaela barely spoke to her anymore. Isola understood. Her partner could not help feeling rejected. The worlds had selected against her. In effect, the universe had declared her a dead end.

Isola felt, illogically, that it must be *her* fault. She should have found a way to console her friend. *It must be strange to hear you'll be the last in your line.*

Yet, what could she say?

That it's also strange to know your line will continue, but out of reach, out of sight? Beyond all future knowing?

The experiments continued. Loyal camera probes were torn apart by tides, or aged to dust in swirling back-flows of time near Tenembro's vast event horizon. Isola borrowed factors from the visitors' ship-drive. She tinkered with formulas for small counterweight black holes, and sent the new micro-singularities peeling off on ever-tighter trajectories toward the great nought's all-devouring maw.

Cameras manoeuvred to interpose themselves between one nothing and another. During that brief, but time-dilated instant, as two wells of oblivion competed to consume them, the machines tried to take pictures.

Pictures of nothing, and all.

"To pass the time, I've been tinkering with your pseudo-life tanks," Jarlquin announced proudly one evening. "Your servitor fabricants ought to last as long as nine days now, before having to go back into the vat."

The visitor was obviously pleased with herself, finding something useful to do while Isola gestated. Jarlquin puttered, yet her interest remained focused on a product more subtle than anything she herself would ever design. Unskilled, but tutored by a billion years of happenstance, Isola prepared that product for delivery.

The second theory of origins had amazed her. It was not widely talked about in Kalimarn's academies, where savants preferred notions of Quantum Fluctuation. After all, Kalimarn served as banking world for an entire cluster. No doubt the colonists *liked* thinking of the universe as something out on loan.

Nevertheless, in her academy days, Isola had sought other explanations.

We might have come from somewhere else! She realized one evening, when her studies took her deeply into frozen archives. The so-called "crackpot" theories she found there did not seem so crazy. Their mathematics worked just as well as models of quantum usury.

When a black hole is created after a supernova explosion, the matter that collapses into it doesn't just vanish. According to the equations, it goes... "elsewhere." To another spacetime. A continuum completely detached from ours.

Each new black hole represents another universe! A new creation.

The implication wasn't hard to translate in the opposite direction.

Our own cosmos may have had its start with a black hole that formed in some earlier cosmos!

The discovery thrilled her. It appalled Isola that none of her professors shared her joy.

"Even if true," one of them had said. "It's an unanswerable, unrewarding line of enquiry. By the very nature of the situation, we are cut off, severed from causal contact with that earlier cosmos. Given that, I prefer simpler hypotheses."

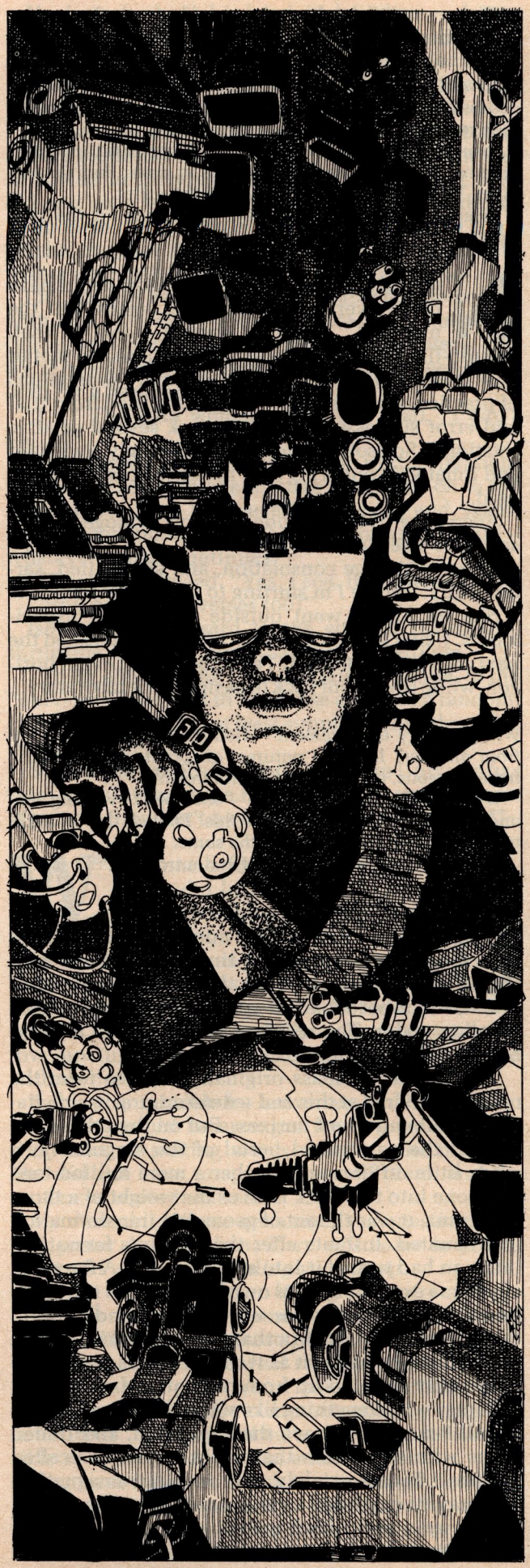
"But think of the implications!" she insisted. "Several times each year, new macro-black holes are created in supernovas –"

"Yes? So?"

"– What's more, at any moment across this galaxy alone, countless starships generate innumerable *micro* singularities, just to surf the payback wave when they collapse. Each of these "exhaust" singularities becomes a universe too!"

The savant had smiled patronizingly. "Shall we play god, then? Try to take responsibility, in some way for our creations?" The old woman's tone was supercilious. "This argument's almost as ancient as debating angels on pinheads. Why don't you transfer to the department of archaic theology?"

Isola would not be put off, nor meekly accept conventional wisdom. She eventually won backing to investigate the quandaries that consumed her. Much later, Jarlquin told her this perseverance was in part inherited. Some colonies had learned to cherish tenacity like hers. Though sometimes troublesome, the trait often led to profit and art. It was a major reason Pleasence World had sent a fetch ship to Tenembro Nought.



They cared little about the specific truths Isola pursued. They wanted the trait that drove her to pursue.

Cells differentiate according to patterns laid down in the codes. Organs form which would – by happenstance – provide respiration, circulation, cerebration...

In one locale, cells even begin preparing for future reproduction. New eggs align themselves in rows, then go dormant. Within each egg lay copies of the script.

Even this early, the plan lays provisions for the next phase.

Normally, a pseudo-life incubator would have taken over during her final weeks. But the nurturist, Jarlquin, wanted none of that. Pseudo-life was but a product. Its designs, no matter how clever, came out of theory and mere generations of practice, while Isola's womb was skilled from trial and error successes stretching back several galactic rotations. So Isola waddled, increasingly awkward and inflated, wondering how her ancestors ever managed.

Every one of them made it. Each managed to get someone else started.

It was a strange consolation, and she smiled, sardonically. *Maybe I'm starting to think like Jarlquin!*

She no longer went outside to conduct experiments. Using her calculations, Mikaela fine-tuned the next convoy sent to skim Tenembro's vast event horizon, while Isola went back to basics in the laboratory.

What mystery is movement – distinguishing one location from another? In some natures, all points correspond – instantaneous, coincidental. Uninteresting.

What riddle, then, is change *– one object* evolving *into another? Some worlds disallow this. Though they contain multitudes, all things remain the same.*

Is a reality cursed which suffers entropy? Or is it consecrated?

Once more a flash. Two micro-singularities fell together, carrying a tiny holo-camera with them to oblivion. In the narrow moment of union, the robot took full-spectrum readings of one involute realm. The results showed Isola a mighty, but flawed, kingdom.

The amount of mass originally used to form the nought mattered at this end – determining its gravitational pull and event horizon. But on the other side, beyond the constricted portal of the singularity, it made little difference. Whether a mere million tons had gone into the black hole or the weight of a thousand suns, it was the act of geometric transformation that counted. Instants after the nought's formation, inflation had turned it into a macrocosm. A fiery ball of plasma exploding in its own context, in a reference frame whose dimensions were all perpendicular to those Isola knew. Within that frame, a wheel of time marked out events, just as it did in Isola's universe – only vastly speeded up from her point of view.

Energy – or something like what she'd been taught to call "energy" – drove the expansion, and traded forms with substances that might vaguely be called "matter." Forces crudely akin to electromagnetism and gravity contested over nascent particles that in coarse ways resembled quarks and leptons. Larger concatenations tried awkwardly to form.

But there was no rhythm, no symmetry. The untuned orchestra could not decide what score to play. There was no melody.

In the speeded-up reference frame of the construct-cosmos, her sampling probe had caught evolution of a coarse kind. Like a pseudo-life fabrication too long out of the vat, the universe Isola had set out to create lurched toward dissipation. The snapshot showed no heavy elements, no stars, no possibility of self-awareness. How could there be? All the rules were wrong.

Nevertheless, the wonder of it struck Isola once more. To make universes!

Furthermore, she was getting better. Each new design got a little farther along than the one before it. Certainly farther than most trash cosmos spun off as exhaust behind starships. At the rate she was going, in a million years some descendant of hers might live to create a cosmos in which crude galaxies formed.

If only we could solve the problem of looking down Tenembro, she thought.

That great black ripple lay beyond the laboratory window, crowned by warped stars. It was like trying to see with the blind spot in her eye. There was a tickling notion that something lay there, but forever just out of reach.

To Isola, it felt like a dare. A challenge.

What strange rules must reign in there! She sighed. *Weirdness beyond imagination...*

Isola's gut clenched. The laboratory blurred as waves of painful constriction spasmed inside her. The chaise grew arms which held on, keeping her from falling, but they could not stop Isola from trying to double over, gasping.

Such pain...I never knew...

Desperately, she managed a faint moan.

"Jar...Jarlquin..."

She could only hope the room monitor would interpret it as a command. For the next several minutes, or hours, or seconds, she was much too distracted to try again.

It is a narrow passage, fierce and tight and terrible. Forces stretch and compress to the limit, almost bursting. What continues through suffers a fiery, constricted darkness.

Then a single point of light. An opening. Release! Genesis.

They watched the fetch ship turn and start accelerating. Starlight refracted through a wake of disturbed space. If any of the multitude of universes created by its drive happened, by sheer chance, to catch a knack for self-existence, no one in *this* cosmos would ever know.

Isola's feelings were a murky tempest, swirling from pain to anaesthesia. A part of her seemed glad it was over, that she had her freedom back. Other, intense voices cried out at the loss of her captivity. All the limbs and organs she had possessed a year ago were still connected, yet she ached with a sense of dismemberment. Jarlquin had carefully previewed all of this. She had offered drugs. But Isola's own body now doped her quite enough. She sensed flowing endorphins start the long process of adjustment. Beyond that, artificial numbing would have robbed the colours of her pain.

The fetch ship receded to a point, leaving behind Tenembro's cavity of twisted metric, its dimple in

the great galactic wheel. Ahead, Pleasence Star beckoned, a soft, trustworthy yellow.

Isola blessed the star. To her, its glimmer would always say – *You continue. Part of you goes on.*

She went on to bless the ship, the visitors, even Jarlquin. What had been taken from her would never have existed without their intervention, their "selection." Perhaps, like universes spun off behind a star-drive, you weren't meant to know what happened to your descendants. Even back in times when parents shared half their lives with daughters and sons, did any of them ever really know what cosmos lay behind a child's eye?

Unanswerable questions were Isola's metier. In time, she might turn her attention to these. If she got another chance, in a better situation. For now, she had little choice but to accept the other part of Jarlquin's prescription. Work was an anodyne. It would have to do.

"They're gone," she said, turning to her friend.

"Yes, and good riddance."

In Mikaela's pale eyes, Isola saw something more than sympathy for her pain. Something transcendant glimmered there.

"Now I can show you what we've found," Mikaela said, as if savouring the giving of a gift.

"What we..." Isola blinked. "I don't understand."

"You will. Come with me and see."

Tenembro was black. But this time Isola saw a different sort of blackness.

Tenembro's night fizzed with radio echoes, reddened heat of its expansion, a photon storm now cool enough to seem dark to most eyes, but still a blaze across immensity.

Tenembro's blackness was relieved by sparkling pinpoints, whitish blue and red and yellow. Bright lights like shining dust, arrayed in spiral clouds.

Tenembro Universe shone with galaxies, turning in stately splendour. Now and then, a pinwheel island brightened as some heavy sun blared exultantly, seeding well-made elements through space, leaving behind a scar.

"But..." Isola murmured, shaking her head as she contemplated the holistic sampling – their latest pan-spectral snapshot. "It's *our* universe! Does the other side of the wormhole emerge somewhere else in our cosmos?"

There were solutions to the equations which allowed this. Yet she had been so sure Tenembro would lead to another creation. Something special...

"Look again," Mikaela told her. "At beta decay in this isotope...And here, at the fine structure constant..."

Isola peered at the figures, and inhaled sharply. There *were* differences. Subtle, tiny differences. It was another creation after all. They had succeeded! They had looked down the navel of a macro singularity and seen...everything.

The still-powerful tang of her pain mixed with a heady joy of discovery. Disoriented by so much emotion, Isola put her hand to her head and leaned on Mikaela, who helped her to a chaise. Breathing deeply from an infusion tube brought her around.

"But..." she said, still gasping slightly. "...the rules are so close to ours!"

Her partner shook her head. "I don't know what to make of it either. We've been trying for years to design a cosmos that would hold together, and failed to get even close. Yet here we have one that occurred by natural processes, with no conscious effort involved–"

Mikaela cut short as Isola cried out an oath, staring at the pseudo-life chaise, then at a waiter-servitor that shambled in carrying drinks, a construct eight days old and soon to collapse from unavoidable buildup of errors in its program. Isola looked back at the holographic image of Tenembro's universe, then at Mikaela with a strange light in her eyes.

"It...*has* to be that way," she said, hoarse-voiced with awe. "Oh, don't you see? We're pretty smart. We can make life of sorts, and artificial universes. But we're new at both activities, while nature's been doing both for a very long time!"

"I..." The pale woman shook her head. "I don't see..."

"Evolution! Life never *designs* the next generation. Successful codes in one lifetime get passed on to the next, where they are sieved yet again, and again, adding refinements along the way. As Jarlquin said – whatever works, continues!"

Mikaela swallowed. "Yes, I see. But universes..."

"Why not for universes too?"

Isola moved forward to the edge of the chaise, shrugging aside the arms that tried to help her.

"Think about all the so-called laws of nature. In the "universes" we creat in lab, these are almost random, chaotically flawed or at least simplistic, like the codes in pseudo-life."

She smiled ironically. "But Tenembro Universe has rules as subtle as those reigning in our own cosmos. Why not? Shouldn't a child resemble her mother!"

What came before me?
How did I come to be?
Will something of me continue after I am gone?

Isola looked up from her notepad to contemplate Tenembro Nought. This side – the deceptively simple black sphere with its star-tiara. Not a scar, she had come to realize, but an umbilicus. Through such narrow junctures, the Home Cosmos kept faint contact with its daughters.

If this was possible for universes, Isola felt certain something could be arranged for her, as well. She went back to putting words down on the notepad. She did not have to speak, just will them, and the sentences wrote themselves.

My dear child, these are among the questions that will pester you, in time. They will come to you at night and whisper, troubling your sleep.

Do not worry much, or hasten to confront them. They are not ghosts, come to haunt you. Dream sweetly. There are no ghosts, just memories.

It wasn't fashionable what she was attempting – to reach across the parsecs and make contact. At best it would be tenuous, this communication by long-distance letter. Yet, who had better proof that it was possible to build bridges across a macrocosm?

You have inherited much that you shall need, she went on reciting. *I was just a vessel, passing on gifts I received, as you will pass them on in turn, should selection also smile on you.*

Isola lifted her head. Stars and nebulae glittered beyond Tenembro's dark refraction, as they did in that universe she had been privileged to glimpse through the dark nought – the offspring firmament that so resembled this one.

As DNA coded for success in life-forms, so did rules of nature – fields and potentials, the finely balanced constants – carry through from generation to generation of universes, changing subtly, varying to some degree, but above all programmed to prosper.

Black holes are eggs. That was the facile metaphor. *Just as eggs carry forward little more than chromosomes, yet bring about effective chickens, all a singularity has to carry through is* rules. *All that follows is but consequence.*

The implications were satisfying.

There is no mystery where we come from. Those cosmos whose traits lead to forming stars of the right kind – stars which go supernova, then collapse into great noughts – those are the cosmos which have "young." Young that carry on those traits, or else have no offspring of their own.

It was lovely to contemplate, and coincidentally also explained why she was here to contemplate it!

While triggering one kind of birth, by collapsing inward, supernovas also seed through space the elements needed to make planets, and beings like me.

At first, that fact would seem incidental, almost picayune.

Yet I wonder if somehow that's not selected for, as well. Perhaps it is how universes evolve self-awareness. Or even...

Isola blinked, and smiled ruefully to see she had been subvocalizing all along, with the notepad faithfully transcribing her disordered thoughts. Interesting stuff, but not exactly the right phrases to send across light years to a little girl.

Ah, well. She would write the letter many times before finishing the special antenna required for its sending. By the time the long wait for a reply was over, her daughter might have grown up and surpassed her in all ways.

I hope so, Isola thought. *Perhaps the universe, too, has some heart, some mind somewhere, which can feel pride. Which can know its offspring thrive, and feel hope.*

Someday, in several hundred billion years or so, long after the last star had gone out, the great crunch, the Omega, would arrive. All the ash and cinders of those galaxies out there – and the quarks and leptons in her body – would hurtle together then to put *fini* on the long epic of this singularity she dwelled within, paying off a quantum debt incurred so long ago.

By then, how many daughter universes would this one have spawned? How many cousins must already exist in parallel somewhere, in countless perpendicular directions?

There is no more mystery where we come from. Had she really thought that, only a few moments ago? For a brief time she had actually been *satiated.* But hers was not a destiny to ever stop asking the next question.

How far back does the chain stretch? Isola wondered, catching the excitement of a new wonder. *If our universe spawns daughters, and it came, in turn, from an earlier mother, then how far back can it be traced?*

Trillions of generations of universes, creating black holes which turn into new universes, each spanning trillions of years? All the way back to some crude progenitor universe? To the simplest cosmos possible with rules subtle enough for reproduction, I suppose.

From that point forward, selection would have made improvements each generation. But in the crude beginning...

Isola thought about the starting point of this grand chain. If laws of nature could evolve, just like DNA, mustn't there exist some more *basic* law, down deep, that let it all take place? Could theologians then fall back on an ultimate act of conscious Creation after all, countless mega creations ago? Or was that first universe, primitive and unrefined, a true, primeval accident?

Either answer begged the question. Accident or Creation... in what context. In what setting? What conditions held sway *before* that first ancestor universe, that forerunner genesis, allowing it to start?

Her letter temporarily forgotten, with mere galaxies as backdrop, Isola began sketching outlines of a notion of a plan.

Possible experiments.

Ways to seek what might have caused the primal cause.

What had been before it all began.

David Brin, author of many award-winning science-fiction novels, last appeared in *Interzone* with "Piecework" (issue 33), and Stan Nicholls interviewed him in our issue 41. He lives in California, but recently spent a year in France.

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Encounter of Another Kind

David Langford

At the time it seemed a good night for our work. A thin watery fuzz, half mist and half rain, was blurring the moon and had made haloes round the lights of the main road. This dark lane was still puddled from afternoon showers, so that when our van tilted and bumped along it the headlight reflections rose in silent luminous bubbles through the trees. Even I took a long moment to identify them. The right frame of mind is so important.

This was a high-activity area of Wiltshire, where sightings came regularly with the seasons. It was crop circle country too, but I had always been uneasy about that work: it's too showy and physical, and too many fanciful hoaxers had spoilt the impact of our own real, authorized creations. But the fertile location was just happenstance. The man Glass lived close at hand, and was known to take this lane from Pewsey village to his house. Tonight he had been delivering one of his lying, offensive lectures, and the driving time from London...

I checked my watch. Perhaps Glass's wife would be doing the same, and laying out coffee-cups. Would she believe his incredible, incoherent story a few hours hence? We were ready by the roadside, in a field muddy and trampled enough that our own traces could make no difference.

The stage was set in the bubble-tent. Mackay had long finished stringing his cables and was hunched over his little panel of lights, rapt like a boy playing trains. Sometimes I wondered about Mackay. It was easy to imagine him working with anyone, even the IRA, grinning all over that fat face and soldering his fussy circuits for sheer love of gadgetry. He never seemed to absorb the idea that we were evangelists labouring in the service of a great truth.

One amber light blinked and double-blinked in the box. Ten-minute test. The coast was clear and the kid hadn't yet gone to sleep at his post up the dark lane, at the junction. We were as ready as we would ever be.

The kid's role was relatively minor, but I still worried about him getting it right. You never know what to make of these teenage agglomerations of hair, leather and studs. But he'd asked sensible questions about the reports of Visitors in this and that country: sometimes putty-faced midgets with enormous eyes, sometimes six or seven feet tall. I dare say they can take what form they like, I'd told him, and he seemed satisfied. Now Mackay was deeply indifferent to that kind of speculation, and Glass would naturally have made it a basis for mockery.

Yes. Peter Glass was a man long overdue for the attention of the skies. Whenever some hint of the mysterious and wonderful came creeping shyly into the world, it was always he who'd rush to be interviewed and turn everything to mud with his touch. It was the planet Venus, it was a low-flying plane, the witnesses imagined it all, he was just lying, she is mentally disturbed, who can believe in little green men anyway?

(A cheap newspaper phrase, that last. In the classic accounts They are never green.)

It is particularly maddening when an encounter we *know* to have been physically real is explained away as hallucination. People who ought to be fighting at our side are seduced by talk of visitations and abductions being all a matter of strange psychological states blah blah blah which if properly studied might give new insight into the mind and blah blah blah. What is this stuff but a fancy version of "he's barmy and she made it all up"? Of course it must be said that some people do make it up. I loathe a hoaxer.

The large oblong indicator at dead centre of Mackay's panel went red and a low buzz sounded. I keep my distance from electronics hobbyism, but that one was obvious enough. The kid had clocked what was presumably the right car going by. Now he should be hauling out that big *DIVERSION* sign from the sodden undergrowth. A quiet country lane was about to become quieter.

I always kept the pallid mask off until the last minute: it's hot and uncomfortable. Lights were flickering in the distance, approaching. Glass himself would be seeing those eerie reflections rise up the wet trees. Perhaps they would take on a new significance for him, now or in retrospect, because Mackay had flicked the first of his switches. Could the tiny hiss even be heard over the engine noise? A receptive frame of mind was needed.

In the classic UFO encounter by road and by night, an unidentifiable light is seen above and the car ignition mysteriously fails. This will often be the preliminary to a "missing time" or even an "alien abduction" experience. We were certainly going to see to that. At the second click from Mackay's board the quartz-halogen cluster blazed intolerably from the sky (in fact from a cable slung precariously between tall trees on either side of the lane), and at the third Glass's ignition mysteriously failed.

The sky-gods command powers beyond our scope, of course, and their servants down here must resort to earthly expedients. I think a priest might feel the same when he doles out the bread and wine and is

sure it represents a truth, while doubting that the miracle of blood ever really comes to pass as it had in scriptural days. Mackay's opposite number in London had done his part well enough: the relay in the HT circuit and the tiny cylinder with its servo-operated valve just under the driver's seat. Of course it is the signal from the first switch that releases the gas.

Longstead 42 is a transparent and almost odourless psychotropic agent, used to ensure the properly receptive frame of mind. Its effects do not last long, but Glass was still trembling and almost helpless in his stalled Volvo when we adjusted our bulging masks and came to him. The sequence of events, coloured and exaggerated by the mild hallucinogen, must already have been etching itself deep into his memory ...all the more so for its theoretical familiarity. His own scoffing researches would reinforce the impact of what happened now. I tried to be gentle with the hypodermic, but there was no need to conceal this injection. Unexplained scars and puncture-marks are all part of the classic abduction experience.

The kid's lightless motor-bike was coughing at the gate as we helped Glass towards our mother ship. Mackay fingered his pocket controller and the great inflated igloo pulsed in a riot of coloured lights. A bubble marquee is perfect for this work despite the faint roar of the compressor: it even has an airlock. I myself found it a deeply moving sight. If only...

He did not resist as we stripped him and settled him on an examination table of a design as unearthly as our resources could arrange. For him this would be a place of stabbing supernatural light, thanks to a few drops of atropine that dilated each eye to the full; and strange small Beings would hover around. The kid, who had changed into his own mask and white leotards before joining us now, was already short enough: but the deceptively high table made midgets of us all, while dry-ice fog confused the issue of how far down our legs might actually go. Truth is all a matter of presentation. Our putty-complexioned masks swelled at the top into mighty domes of intellect, and we peered through huge eyes of empty black glass.

So we set to work, following the guidelines laid down by a myriad published cases. This is a hugely documented phenomenon. Mackay and I had had plenty of practice with communicants of both sexes, and worked well together. Biopsies, minute incisions. Needles in Glass's navel, liquid drooling into his ear, surreal alien mechanisms blinking as they diagnosed and recorded nothing at all. Intermittent chemical blackouts helped break up the stream of his memory (partial amnesia is highly characteristic). There was a star map ready to show him, a patternless scattergram on which he could later impose any meaning he cared.

He gaped. I knew we had him. Why should he be so loud in his filthy scepticism if he were not already close to belief, just waiting for the sign? Recorded messages of peace and millennial warning washed over him, the voices digitally processed into eerie tones appropriate to the farther stars. Never again would he be able to say with sincerity that it was all ridiculous, that in all probability the quote UFO abductees unquote are merely drawing attention to themselves with lurid fantasies.

The culmination is the terrible Probe, the thing that bulks large in the encounter/abduction story which I believe has sold more copies than any other. It is a huge ugly object, like a phallus designed by H.R. Giger in a bilious mood: thirteen inches long, vaguely triangular in cross-section, grey and scaly, tipped with a jagged cage of wires. (The shaft is actually painted fibreglass.)

It is a necessary part of the experience that the victim should feel himself anally penetrated by this probe. Of course we relied on suggestion: after showing him the thing, and turning him over to obstruct his vision, I would actually insert a finger. The greased rubber glove was already on my hand.

But there was a hitch before the Probe came into play. The head-masks do not make it all that easy to see to the left or right. We had blacked Glass out again to allow a quick breather and a cup of tea from the thermos... and there was a confused sound. I fumbled impatiently with the mask and at the same time felt a small sharp pain in my thigh, some stinging insect, perhaps.

When I'd finally pulled the stifling thing off my head I saw that Mackay had fallen over. The fog lapped around him. I thought at first he must have had an accidental whiff of the blackout agent. Everything was blurring and the tent walls shimmered. The kid smiled at me. It is not possible that the mask could smile.

I told him to take that stupid thing off. I do not know whether I meant the mask or the smile. He invited me to remove it for him, and though I first reached out in blind anger at his playing around, I was suddenly afraid that if I touched it the great head would be built of living flesh. No. I said something loud, perhaps not an actual word. Was Glass's body melting and oozing off the table? No.

There is a gap here. Partial amnesia is highly characteristic. Things tilted heavily in and out of focus. I remember the feel of another insect and knew this time it was a needle. By then I was pressed into the cold soggy fabric of the tent floor, choking in our artificial fog. Insistent fingers tugged at my tight white alien costume.

Everything inside my skull was whirling in tight, chaotic patterns, led by a silly persistent worry about whether the syringe had been properly sterilized (I was always very conscientious about this). What did I know about the kid? It was his first outing. I had barely seen him before. They can take what form they like.

Those eyes.

He said...

I do not recall all the words. That scopolamine cocktail is meant to be disorienting. The thin voice conveyed that we were playing a dangerous game. More than once he said: "My sister." I thought of sister worlds, sister craft gleaming silver as they made their inertialess turns and danced mockingly off the radar screens. He said: "In an institution." Would that have been the Institute of UFO Studies? At another point he said: "You bastards," and "did all this to her," and "waiting a long time for this..." The words of the sky-gods are always enigmatic, and perhaps we are only their bastard offspring.

It was so hard to think. All this is confused in a red blur of pain, because to impress his seriousness upon me he then made scientific use of the Probe. Nor was there any reliance on suggestion or on a greased and rubber-sheathed finger. "This is for her. You hear me? This is for her." Did I hear that? At the time I could not begin to appreciate it as an exalting, a transcendent experience. I am sure that no chemical agents assisted the loss of consciousness which duly followed, although not soon enough.

Waking up on chill plastic stretched over mud, racked with cramps and another, deeper ache... is not an experience to be recommended. The "kid" was long gone. I never knew his name, if on Earth he ever went under a name. I tried not to be consoled by the discovery that Mackay too had been warned, every bit as emphatically as myself.

Under a dismal grey moon we limped somehow through the clear-up procedure and left Glass to sleep it off in his wretched Volvo, itself now stripped of our London man's gadgetry. When he uncoiled himself in the small hours, he would be awakening to his new membership in the ranks of abductees, the sufferers from "missing time." Would he proclaim it or would he lie by silence? Who cared? Glass was no longer important.

The truth is what's important. After a longish period of convalescence and keeping a low profile (even my once-friendly family doctor was terrifyingly unsympathetic about the injury), I now see myself in the position of a worldly priest who has at last received his own sign. But it's a sign like the miraculous appearance of the face of the Virgin Mary in one's toilet bowl. The kind of thing that will do to win peasants: meaning so much to the recipient, but just another tawdry, commonplace sensation to the world at large. For this muddying of the waters I blame the people who have made up garish UFO encounter tales without ever having a genuine experience like the one we gave to Glass. Oh, I do loathe and despise these hoaxers, almost as much as the narrow-minded sceptics themselves.

Meanwhile, how can I hope to publish *this* truth and have its very special status believed? How can it help me to my rightful position among the elect when They finally beam down in glory from the stars with all their wonderful cargo? How?

David Langford is a popular columnist in *MILLION: The Magazine of Popular Fiction* and several other publications. As far as his short stories are concerned, he last appeared in *Interzone* with "A Snapshot Album" (issue 43). He lives in Reading.

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The Robert Rankin Story

As Told to Colin Munro

He's one of Aleister Crowley's biggest fans, he wears his hair in a pony-tail, is a self-confessed ageing hippy, likes a pint of lager or three and has a fascination with all things weird and wonderful. He's also a mild-mannered lunatic who happens to write some bloody funny books. Well, that's the by now legendary synopsis completed; however, if your curiosity extends to learning the full and unexpurgated details of "The Robert Rankin Story" then, dear reader, read on...

I first met Robert on a brisk October morning at his home in Brighton which he shares with his wife Alison and their two boisterous children, William and George. After the relevant introductions were made, Robert ushered me into his study for the serious business of "The Interview." This room in itself provided an interesting and colourful insight into the man's character. Not so much a study, more the lair of some 20th-century mage. A bizarre assortment of stuffed animals greeted our entrance with glassy-eyed silence whilst a grotesquely shrunken head leered evilly at my evident astonishment. On an elderly table, nestling amongst other curiosities, several crystal balls glinted brightly in the hazy autumn sunlight, their distorted surfaces reflecting shelves weighed down by books of every description; new propping up old, fact leaning towards fiction, tales of fantasy and the occult predominant. Stepping into Mr Rankin's study is not unlike stepping into one of his novels and it was these that I was here to discuss.

The Brentford books were Rankin's first forays into the world of Published Author. They describe the bizarre events inflicted upon the inhabitants of this small West London suburb of Ealing. Classics of fantastic humour, they achieved for him a cult following, but precious little else. How did Rankin account for their apparent lack of success? Rankin gives a wry smile as he replies:

"Well, I could ask you to define 'success' but if we're simply talking sales, then yes, the books could have done better. The fact of the matter is that for most authors the marketing of their work is at least as important as its content. With the Brentford series many people, including my then publishers, found the tales hard to categorize. Who should they be aimed at, where and what was that mysterious beast known as Target Audience? Lack of promotional spend didn't help matters greatly either, for example the first in the series, *The Antipope*, was released a few short months after my publishers had spent a good deal of money launching the first work of another new author, a novel called *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy*. As a result, *The Antipope* had to be content with a rather more modest promotional budget and initial sales were, shall we say, disappointing. The next two books, *The Brentford Triangle* and *East of Ealing*, suffered a similar fate."

Taken out of context, Rankin's comments could sound slightly bitter, but the fact is that he delivers them in a very laid-back almost amused fashion. *Che sera, sera.*

Doesn't it worry him that as an author his livelihood seems so dependent on the outside forces of Marketing and Public Relations? He seems philosophical on the subject.

"Once any writer decides that he'd like to earn a living from his work, then, however reluctantly, he's entering the market place. He might write the books but someone else has got to sell them."

If other people find it hard to put a strait-jacket on Robert Rankin's books, how would he himself describe them? Rankin laughs and lights the first of many cigarettes; inhaling deeply, he replies:

"Ah, you're asking the difficult ones now, are you? Well, I suppose if I had to hang a name tag on my work I'd call it 'Fantastic Fiction.' The bizarre fascinates me totally. One of my favourite publications for example is the *Fortean Times*, with its stories of showers of frogs, latter-day vampires and Latvian peasants working miracles. I find that sort thing both amusing and intriguing. I'd like to think that my books are viewed the same way."

Compared to the Brentford books, the *Fortean Times* seems a very tame journal indeed. Forget amphibians falling from the sky and regale yourself instead with the antics of some the funniest and weirdest characters ever to dwell in pulp city. Nominate your favourite from this far-from-complete selection. There's Manuel Ortega, the foul-mouthed kamikaze Flying Saucer Captain hell-bent on destroying the Earth in general and Brentford in particular. Or choose instead Paul and Barry Geronimo, the dual incarnations of the great Apache warrior (counts as one vote); then there's Archroy, Master of the ancient and deadly art of Dimac; and, to round off our list, what about a Magnum-wielding Sherlock Holmes, revived from his suspended animation beneath the streets of Ealing? The list of "amusing and intriguing" characters in Rankin's novels is a long one. Clichéd as the question may seem, just where does he get his ideas from?

"Basically just from everyday life. It's fairly true to say that everybody's got a story; I just happen to look at that person and their story with a slightly distorted view."

A nice understatement there from a man whose story-telling technique has been likened to a Dennis Wheatley on dope.

At this point in the interview some readers might possibly be thinking, "Fine, we've been told so far that this guy Rankin has a taste for the offbeat, we've been given a fleeting introduction to some of his heroes and villains but why oh why would anyone want to set novels of the fantastic in the somewhat less than exotic borough of Ealing?" It seemed like a good question to me too, so I put it to the one man with the answer. Without hesitation he replies:

"Have you ever been to Brentford? It's an amazing place, you should try it sometime. In the nicest possible way, the place is just strange. I lived there for about ten years, and I have some very fond memories of my stay, however you quickly realize that the Brentonians are a breed apart. If you subscribe to their view that Brentford forms the hub of the known Universe then it doesn't take a great leap of imagination to envisage it being beset on all sides by forces of evil eager to wreak death and destruction upon the chosen few."

Between *East of Ealing* and the publication of the fourth and (to date) final book in the series, *The Sprouts of Wrath*, there lay a considerable number of years in which it seemed Rankin had hung up his pen and paper for good. Why the gap?

"Purely commercial," comes the reply. "I thought I'd finished with the Brentford series and was working on a new project when my publishers asked for just one more story. In my own way I'm very very fond of Pooley and O'Malley [our main heroes throughout the series] and the thought of being offered money to write about them again was one that I just couldn't resist, so *The Sprouts of Wrath* was born."

Are there any plans for a fifth in the series?

"Unlikely. In retrospect I'm not even that sure that it was wise to do *The Sprouts*. I'd moved out of the area by then and found it hard to recreate the spirit of the earlier tales. It would be a great pity if I wrote another and got it wrong."

Despite Rankin's reservations about *The Sprouts of Wrath*, it is still a very funny book and rounded off a brilliant and exceedingly well written series that led him to that dubious status of "cult" author. Is it a position he enjoys?

"I suppose it's quite flattering. I often hear from readers who tell me that they really like my books and why wasn't I on a best-seller list somewhere? They seem quite a loyal bunch as well. For example, one of the characters in the Brentford tales is known as Archroy. Archroy travels the world in search of things like Noah's Ark or the lost city of Atlantis. He updates Pooley and O'Malley on his progress via cosy little post-cards, saying such things as 'am half way across the Andes on the trail of the Yeti. Weather rotten. Wish you were here.' It's an infrequent running gag in the books. To my surprise I started to receive post-cards from all around the world with messages like 'Having a lovely time in Costa Del Sol looking for the lost treasure of the Incas. All the best. Archroy.' Now, I've moved house a few times since first getting these cards and yet they just keep turning up correctly addressed. To this day I still don't know who's sending them, but it's fun."

Isn't there the fear that a cult author is simply an author who hasn't hit the big time yet?

"I wouldn't mind in the slightest if Hollywood phoned me to-morrow and said 'Rankin, we've just read your latest novel and we think it could be *big*. How does a million dollars grab you?' Equally, if I wasn't making a penny out of my books I'd still be writing."

So what's the fascination with the roller-coaster fortunes of being an author?

"Quite simply, it isn't real life.

Photo of Robert Rankin courtesy of Bloomsbury Publishing

Whether certain people care to admit it or not, writing is part of the Entertainment Industry, not as glamorous perhaps as being a rock or film star but nonetheless it's still not a proper job. I'm just pleased and grateful that I can make my way in the world doing something that I actually enjoy doing."

Many people, not least fellow authors, might view Robert's opinions on the gentle Art of Writing as just a tad Bohemian. However to set these opinions in their proper context it is useful to know a little of the man's background.

Born in 1949 he came of age at the height of the Swinging Sixties, attended an Art School and was based in London. It comes as no big surprise therefore when Rankin admits to being a dyed-in-the-wool Hippy. Time and change have wiped the rose tint from many of that generation's spectacles but the perceived liberation of that decade from outmoded values and morals has undoubtedly left its mark on Rankin. He admits to having wasted a lot of his early life just bumming around from job to job (and there were many) but, as he explains, this was done at a time when very few gave much thought to tomorrow. In these days of recession, it's hard to appreciate the carefree philosophy enjoyed by the youth of the Sixties. As Rankin himself puts it:

"Nobody thought that the good times were ever going to end. Then things started to get rather dark and grim and now I'm surrounded by a society of people from my own generation mortgaged up to the eyeballs and wondering where it all went wrong."

Did he learn anything from that period?

"Only that whatever it took, I wanted to work for myself. That's basically one of the main reasons as to why I write. I couldn't be happy sitting in an office earning money for someone else."

Just then we were interrupted by a

rather voluble George Rankin who had rightly decided that his Dad wasn't paying him quite the attention he deserved. Rankin senior responded to his youngest son's demands the way any enlightened father of the Nineties should.

He bribed him.

His first attempt was to pick up a small plastic figure, which had been nestling quite happily next to a host of its comrades, and hand it to the child, remarking as he did so:

"I love the Star War characters, don't you? They look so dated now. This one's an Imperial Stormtrooper I think, or maybe it's one of the bad guys."

Good Guy or Bad Guy, it didn't seem to cut much ice with young Master George who examined it briefly before discarding it. Undaunted, Dad proceeded to pluck an inflatable U.S.S. Enterprise from its orbit around the study's ceiling. George, it would seem, is undoubtedly a Trekkie at heart; mollified he clutches his prize and toddles off.

We continue.

Apart from his wish to be independent, what other forces drove Robert Rankin to become an author? He is quite definite in his answer to this one.

"My father. He was a great character. It was from him that I acquired my love of the tall tale, for the simple reason that he was always telling them. It was wonderful. When other kids at school told me that their dads were electricians or bank managers, I was telling them that my Dad was a whaler or something like that. Impressive stuff. He also was in the habit of taking me to places such as museums, showing me the wonders of the world, through him the world seemed a much more interesting place. In addition, he hinted that he had a more than passing knowledge of Aleister Crowley, the infamous Black Magician, and it seemed to me that this knowledge was something beyond what could simply be gleaned from a book. As it happened, I never did find out what that connection was; to this day I still wonder about it."

It is obvious that the Occult holds an attraction for Rankin, the study is filled with a variety of thaumaturgical devices and books of mystic lore, the hardware and software of the Arcane. Just how seriously does he take it all?

"Not too seriously, although I do believe that science hasn't got all the answers as to what goes on in the world." He smiles again and adds: "There are still things beyond our ken."

We move on from the realms of the magical and discuss matters of a more futuristic nature, specifically, his new Armageddon trilogy. The first of the series entitled *Armageddon: The Musical* is something of a firecracker of a novel, full of sparkling, fizzing ideas, but one is never too sure which way the plot will jump next. Rankin himself admits that the story-line was untidy, suffering from an embarrassment of sub-plots.

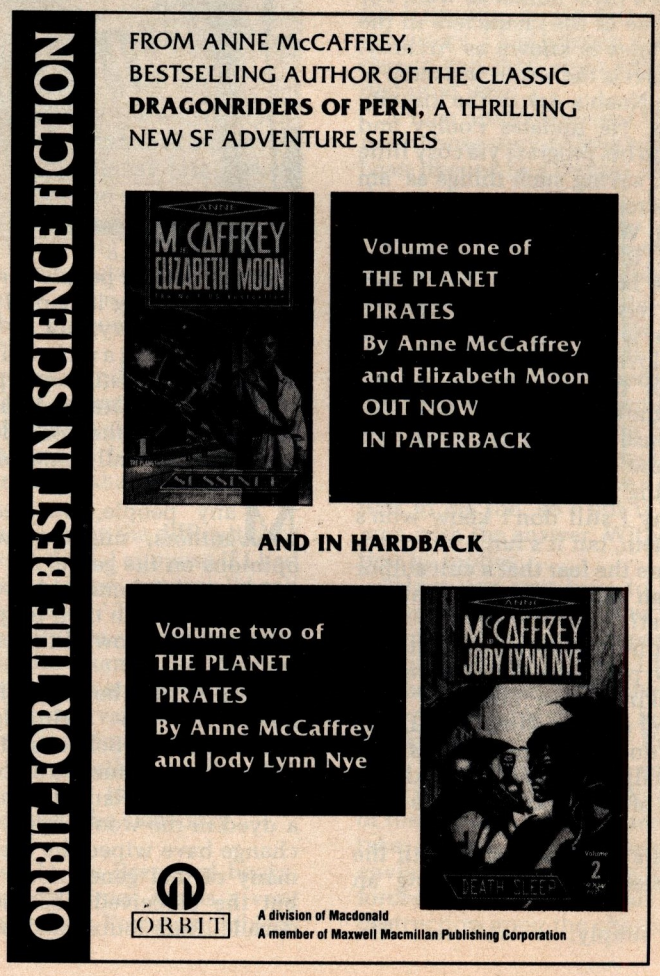
"I was perhaps a bit self-indulgent, I had become very absorbed by the story and didn't step back enough to appreciate that it was it was becoming overly complex. There's a lot going on this book."

It's hard to be too critical of Rankin, as the book does have some very funny moments. Its basic premise is that the planet Earth is in reality nothing more than a mega Soap Opera produced by a TV-obsessed alien race known as the Phnaargs. The problem is that, ever since the award winning episode which featured World War III, viewing figures have been dropping like Ozark Mountain turkeys. It would appear that life on a post-holocaust Earth isn't that much fun. Concerned that the show might be axed, the Phnaargian script-writers come up with an idea to boost audience ratings. When you realize that this idea eventually involves the Bates Motel, Jesus Christ's twin sister, cannibalistic gangs, Elvis Presley and a time travelling sprout called Barry, you begin to understand, just a little, the task involved in bringing the plot to a satisfactory conclusion. Rankin succeeds in this task, but only just. *They Came and Ate Us – Armageddon II: The B-Movie* is a different kettle of sprouts. The plot is kept reasonably under control, the humour is well maintained ("in" jokes in particular litter the pages like land mines) and Mr Rankin's fresh and fertile imagination shines through in every paragraph. If you want to know what it's about, well there's a talking dog called Fido, an assortment of Demons from Hell, kinky sex (page 111) and, of course, Elvis Presley. If you'd like to learn more, then I humbly suggest you buy the book.

One particularly interesting aspect of Rankin's work is his ability to make his reader pause and wonder what sort of book would be produced if, instead of going for your funny-bone, Rankin chose instead the jugular. Rankin is adamant however that there will never be a "straight" novel.

"I don't think I'm capable of doing serious work, it's the humour of a situation which appeals to me most. The temptation would always be there to leave the audience laughing."

For his fans and perhaps for a wider public, there should be a lot to laugh about. Coming soon to a sanitarium near you will be *Armageddon III: The Suburban Book Of The Dead*, and at the same time there are plans to re-issue the complete Brentford series. If what you are looking for in a book is originality, entertainment and wit, then pick up a Robert Rankin story.



Self-Sacrifice

Francis Amery

There is a ritual element to matters of this kind, which must be carefully observed. It is important that you make the correct selection, most particularly on this occasion, and the search – however uncomfortable it may be – must not be hurried.

It does no good to drive slowly along the usual streets, scanning the dim-lit ranks of careerist whores; authentic professionals are no use at all, however fresh and lean and tender they may appear to be. Girls of the right kind are never to be found on the usual pitches. The regulars will not tolerate them, not because they consider them to be competition (although they may be had cut price) but because they worry about the reputation of their streets, and do not wish them to become known as places where addicts ply their trade. In the civilized heartland of whoredom there is no worse strategy than to take one's stand in an area which is moving downmarket; the honest tradeswomen who take a pride in being service sector professionals, who believe and hope that they are clean and wish to advertise their cleanliness – honestly or not – must at all costs steer clear of the dead-enders who are past caring about what they pick up or what they pass on, or anything at all except the magic powder which sets them free.

To find what you need, you must go where the derelicts go, into the Underworld beyond and beneath the enterprise culture, and there you must search with infinite care for your Eurydice. You must go deeper, into the innermost circles of Hell, in search of the derelict and the desperate, to find a girl who is not merely child-like but so exclusively dependent on her regular fix that she has utterly abandoned all self-regard.

There is no functional necessity in this, of course – she will undoubtedly be positive, as you are, and that may be taken for granted – but in matters of this kind aesthetic priorities are paramount and it is aesthetic necessity which governs your choice.

You are duty bound to celebrate each anniversary as though it were the last – as indeed it might be.

When you do find her, she will be initially reluctant to go with you; that is inevitable. She is in Hell, but she is with the devils she knows, and you are a devil she does not. It is not that she fears what you might do to her; if she fits your requirements she will not be afraid of any kind of imaginable physical abuse, or being killed. What she fears is losing her connection. Her worst nightmare is that she might find herself in a place she does not know, where she does not know how to score. What she wants to do is to get into the front seat of your car and suck you off as fast as she possibly can, so that she can run with her wrinkled ten pound note to some pit of shadow where the Candy Demon always waits, ever-ready to do business. When you tell her that you want something very different, she is certain to hesitate. Even if you showed her five notes instead of one she would hesitate. So you show her something else: something white.

It wouldn't have to be genuine, if all you needed was to draw her into the car. If the quantity were right, the mere possibility would be promise enough; even here, hope has power enough to conquer cynicism. But in ritual matters of this kind, authenticity is of paramount importance. When you show her the heroin, it must be real.

Everything must be *real*.

Ideally, the girl should be intelligent. She would listen to you anyway, and her attentiveness will be mere performance in either case – it would be far too much to hope that she might *care* – but if she is intelligent, she will more fully understand what you say, and that is good. It does not matter what her reaction is – she will probably think you are mad, even if she does not say so aloud – but in these days almost everyone holds the opinion that almost everyone else is mad; that is always the last defiant claim of an imagination which can no longer cope with the enormity and ugliness of the world.

After all, there is a strong case to support the claim that everyone *is* mad, or at least deluded. We think that we're in charge of ourselves and our lives, but we aren't. Those few who try to do their best for their loved ones, and for mankind, never do what needs to be done, and never even permit themselves to recognize what needs to be done. We can't control our fundamental urges and impulses well enough to render them harmless. If the world is moving, at last, in the direction of sanity, it is no thanks to Everyman; he is simply a fool and a madman, fiddling while the Human Empire burns. Nor, in spite of everything you have done, may you count yourself a shining exception. You can't avoid your share of the guilt, your share of the sin, your share of the madness. You must remember that, today of all days. You're no better than anyone else.

Once she has been lured into the back seat of the car she immediately becomes a prisoner of the child-proof locks. It doesn't matter whether she is aware of it or not. She is in any case a

prisoner of evil circumstance. The plush seats of the BMW have merely brought a poignant hint of luxury into the cold rigour of her meagre existence.

You study her carefully in the rear-view mirror. Such are the boundless benefits of modern-day technology and the scientific perspective. Orpheus did not know what was happening behind him, and could not resist the temptation to look around as soon as he thought – wrongly – that it was safe to do so. You have a better understanding of the limits of possibility than he had, and your journeys into Hell always achieve their purpose.

This time, she is blonde, although it is not easy to tell because her hair is so dirty and hangs so raggedly about her face. The face is obviously good, though: thin and gaunt, with watery, haunted eyes. She wears an anorak and blue jeans, which hide her figure, but she is evidently half-starved. She has become acustomed to feeding her spirit rather than her body, and evidently knows well enough how superstitious conventional ideas about a heathy diet really are.

She is only five feet tall, possible four-eleven. It is hard to tell how old she really is – perhaps as much as eighteen, or even twenty – but she *looks* fifteen. She will certainly pass for a child when she strips down, if only by virtue of her emaciation. Authenticity matters in this instance as in all others, but on this particular point authenticity is compromised by ambivalent circumstance. This is Sally's twenty-first birthday, and the ninth anniversary of her death. Her image in memory is both twelve and twenty-one, at one and the same time; she is child and woman both, just as she is dead and also – by virtue of her reflection in the rear-view mirror – still alive.

When you stop in the underground car park and let her out she looks warily around.

"Here?" she asks, as though it makes no difference at all to her.

"Upstairs," you say. "The thirteenth floor."

She follows you to the lift – after all, you have the plastic bag full of powder in your briefcase: the bread of Heaven, the staff which supports her precarious life. You have become, in her eyes, the Candy Demon, the deliverer of sweet oblivion. You are her Grim Reaper, her Father Time, bearing a cup instead of a scythe.

If only she knew what a Reaper you are! But she will know, later, when the time comes for the most sacred part of the ritual. Then, she will hear your confession and know what you are. She will not grant you absolution, and probably will not believe a word that you say, but she will hear the truth.

There is no gratitude in her eyes as she looks around the flat, no sense of wonder at all. If there is any speculation in her gaze it is a pathetic attempt to guess whether anything easily portable would be worth the effort of stealing it should the opportunity arise. Alas for her ambitions, there is a marked dearth of ornamentation, and nothing to be seen which is made of gold or silver. Your tastes and inclinations have become increasingly Spartan since you became a widower.

When you lead her into the bathroom she is resigned but faintly resentful; she has no notion of ritual cleansing, but she must know that her face will be fairer, and her hair silkier, and her body more pleasant to the touch, once the stain of the streets has been removed. Perhaps that is what she resents: the obligation to provide sensual pleasure. She ought to be grateful for the chance to take a bath, but she shows no sign of it as you run the water. She should be alert to the possibility that your purposes might coincide in some respect with her own desires, but her attention is so narrowly focused on the magic powder that it has no scope for any other satisfaction.

She does not undress until you instruct her to do so, but she makes no complaint. She is not unduly ashamed or uncomfortable to be seen naked, nor to be soaped and scrubbed by your gentle hands. When you give her the clothes which you have set aside for her to wear she puts them on indifferently. She is not the kind of whore who plays parts like this as a matter of course, but she has heard her share of stories about the crazier kind of client and she is incapable of surprise. Perhaps she believes that she is acting out some stereotyped and vulgar cliché.

I really need the stuff," she says, when it dawns on her that this may take some time, but she does not expect to obtain her reward so easily. You open the bathroom cabinet and show her the hypodermic, still in its sterile wrapping, and the rest of the apparatus, all ready for her. She has already seen the drug itself. For the first time some fugitive relic of her former curiosity urges her to say: "You a user?"

You shake your head. "It's all for you," you tell her. "You can take it all."

That makes her anxious; she has gauged the quantity and its value, and reckons this too generous a promise. She knows that she is not worth a tenth as much, on the open market, and wonders if she has been taken for a ride.

"Where'd you get it?" she asks, suspiciously.

"I'm a doctor," you tell her. "It's easy for me. I can get hold of any quantity without having to account for it. I cut it myself. It's perfectly safe."

Her fears are not altogether quieted. It is in her mind that she might, after all, have been brought here to suffer some hideous ill-treatment, perhaps cruel enough to break down the sturdy wall of her indifference to harm. But she knows that it is too late to pay attention to such possibilities. She allows herself to shepherded back into the sitting-room, squirming as she tries to make herself comfortable in the party dress which was made for a little girl.

Then you bring out the birthday cake, and light the candle, and display yourself for the harmless eccentric that you really are.

There are twenty-one candles: twelve white, nine black. You hesitate before explaining, hoping that she might be clever enough to deduce what is happening, to provide the beginning of the story herself. Perhaps she is – might that be a flicker of comprehension in her weak, red-rimmed eye? – but if she is, she will not voice her conclusions.

"My daughter," you say, as tenderly as you can, "would have been twenty-one today, if she had not died. I always have a party."

She nods. She thinks she understands. She knows how small and thin she is, and what kind of clothes she has been given to put on – although she does not know as yet precisely what she might be asked to do,

if anything, when she takes them off again.

"Your name," you say, "is Sally."

She has sufficient sense of occasion not to contradict you. In fact, she reveals a certain flair for the dramatic by asking: "What did I die of?"

She is probably thinking of something like leukaemia. It is tragically romantic when children die of leukaemia. She is probably hoping that the answer is tragically romantic, because that will reassure her about the nature of the pantomime in which she has been invited to play a leading part.

"You were murdered," you say, staring at her face to catch her reaction. Because she has relaxed her guard a little, she does react, but the shock is subdued; her emotions are still anaesthetised, although she certainly needs her fix.

"You were knocked off your bicycle by a drunken driver," you explain. "You fractured your skull, broke your pelvis and ruptured your spleen, in addition to various minor injuries. It was a Sunday afternoon. The driver was a childless housewife aged 39, who had nothing better to do with her time than commit the occasional desultory adultery and drink herself stupid. She was banned from driving for four years but the judge thought that a custodial sentence would be inappropriate, presumably because she was middle class."

"Oh," she says.

"It was your birthday," you add, bleakly. "You died on your birthday."

"Oh," she says, again.

"It destroyed your mother. She wouldn't have caved in so soon, if it hadn't been for that. She'd have been stronger."

This time, she doesn't even bother to say "oh."

You sit down beside her. You have to blow out the candles yourself, before you cut the cake. You offer her a neatly-cut slice whose size is judged to perfection, and she looks down at it suspiciously. It is a sponge cake, dyed in pastel shades, with thick, soft, white icing and glutinous synthetic cream.

"You don't have eat it if you don't want to," you say, amicably. "I didn't bring you all the way up here just to eat cake. In a little while I'm going to fuck you, and then I'll give you the stuff. But it won't hurt to eat. Please."

This confirmation of the game plan helps her to relax. Perhaps she sighs with relief, thinking that it all makes more sense now, and that the ritual is crazy in an altogether commonplace sort of way. She thinks about saying: "Did you used to fuck your daughter?" but she doesn't. She isn't as impudent as some of her predecessors, although her thoughts run along the same lines.

"No," you say, as though she *had* asked. "I didn't ever fuck you while you were alive. I wanted to, very much, but I never did. I thought that it would constitute child abuse, and might cause you to have psychological problems in later life. If I could have been confident that you would continue to love me, I might have taken the risk, but I wasn't. Incest and child molestation get such a bad press, you see, and I wasn't able to assess the accuracy of the common opinion that girls fucked by their fathers always hate the experience. I didn't want you to hate me, so I never took my opportunities while you were alive. Now that

Illustrations by Sylvia Starshine

you're dead, it's much easier. I don't have to feel guilty about the fucking – only about the fact that it gives me a reason, however small, to be grateful that you were killed. If you were still alive, I probably never would have fucked you, unless you had gone out of your way to seduce me. I'm sure that happens, sometimes, but it may be just wistful thinking."

If she notices the play on words she doesn't react.

"Aren't you having any?" she asks, before taking the first bite out of her slice of cake.

You shake your head. "I never do," you say. "It's for you."

She is still suspicious, but she eats the slice of cake. She disposes of it rapidly, but not avidly; it is not greed which moves her but a desire to get on with things. Her attention is fixed on the moment when she will be given the superabundant supply of heroin, with which she gratefully will hammer one more figurative nail into her coffin.

The sugar in the icing and the cream conceals the bitter taste of the muscle relaxant. The dose is precisely calculated, as it invariably is, thanks to your long experience and profound respect for ritual. It will gradually rob her of the power of movement, but it will do no real damage, and she will remain fully conscious. It is necessary that she lies still, not in order that you might fuck her – she would, of course, lie still for that anyway – but in order that she will not become restive afterwards, when she must listen to what you have to say. She will be impatient for her overdue fix, but a vital part of the price will still remain to be paid, and it is necessary that everything should run smoothly.

"I loved you, Sally," you tell her, while the drug takes effect. "I loved you with a devotion and a passion which you probably cannot imagine. The sexual component of that love was only a tiny part of it – a belated extension of something much vaster and more profound. I loved you even before you were born, when you were merely an unformed idea. I am elderly, as you can see; I had long planned to have a child, in spite of the terrible state of the world, but I felt – deeply and sincerely – that I was not entitled to do so unless and until I had first accomplished something that would make the world a better place. I took my duties as a father seriously, you see. I still do. Everything I did in those distant days I did for love: for love of the wife I had and the daughter I intended to have, for love of all the wives and daughters which good men and true would have. I could never care as much for my fellow men; I could not help but feel that they were the ones who had made Hell on Earth, while women and girls were merely their victims. I have always loved women – the *idea* of womanhood."

She opens her mouth to reply. It is bound to be something sarcastic; a person like her is incapable of understanding what you have just said, and incapable of sympathizing with it even if she did. Persons of her kind have no sentimentality left in them – but that is not her fault. She too was a child once: an *authentic* child. It is the world which has made her into what she is, obliterating all the potential beauty with which her mind and heart once overflowed. She is, after all, the victim on whose behalf you have laboured all your life. She is the reason, the daughter, the idea.

She finds it unexpectedly difficult to speak. She hasn't yet lost her voice entirely, but she can't quite formulate the mocking words she intended to use.

You stand, and pick her up. She weighs very little; you have no difficulty in lifting her and cradling her in your arms. Just for an instant, anxiety makes her cling to you, as if you were indeed her father, come at last to rescue her from sore distress, come to repair her anguish with the protective embrace of your arms. But she cannot sustain the effort, physically or spiritually.

You take her into the bedroom and you lay her out on the bed. You undress her, one precious garment at a time, lovingly and reverently. Then you undress yourself, looking down at her all the while.

She is not entirely devoid of a sense of duty. When she realizes that you mean to fuck her without any protection, her eyes widen slightly, and the ghost of a frown creases her forehead. If she were able to mobilize her paralyzed vocal cords she would warn you. In spite of what she thinks you are, she would warn you. She does not wish you dead.

"It doesn't matter," you say, soothingly, while stroking her pale cheek. "I'm positive. I've been positive for years. We belong, you and I, to the same legion of the damned."

And then, for a while, you say no more. Actions speak louder than words.

The purpose of ritual is to dignify a mere event and thus transform it into something more significant, something more meaningful. The purpose of ritual is to magnify thought and action, to elevate them to a higher plane, where the particular may become general and one lonely act of love may symbolize the love that all mankind has – or ought to have – for the world which gave them birth and gives them sustenance. Through ritual, the tawdry becomes noble, the ordinary becomes extraordinary, and the mundane becomes supernatural.

Because this intercourse is a ritual, mere appearance becomes irrelevant. This is not a drug-addicted whore at all; it is your daughter. It is the idea of your daughter, the ideal of your daughter, the idol of your daughter. What you are doing is no mere obscene performance, and what you will achieve is no mere release of libidinous frustration. This is the perfect act of love, the ultimate celebration, made glorious by its very impossibility.

The flesh which you touch is *her* flesh. It has *her* texture, *her* odour, *her* vivacity. The rapture which you feel is the rapture of communion with *her*.

This is no illusion, no pretence; this is *real*.

This is, in fact, the *only* reality; all else is false. The entire world in which you live and labour, save only for this, is but a delusion laid before your eyes by a mad and spiteful demon. You are in Hell, even here and even now, but for this one extended, infinite moment in time you have the ecstatic power to transform that Hell, to redeem the world from its desolation.

You delay the culmination of the process and the inevitable decay of ecstasy as long as possible, but you cannot delay it for long. The experience is too powerful; it is too great a gift to have your daughter released, if only for a few precious moments, from

the world beyond the grave. You close your eyes, hoping against hope that if you obey the cunning injunction of the Prince of Hell you might keep what has been covenanted to you, but in the end it is impossible.

You, as a scientist, must respect that. The impossible remains, and always will remain, beyond your reach.

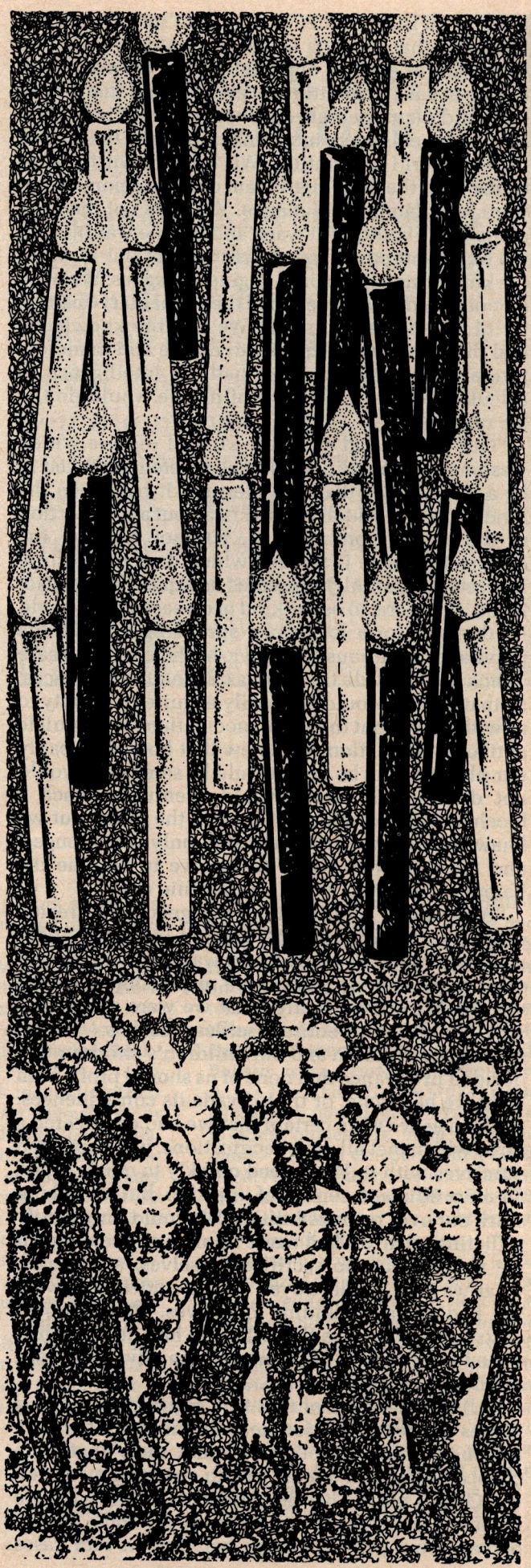
Afterwards, you make your confession. While she is still present and conscious – though lost and probably frightened, in the strange, lumpen, useless body which you have helped her to borrow for a little while – you tell her what you were never able to tell her while she was alive. You explain to her why you did what you did, for her and for the world.

"Long before you were born, Sally," you say, patiently, "it had become obvious to the enlightened few that the world was in deadly danger – that the Great Mother of us All was sick, and that her children had become her unwitting enemies. There were those who said that it was the machinery which had run out of control, that it was all to do with automation and the polluting excrement of factories, but men of my kind – the doctors, the biologists – knew that was false. We knew that men did not require heavy machinery to poison rivers and make deserts, that subsistence farmers cutting wood for cooking fires could devastate ecosystems as efficiently as the makers of motorways and diggers for oil. We knew that the real, underlying problem was simply a matter of numbers. We knew that the sole solution, however unpalatable it might be, was to reduce the size of the human population. We also knew, though, that the only people who would voluntarily accept the necessity of having fewer children, or none at all, were people like us, and that we were too few to make any material difference.

"You must understand, my darling, that this was a matter of inevitability. Those of us who understood were a tiny minority – perhaps one in every million – but there was no doubt about what we saw. The world was descending into ecocatastrophe, like a huge lorry careering down a steep slope, unstoppably. People were complacent, because the effects they saw around them seemed to be no more than a series of minor nuisances, but that is what a man thinks when a mosquito bites him, unaware that the parasite is now in his blood, and that the havoc it will wreak, destroying his health and strength, is inevitable. The great majority of men have always been blind to the future, Sally. Even among those who can see, the majority feel themselves to be helpless, incapable of any constructive action save complaint.

"Only a few of us truly understood, and only a few within the few were prepared to act. Only a tiny, infinitely precious few, were prepared to take responsibility, to take upon themselves the burden of mankind's sins of omission and commission, to swallow the bitter pill of necessity. We had the means, in our laboratories; we had the will, because we loved the world, and loved our daughters; we had the courage, because we saw and understood that if we did not act, Mother Earth herself was lost.

"What was needed, my love, was a single vital move



in the great game of life, which could save the world. We knew that no such salvation could be achieved overnight, or even in our lifetime, but we also knew that great oaks from little acorns grow, and that if only we could plant the right seed we might set in motion a train of events every bit as unstoppable as the juggernaut of world population. We had known for centuries what the three significant checks of population were: war, famine and plague. We were not the kind of men who could start wars, and famine was by then too blunt and powerless an instrument, but we *were* the kind of men who could engineer plagues. We were doctors, men who understood the elementary chemistry of genetics and disease. We had the knowledge and the technology required to devise and manufacture a new plague, and we had the intelligence to calculate exactly what kind of plague would do the job required of it.

"Our plague had to be the kind of disease which was immune to ordinary chemical defences; it had to be a virus rather than a bacterium. It had to be the kind of disease which would kill all but a tiny fraction of those who contracted it, but not quickly; the cleverest parasite is the one which does not destroy its hosts but carefully preserves its capacity to spread. It had, therefore, to be the kind of disease which could lie dormant for a long time, spreading through the population insidiously. It had to be the kind of disease which could evade the body's own natural defences, so that people would not easily acquire immunity to it, with or without the aid of inoculations to stimulate antibody production. We knew that however deadly our plague might be there would be *some* who would not die, because some would eventually reach a biochemical accommodation with the virus, but we knew that we had to ensure that only the strongest and the best were likely to survive to become the parents of a better, wiser, less prolific race.

"A group of a dozen men designed and created exactly such a disease. We worked in secret, under no one's orders. No government was involved in what we did; we and we alone were responsible for what we did. We knew exactly what we were doing, and why. We did it for entirely selfless reasons – for the sake of our children and our children's children. We decided in advance that none of us should profit from what we had done, or try to evade its consequences. As soon as we were certain that we had engineered a virus which met all our specifications, we inoculated ourselves with it. We moved quickly to create other, far more efficient, centres of infection, but we did not shirk our own responsibilities. We could only justify inflicting what we had made upon our fellow men if we were willing to sacrifice ourselves, and that is what we did. We destroyed all the evidence of what we had done, including ourselves. We accepted destruction, to prove that what we had done we had done for the benefit of others and the salvation of our Mother, the Earth.

"All the members of that tiny regiment of unsung heroes are dead, save for me. I am the last. There is a reason for this, although I cannot deny that pure chance has played a large part in ensuring my survival. Once a person has been infected by the virus we invented, you see, it lies dormant for some time – perhaps two years, perhaps ten, and in rare cases indefinitely. All victims of the virus become participants in a great lottery, waiting for their turn to sicken and die, but the lottery is biased. People who are weak with hunger, or very young or very old, or who suffer from some other disease or genetic deficiency, are more vulnerable than those in the prime of life and the pink of condition. Psychological factors play a part too: those who are under stress, or chronically depressed, or emotionally unstable, are more vulnerable than those whose lives are on a even keel, who are calm of mind and buoyed up by a sense of purpose, and are not eaten away by guilt or remorse or bitterness.

"It was not obvious to me in the beginning that I would be the last survivor of the initial group, but I have proved to myself that I am a stronger man than I ever thought possible. When you died, I might have followed you into the grave, but I did not. I fought back against the vicious whim of fate. I reminded myelf that I am a solver of problems, a man of achievement, a man who had take it upon himself to save the world by obliterating the human surplus and preserving only the essential, only the best. I knew that I could undo the fact of your death, and its effect on me, if only I had the strength and the skill – *and I did*. I have brought you back from the Land of the Dead from the deepest pit of Hell to its outskirts, its earthly borderlands. Year after year, I bring you back – and as long as you can return, I may stay.

"I was never able to tell you this while you were alive – I was never able to confess what I had done to *anyone*, because I had sworn a solemn oath. But the oath cannot apply to conversations with the dead, and so I have the opportunity to explain what I have done, to ease my conscience, to justify my decision. I wish with all my heart that you were not dead, my darling – I would far rather that you had taken your chance among the ranks of the living, perhaps to become the mother of a daughter yourself – but I cannot change places with you. This is the only way in which you can continue to live, and in order that you may have this, I too must continue to live. I *will* continue, as long as I can.

"I will see you next year, my darling girl."

When it's all over, you let her use the bathroom to shoot up. She is entitled to her reward and her privacy. She does not know that she was drugged; she believes that her sudden incapacity was mere exhaustion, a weakness of her own, simply one more arbitrary manifestation of the inexorable deterioration of her body and her mind. She is even grateful for it, because it made the fucking less burdensome for her, and postponed the clawing agony of her dependence.

She shows no sign of remembering anything that you said, although she was conscious throughout. Her memory has discarded it as though it were a dream. That is understandable, and appropriate; it wasn't, after all, this shabby, skinny prostitute to whom you were speaking.

As you finally show her to the door she looks down, hesitantly, at the plastic bag full of white powder which she is trying to conceal about her person. There is such an abundance of magic there, such a cornucopia of promises.

She looks up at you, not afraid now that she is high to take a risk. Her caution is thrown to the winds on which she soars.

"I could stay," she said. "As long as you like. I'd be your daughter. I'd be anything and everything you wanted. You said you could get the stuff – that it was easy."

"It wouldn't work," you say, softly and paternally, as you open the door to let her out. "It couldn't work. You see, *you're dead*."

She curls her lip, abruptly transforming her impression from innocent, pleading temptation to malevolent, contemptuous wrath, and says: "You and me both, motherfucker."

And she is right: positively, inevitably, decisively right. But thanks to you, the world will one day be saved.

Francis Amery is the pseudonym of a well known British science-fiction author. The first *Interzone* reader to guess correctly this writer's identity will receive as a prize copies of two recent novels by the author concerned. No conferring!

WRITE TO INTERZONE

We enjoy receiving feedback from our readers, and we hope to publish a lively letters 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.

Interaction

Continued from page 5

this have been, I wonder, a response to an article in *Foundation* 50 which accused your editorials of being "anodyne"? While naming the above you should also name the scoundrel responsible.

However, you have now given us a definition of Wessex SF (issue 52). Are there clues to the identity of books or authors in this? "...anything with Celts or Anglo-Saxons in." Not much to go on there. "...anything set in westerly parts of England." What, *anything*? Do you include the works of Thomas Hardy? Daphne du Maurier's books, or Winston Graham's Poldark novels? "...anything involving time travel." How well we recall those great sagas of Wessex Science Fiction, *The Door into Summer* (Heinlein), *The End of Eternity* (Asimov), *Up The Line* (Silverberg), and many others. "...anything involving grand cycles of time in which the future becomes the past." The author of *Earth Abides*, George Stewart: is he one of your Wessex people?

Like all descriptive definitions of sf (as opposed to prescriptive definitions), your attempt to identify a Wessex School will only work so long as you stick to generalizations. Even when names are proffered, such theories quickly go wrong. I note your assistant editor's attempt to define a "Sussex school," naming such representative writers as Paul McAuley (Scotland) and Stephen Baxter (Buckinghamshire).

Some writers seek inspiration from without: they interest themselves in the exact sciences, they follow trends, keep up with scientific developments, read books on pop sociology. Others seek inspiration from within: they respond to vague but irresistible impulses about landscape, history, culture, the search for knowledge. Both groups find imaginative possibilities in their musings. Most writers find schools and categories invented by pundits irritating and irrelevant. I hope you will soon declare that this "controversy" is at an end.

By the way, please note my new locality (below).

Christopher Priest
Sussex

Editor: *The term "Wessex School" was applied to a particular type of British SF published during the 1970s and early 1980s, so all your queries about Heinlein, Asimov, Silverberg and so on are beside the point. And, if the term "Wessex School" means anything at all, then at least one of the British authors you name, Keith Roberts, is most certainly a member of it: his* The Chalk Giants *(1974) could be taken as paradigmatic. You ask me to name names; OK, here are a few more – Richard Cowper, Robert Holdstock, Andrew Stephenson (in* The Wall of Years*) and, er, Christopher Priest (in* A Dream of Wessex*). No doubt readers can think of other examples.*

I object to your description of the IZ 49 editorial as "stating a policy." Some earlier editorials did in fact state policies (Radical Hard SF was one, years back) but in issue 49 I was merely trying to describe a couple of trends. In brief, I was "editorializing" for the possible amusement of readers, and you shouldn't mistake a spot of editorializing for something so grand as A New Policy. Interzone remains open to all kinds of sf, as long as it is well written. No offence, Chris!

Mutant Popcorn

Film Reviews by Nick Lowe

With an irony nicely consonant with its theme, the screenplay for **Prospero's Books** is easily the best thing Peter Greenaway has done, and the film surely close to the worst. On paper, the specs take all your breath away: at once a visionary superinterpretation of a play never adequately cinematized, and a definitive *chef-d'oeuvre* synthesis of personal techniques and themes running back over fifteen years. It's even something of a return to roots. Right through the eighties, which saw Greenaway's reputation transformed from barely-tolerated fringey doodler to European cinema's official captain genius, he's kept a lid on the fantasy subjects that launched his art in the seventies. And in the *Prospero* script, it's as if the sheer pressure of pent-up magic's finally blown the lid right off, unleashing a volcanic upchuck of headbending images to make up for a dozen years of denial. Like the gorgeous, impossible library it describes, the pages of the screenplay seem to squirm with a lush pullulation of images crawling over one another to burst off the page into life. Like the Books themselves, it sets out with geometric discipline to catalogue the contents of a real-life renaissance magician's impossibly capacious imagination. And alas, like the Books, eleven-twelfths of it meet a soggy end when the script finally comes alive on screen.

We're all aware, of course, that in filmmaking this kind of thing happens all the time, even among the envied handful of successful control freaks who get to direct their own scripts with the freest hand their almost total absence of budget will permit. (As a singularly apt ironic correlate, when I went in to try and buy the *Prospero* book the local bookshop had closed off the film section because indie role-model supreme and master of settling-for-less John Sayles was doing a PA plug for a work on which he had, at last, complete and uncompromised creative authority. It was, of course, a novel.) Darlings get killed, done because they are too many; you film what the finance will afford, and tug your forelock abjectly for what you get. For Greenaway, who for all his virtuosity and experience has never worked with mass choreography, untried technology, or major special effects, the education has clearly been horrendous – turning a screenplay whose daring and power make *Brazil* look like *Police Academy 5* into a sad, fumbling ghost of its intentions.

Take a frinstance. For "Our revels now are ended," the script prescribes a staggering montage of *twenty-eight* separate images: black rain falling, dancers fading to hair and paper masks, grass and garlands withering to white...And what happens in the film? Fifty confused-looking extras play all-fall-down. The climax, Prospero's drowning of his books, calls on the page for twenty-four individually-tailored magics as each volume in turn is tossed off a cliff into the midnight sea. But what we actually get at the end of the line is Gielgud dropping a pile of antiquarian remainders into a swimming bath, which now and again goes fizz bang. And so on and on, scaling down every ambition as each new corner gets snipped off. The script is frontispieced with a detailed plan in two projections of the topography of Prospero's island. Dated 1989, it assumes (as does the text) a host of exotic exteriors: a beach, a forest, a canal, a cornfield maze with distant pyramids viewed from above. Yet the finished film has dropped all locations, feebly transposing the exterior scenes to stylized colonnades of the palace – columns wound with leaves and creepers for the forest, columns with a couple of wheelbarrowloads of sand for the beach, columns with puddles for the canal...It's just wretched. Quite apart from uncomfortably recalling some of the less happy devices of the Jarman version, it just dissipates the magic into coy pantomimics, embarrassing, irritating, and lifeless.

There's no getting away from the gloomy reality that *Prospero's Books* was made far too cheaply, and on terms that have effectively neutered its vision. If it weren't for the star's unfortunate fragility, it would have been far better left a couple of years (as *Drowning by Numbers* was, to its considerable benefit) till some of the planets were better-aligned for its making. As usual, Greenaway and the indomitable Sacha Vierny do manage to make it all look like it cost about three times the single million there was to spend on the shoot, but the limits are still all too obvious. The much-advertised two million's worth of freebie Jap technology has been no help whatever in the areas where help was really needed: choreography, locations, properties, and above all old-fashioned Hollywood-style steam-driven special effects.

It's interesting to muse, in fact, on what ASACA will make of the return on their technical investment. Presumably, they expected eyepopping demonstrations of wizardry that would sock the jaws of big Hollywood brokers, and recoup the Corporation's loan thousandsfold in subsequent commissions for *Terminators* 3 to 14. If so, it's just another sign of how little Tokyo yet understands the art and politics of western filmmaking. What the incorrigible Greenaway has in fact done is to spend postproduction using two million's worth of their cutting-edge technology to overlay his film with a remake of *A Walk through H.* He's clearly had enormous fun doing it, as you'd expect from a lifelong Kitaj wannabe who, after fifteen years of having to point a camera at his art to get it shown at all, suddenly finds himself given free first entry to the most expensive sandpit any painter's ever been let loose in. But if I was the suppliers I'd be quite dismayed at the deliberately low-key, often unabashedly private way the materials have been used. Anyone with the slightest sense of how Greenaway works might have guessed that, given the chance literally to paint on film, he'd paint the kind of painting he always has: dense, rather brooding, layered collages mixing image, text, and technical diagram. The end product, in fact, leaves it very doubtful whether the ability to transfer Paintbox images (not exactly a brand-new technology in itself) via HDTV to cinema really constitutes the "Gutenberg revolution" he's so fond of claiming in interviews, though I'm sure he's quite sincere in his excitement. Far from showing off the miraculous versatility of the technique, *Prospero's Books* leaves more of a sense of its ultimate limitations, at any rate as a

John Gielgud in 'Prospero's Books'

technology for realizing the kind of mainstream special effects imagined by the script. Even the text descriptions of the Books themselves, to which the bulk of the paintboxing has been devoted, are far more magical and evocative than the comparatively weedy images we see on the screen.

So what's left is the rather pathetic shadow of what on paper looks like a blueprint for the greatest film in history. Even so, some fine things do survive, almost all to do with the figure of Prospero himself. Gielgud's performance serves and is served very well – though his own remarks on the filming in his tie-in memoir make it embarrassingly clear not only that he was left virtually undirected, but that his own and his director's conception of the role, and indeed of the whole play, bore only the most accidental resemblances. In particular, it's easy to sympathize with Sir Johnny's bafflement over Greenaway's insistence that Prospero voice all the other parts. As it turns out, Greenaway is so obsessed with the solipsistic figure and mind of Prospero that he frankly doesn't give half a toss about the inside heads of any of the other characters. As a result, the scenes in which Prospero is uninvolved – particularly the activities of Alonso's party, and the Stephano/Trinculo/Caliban subplot – are flatly uninvolving and often unintelligible. I.i, which takes more screen time than any other, would pass understanding even with a close familiarity with the text; and on first viewing I got through the whole film without even being able to work out which actor was supposed to *be* Antonio (on whom, even in this version, the entire plot hinges). As usual, Greenaway tries to cover himself for his freely-admitted incompetence at directing actors by luring the most preposterously overtalented cast imaginable. And, in fairness, even the non-Anglophones do remarkably well: Erland Josephson's Gonzalo and, especially, the bizarrely-cast Michel Blanc as Alonso actually coming off rather better than Mark Rylance's surprisingly hopeless Ferdinand. But their parts are butchered, and most of what's left of their dialogue is snatched from their lips and left to be played as dumbshow. For the actor, it's hard to imagine a more frustrating Shakespearean encounter.

Still, in the end the film does offer a sensitive, honest, yet in the best sense personal reading of the play, fair both to the magic and to the issues of Prospero's redemption. It certainly helps that, though I'd hardly have thought so before, *The Tempest* turns out to be stuffed to the ruff with classic Greenaway themes. It takes surprisingly little to turn the figure of Prospero into a surely-definitive incarnation of the familiar Greenaway hero: the obsessed, solitary demiurge brought down by the conspiracy of those worldlier victims whose lives he has tried to manipulate to his design. Like Mr Neville, the Deuce twins, Kracklite, Madgett, and Spica before him, Prospero is a man unmade by his own vision and power. The novelty here is that Prospero sees in time what he is becoming, renounces his magic of his own will, and by consenting to be nothing is redeemed – allowing him, unlike all his predecessors, to survive the film, surrendering in the epilogue the last of his identity to the audience's will. This is genuinely moving, and quite deeply true to the play. In subduing some of his fiercely personal vision to the collaborative input of his distinguished co-writer, Greenaway seems to have broken through, in this uncharacteristic tale of reconciliation and letting go, to a mellower, more redemptive version of his own autobiographical myth. It's not surprising he aligns himself strongly with the view, not really as fashionable at the moment as it has sometimes been, that reads Prospero and his renunciation of his magic as a conscious parable of his creator's farewell to the theatre. This is a filmmaker's Prospero, who writes the script of his own vengeance on the world that has cast him out, rediscovers his humanity in doing so, and is rewarded by seeing the script miraculously get made. "In this script it is intended," writes Greenaway in his preface with a disarming mix of perfect

truth, natural humility, and staggering disingenuousness, "that there should be much deliberate cross-identification between Prospero, Shakespeare and Gielgud." Ah yes: and the key players in WWII were Stalin, Roosevelt, Churchill, Hirohito and Mussolini.

There are of course, for the hardened palate, plenty of the incidental pleasures the Greenaway junkie by now takes for granted: dense painterly visuals, hilarious costumes, some breathtaking flights of imagery, and nearly as many references to old masters as there are to the director's own films. Sadly, though, there's also some deplorably amateurish Minelli on a shoestring, to the strains of some by now rather overfamiliar (in one case, deliberately recycled) wood-and-brass confectionery from maestro Nyman that only leaves you pining for Elisabeth Welch; and an *awful* lot of none-too-coordinated fleshy Dutch extras waving their danglies and (if you rashly let your eye stray from the foreground action) surreptitiously corpsing as they wander cluelessly around lugging bowls of fruit. The metafictional surplot, despite being an almost wholesale lift from Resnais's *Providence* on a scale that blurs the line uneasily between *hommage* and plagiarism, is largely impenetrable without some directorial commentary – particularly the idea that Ferdinand is Prospero's own creation, an idea that so far as I can see is unhinted-at anywhere on screen.

There's nothing so terribly wrong with *Prospero's Books* that an extra million and a bit of pop video experience wouldn't have sumptuously fixed; and at least Greenaway, unlike Shakespeare and Gielgud, has recorded his *Tempest* while still in his prolific prime, and can effortlessly afford an isolated dud. On balance, I suppose, there's enough there to make you grateful something was made, and we do have the book as a document of what might have been. But that knowledge of possibility only nags all the more, a depressing indictment of the business of getting films made. I can't easily imagine even the tirelessly inventive Greenaway coming up with another film that could match this script. As in the film, it looks like final cut landed with Caliban.

In the meantime, if you really feel ready for postnarrative cinema, you probably deserve Shinya Tsukamoto's new-flesh rampage **Tetsuo: The Iron Man**. A deliberately senseless storyline from the weirder reaches of *manga* surrealism is further confounded by crazed editing, next-to-no dialogue over near-continuous music, a kind of garage-thrash b&w camera style, and a gleefully disassembled narrative chronology that does its best to erase differences between time present, flashback-&-forward, and dream. The plot (a quaintly archaic term in the context) has a clean-cut "salaryman" (as the credits insist) knock down a young "metals fetishist" (same) on the way home from a bit of rumpy with his best girl in the park; whereupon he finds his flesh turning into scrap metal and his brain to fuzzy video, the result (apparently) of psychic vengeance from the youth, who was also mutated by the accident in one of those *Akira* situations that must give the Tokyo traffic authorities such a headache.

After several bizarre set pieces that may or may not be hallucinated, and after the hapless girlfriend has had a fairly graphic taste of what was only threatened in *Hardware*, the lads finally meet up for a fight to the finish, throw one another around a bit, and eventually settle their differences by fusing into a sentient junkyard ready to take on the world. "We can mutate the whole world into metal! We can rust the world into the dust of the universe!" If the subject consciously recalls *Akira* – whose international audience, presumably, *Tetsuo* is out to chase – the style is more like a Svankmajer remake of *Eraserhead*, mixing manic stop-motion with lurid live action and an undeniable flair for barf-provoking Cronenbergian special makeup. "Soon," the victim is promised, "even your BRAIN will turn to metal!" After 67 gibbering minutes which manage to be somehow simultaneously too fast and too slow, the exhausted viewer can only nod limp assent. You can see how easily a Japanese investor might be driven to put money on Greenaway.

(Nick Lowe)

From 'Tetsuo: The Iron Man'

Tube Corn
TV Reviews by Wendy Bradley

You will have to forgive this column if it is looking a little frayed around the edges this month. The poor little thing has been launched into the world unsuspecting that its creator has endowed it with less than the usual number of graces and without even the most cursory visit to the fairy godmothers to request them to endow it with beauty, goodness, grace and an ability to survive attacks from spinning wheels. It totters out naked into the storm, not realizing that its creator has just returned from a Dire Straits con-

cert having left most of her alleged brain in an alternate dimension, and staggers gamely on, innocent of the knowledge that most columns are tucked up tightly in an *ASCII* file on a wordprocessor program rather than hurled into the teeth of the gales of life on account of technological illiterates deleting their entire wordprocessor program and then discovering that the box of master discs does not contain a copy and omigod I just deleted the master.

Sorry about that.

The four things that this column endeavours to cover are programmes about science, science fiction, fantasy (including children's) and programmes which have an innovative content. No, I'm not going to review *Thunderbirds*.

What I am going to review, in the continuing absence of programmes which are either science fiction proper or which are in any way innovative, are a programme about science and a programme which I have deemed to be in the category of fantasy.

First, the programme about science. Channel 4's *Equinox* series continues to produce documentaries which are both quirky and thought-provoking and their September offering on the **Space Suit** fitted the bill in both respects. However the thought provoked was mainly about the idiocy and short-sightedness of the people speaking about NASA space-suit design: the Apollo suit took men to the moon, but since then they have increased in weight by a factor of ten because of the "bells and whistles" which have been added. The shuttle suits can't be used to walk in, for goodness' sake! "Sixties technology" was referred to dismissively during the programme but sixties technology took us to the moon and the loss of that capacity (for make no mistake about it, it *is* lost) is a tragedy.

However the programme was heavy on the technological advantages and disadvantages of hard and soft suits but scarcely dealt with the most interesting subject, the iconography, other than the casual mention that the first Mercury pilots' suits were aluminized simply to make them look good; to make them look like science-fiction illustrators' conceptions. All the arguments about the technology – and in the end it boils down to the look. Spacesuits have to look cool, man, it's like a patriotic duty. Much of the cold war can be read in the difference between the Russian suits where you always get to see the noddy ears, and the American suits where you always get to see the mirrored visor. The Russian helmets with the ear flaps mean that when they're doing badly they look like Deputy Dawg and when they're doing well they look like

Cybermen – but they always look like Them and never Us.

Secondly, I am aware that my categorization of a religious programme as fantasy may be objectionable, but there is of course a large overlap between religion and myth, where stories not essential to the religious belief itself accrete around the central core of authorized stories. If you subscribe to Christianity you don't have to believe that there is a Wandering Jew or a miraculous impression of Jesus' face on a handkerchief, or that the Holy Grail appears outlined in neon if you can only find the right castle, but you are supposed to accord a different level of belief to the Stable and the Star and the Three Wise Men. Many of the myths which inform so much fantasy literature – Greek, Norse, Celtic mythology with the numbers filed off and the character names changed – were themselves in their heydays devoutly believed. Who today will protest at blasphemous portrayals of Thor, Athena and Ceridwen?

It is much harder to make any meaningful comment on a system of belief of which one is a member, which seems to me why non-Hindu Peter Brook was able to make a moving and profound version of the *Mahabharata* (shown on Channel 4 a couple of years ago) and yet the long-running and reverent **Mahabarat** on BBC1 manages to reduce the same stirring and rich brew of stories to the level of the BBC Shakespeare – so careful and correct that it is lifeless. The look of the series is very similar to the BBC Shakespeare too: lavish costumes don't work against cheap sets as a rule, and here they reduce heroes and demigods alike to the level of flashily dressed talking heads.

Brook's *Mahabharata* was religious theatre without the religion; a presentation of Hindu mythology without any consideration of its content in terms of its religious validity but instead concentrating on its emotional effect. At the end of it, in spite of my utter unfamiliarity with some of the concepts (like dharma) discussed and my shameful ignorance of the moral, ethical and religious framework within which the characters acted, I still felt as though I had participated in a religious experience. The orgasmic feeling of catharsis, the purging of the emotions, is common to all great drama religious or not. In great religious drama, however, it should be accompanied by a shaking up of your view of the world and its moral framework and, equally importantly, by a triumphant assertion of one viewpoint at the expense of woolly liberal "on the other hands." *Mahabarat* is certain but not triumphant, strange but not stirring, flat where it ought to be deep. As Brook says in his book *The Shifting Point*, describing the encounter of an Indian dancer dressed as Kali for a religious ceremony with a passing Jeep at a crossroads:

> I thought, What's going to happen? Who's going to give way? And, of course, without even thinking, Kali stepped back, as did her attendants, let the Jeep pass, and then walked forward again and carried on with the ceremony.
>
> Here you have the decline and fall of religious theatre. Because the genuine Kali would have thrown such a look at the Jeep that it would have stopped in its tracks. And a smarter priesthood would have arranged to have had a James Bond Jeep there that would have gone up in smoke just to show the people that Kali is as strong as ever. But faced with a Jeep *that wants to hurtle along the highway*, the little dancer doesn't for a moment imagine that the goddess who is possessing Kali could actually hold up traffic.

Mahabarat is said to have stopped traffic when it was first broadcast on the Indian sub-continent. I find it hard to believe that it would stop a bicycle.

(Wendy Bradley)

Bad Timing

Molly Brown

"*Time travel is an inexact science. And its study is fraught with paradoxes.*" Samuel Colson, b. 2301 d. 2197.

Alan rushed through the archway without even glancing at the inscription across the top. It was Monday morning and he was late again. He often thought about the idea that time was a point in space, and he didn't like it. That meant that at this particular point in space it was always Monday morning and he was always late for a job he hated. And it always had been. And it always would be. Unless somebody tampered with it, which was strictly forbidden.

"Oh my Holy Matrix," Joe Twofingers exclaimed as Alan raced past him to register his palmprint before losing an extra thirty minutes' pay. "You wouldn't believe what I found in the fiction section!"

Alan slapped down his hand. The recorder's metallic voice responded with, "Employee number 057, Archives Department, Alan Strong. Thirty minutes and seven point two seconds late. One hour's credit deducted."

Alan shrugged and turned back towards Joe. "Since I'm not getting paid, I guess I'll put my feet up and have a cup of liquid caffeine. So tell me what you found."

"Well, I was tidying up the files – fiction section is a mess as you know – and I came across this magazine. And I thought, 'what's *this* doing here?' It's something from the twentieth century called *Woman's Secrets*, and it's all knitting patterns, recipes, and gooey little romance stories: 'He grabbed her roughly, bruising her soft pale skin, and pulled her to his rock hard chest' and so on. I figured it was in there by mistake and nearly threw it out. But then I saw this story called 'The Love That Conquered Time' and I realized that must be what they're keeping it for. So I had a look at it, and it was..." He made a face and stuck a finger down his throat. "But I really think you ought to read it."

"Why?"

"Because you're in it."

"You're a funny guy, Joe. You almost had me going for a minute."

"I'm serious! Have a look at the drebbing thing. It's by some woman called Cecily Walker, it's in that funny old vernacular they used to use, and it's positively dire. But the guy in the story is definitely you."

Alan didn't believe him for a minute. Joe was a joker, and always had been. Alan would never forget the time Joe had laced his drink with a combination aphrodisiac-hallucinogen at a party and he'd made a total fool of himself with the section leader's overcoat. He closed his eyes and shuddered as Joe handed him the magazine.

Like all the early relics made of paper, the magazine had been dipped in preservative and the individual pages coated with a clear protective covering which gave them a horrible chemical smell and a tendency to stick together. After a little difficulty, Alan found the page he wanted. He rolled his eyes at the painted illustration of a couple locked in a passionate but chaste embrace, and dutifully began to read.

It was all about a beautiful but lonely and unfulfilled woman who still lives in the house where she was born. One day there is a knock at the door, and she opens it to a mysterious stranger: tall, handsome, and extremely charismatic.

Alan chuckled to himself.

A few paragraphs later, over a candle-lit dinner, the man tells the woman that he comes from the future, where time travel has become a reality, and he works at the Colson Time Studies Institute in the Department of Archives.

Alan stopped laughing.

The man tells her that only certain people are allowed to time travel, and they are not allowed to interfere in any way, only observe. He confesses that he is not a qualified traveller – he broke into the lab one night and stole a machine. The woman asks him why and he tells her, "You're the only reason, Claudia. I did it for you. I read a story that you wrote and I knew it was about me and that it was about you. I searched in the Archives and I found your picture and then I knew that I loved you and that I had always loved you and that I always would."

"But I never wrote a story, Alan."

"You will, Claudia. You will."

The Alan in the story goes on to describe the Project, and the Archives, in detail. The woman asks him how people live in the twenty-fourth century, and he tells her about the gadgets in his apartment.

The hairs at the back of Alan's neck rose at the mention of his Neuro-Pleasatron. He'd never told *anybody* that he'd bought one, not even Joe.

After that, there's a lot of grabbing and pulling to his rock hard chest, melting sighs and kisses, and finally a wedding and a "happily ever after" existing at one point in space where it always has and always will.

Alan turned the magazine over and looked at the date on the cover. March 14, 1973.

He wiped the sweat off his forehead and shook him-

Illustrations by Steve Hambidge

self. He looked up and saw that Joe was standing over him.

"You wouldn't really do that, would you," Joe said. "Because you know I'd have to stop you."

Cecily Walker stood in front of her bedroom mirror and turned from right to left. She rolled the waistband over one more time, making sure both sides were even. Great; the skirt looked like a real mini. Now all she had to do was get out of the house without her mother seeing her.

She was in the record shop wondering if she really should spend her whole allowance on the new Monkees album, but she really liked Peter Tork, he was so cute, when Tommy Johnson walked in with Roger Hanley. "Hey, Cess-pit! Whaddya do, lose the bottom half of your dress?"

The boys at her school were just so creepy. She left the shop and turned down the main road, heading toward her friend Candy's house. She never noticed the tall blonde man who stood across the street, or heard him call her name.

When Joe went on his lunch break, Alan turned to the wall above his desk and said, "File required: Authors, fiction, twentieth century, initial 'W'."

"Checking," the wall said. "File located."

"Biography required: Walker, Cecily."

"Checking. Biography located. Display? Yes or no."

"Yes."

A section of wall the size of a small television screen lit up at eye-level, directly in front of Alan. He leaned forward and read: Walker, Cecily. b. Danville, Illinois, USA. 1948 d. 2037. Published works: "The Love That Conquered Time," March, 1973. Accuracy rating: fair.

"Any other published works?"

"Checking. None found."

Alan looked down at the magazine in his lap.

"I don't understand," Claudia said, looking pleadingly into his deep blue eyes. Eyes the colour of the sea on a cloudless morning, and eyes that contained an ocean's depth of feeling for her, and her alone. "How is it possible to travel through time?"

"I'll try to make this simple," he told her, pulling her close. She took a deep breath, inhaling his manly aroma, and rested her head on his shoulder with a sigh. "Imagine that the universe is like a string. And every point on that string is a moment in space and time. But instead of stretching out in a straight line, it's all coiled and tangled and it overlaps in layers. Then all you have to do is move from point to point."

Alan wrinkled his forehead in consternation. "File?"

"Yes. Waiting."

"Information required: further data on Walker, Cecily. Education, family background."

"Checking. Found. Display? Yes or –"

"Yes!"

Walker, Cecily. Education: Graduate Lincoln High, Danville, 1967. Family background: Father Walker, Matthew. Mechanic, automobile. d. 1969. Mother no data.

Alan shook his head. Minimal education, no scientific background. How could she know so much? "Information required: photographic likeness of subject.

If available, display."

He blinked and there she was, smiling at him across his desk. She was oddly dressed, in a multi-coloured tee-shirt that ended above her waist and dark blue trousers that were cut so low they exposed her navel and seemed to balloon out below her knees into giant flaps of loose-hanging material. But she had long dark hair that fell across her shoulders and down to her waist, crimson lips and the most incredible eyes he had ever seen – huge and green. She was beautiful. He looked at the caption: Walker, Cecily. Author: Fiction related to time-travel theory. Photographic likeness circa 1970.

"File," he said, "Further data required: personal details, ie. marriage. Display."

Walker, Cecily m. Strong, Alan.

"Date?"

No data.

"Biographical details of husband, Strong, Alan?"

None found.

"Redisplay photographic likeness. Enlarge." He stared at the wall for several minutes. "Print," he said.

Only half a block to go, the woman thought, struggling with two bags of groceries. The sun was high in the sky and the smell of Mrs Henderson's roses, three doors down, filled the air with a lovely perfume. But she wasn't in the mood to appreciate it. All the sun made her feel was hot, and all the smell of flowers made her feel was ill. It had been a difficult pregnancy, but thank goodness it was nearly over now.

She wondered who the man was, standing on her front porch. He might be the new mechanic at her husband's garage, judging by his orange coveralls. Nice-looking, she thought, wishing that she didn't look as if there was a bowling ball underneath her dress.

"Excuse me," the man said, reaching out to help her with her bags. "I'm looking for Cecily Walker."

"My name's Walker," the woman told him. "But I don't know any Cecily."

"Cecily," she repeated when the man had gone. What a pretty name.

Alan decided to work late that night. Joe left at the usual time and told him he'd see him tomorrow.

"Yeah, tomorrow," Alan said.

He waited until Joe was gone, and then he took the printed photo of Cecily Walker out of his desk drawer and sat for a long time, staring at it. What did he know about this woman? Only that she'd written one published story, badly, and that she was the most gorgeous creature he had ever seen. Of course, what he was feeling was ridiculous. She'd been dead more than three hundred years.

But there were ways of getting around that.

Alan couldn't believe what he was actually considering. It was lunacy. He'd be caught, and he'd lose his job. But then he realized that he could never have read about it if he hadn't already done it and got away with it. He decided to have another look at the story.

It wasn't there. Under Fiction: Paper Relics: 20th Century, sub-section Magazines, American, there was shelf after shelf full of *Amazing Stories*, *Astounding*, *Analog*, *Weird Tales* and *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, but not one single copy of *Woman's Secrets*.

Well, he thought, if the magazine isn't there, I guess I never made it after all. Maybe it's better that way. Then he thought, but if I never made it, how can I be looking for the story? I shouldn't even know about it. And then he had another thought.

"File," he said. "Information required: magazines on loan."

"Display?"

"No, just tell me."

"*Woman's Secrets*, date 1973. *Astounding*, date..."

"Skip the rest. Who's got *Woman's Secrets*?"

"Checking. Signed out to Project Control through Joe Twofingers.".

Project Control was on to him! If he didn't act quickly, it would be too late.

It was amazingly easy to get into the lab. He just walked in. The machines were all lined up against one wall, and there was no one around to stop him. He sat down on the nearest machine. The earliest model developed by Samuel Colson had looked like an English telephone box (he'd been a big *Doctor Who* fan), but it was hardly inconspicuous and extremely heavy, so refinements were made until the latest models were lightweight, collapsible, and made to look exactly like (and double up as) a folding bicycle. The control board was hidden from general view, inside a wicker basket.

None of the instruments was labelled. Alan tentatively pushed one button. Nothing happened. He pushed another. Still nothing.

He jumped off and looked for an instruction book. There had to be one somewhere. He was ransacking a desk when the door opened.

"I thought I'd find you here, Alan."

"Joe! I...uh...was just..."

"I know what you're doing, and I can't let you go through with it. It's against every rule of the Institute and you know it. If you interfere with the past, who knows what harm you might do?"

"But Joe, you know me. I wouldn't do any harm. I won't do anything to affect history, I swear it. I just want to see her, that's all. Besides, it's already happened, or you couldn't have read that magazine. And that's another thing! You're the one who showed it to me! I never would have known about her if it hadn't been for you. So if I'm going now, it's down to you."

"Alan, I'm sorry, but my job is on the line here, too, you know. So don't give me any trouble and come along quietly."

Joe moved towards him, holding a pair of handcuffs. Attempted theft of Institute property was a felony punishable by five years' imprisonment without pay. Alan picked up the nearest bike and brought it down over the top of Joe's head. The machine lay in pieces and Joe lay unconscious. Alan bent down and felt his pulse. He would be okay. "Sorry, Joe. I had to do it. File!"

"Yes."

"Information required: instruction manual for usage of..." he checked the number on the handlebars, "Colson Model 44B Time Traveller."

"Checking. Found. Display?"

"No. Just print. And fast."

The printer was only on page five when Alan heard running footsteps. Five pages would have to do.

Dear Cher,

My name is Cecily Walker and all my friends tell me I look just like you. Well, a little bit. Anyway, the reason that I'm writing to you is this: I'm starting my senior year in high school, and I've never had a steady boyfriend. I've gone out with a couple of boys, but they only want one thing, and I guess you know what that is. I keep thinking there's gotta be somebody out there who's the right one for me, but I just haven't met him. Was it love at first sight for you and Sonny?

Alan sat on a London park bench with his printout and tried to figure out what he'd done wrong. Under Location: Setting, it just said "See page 29." Great, he thought. And he had no idea what year it was. Every time he tried to ask someone, they'd give him a funny look and walk away in a hurry. He folded up the bike and took a walk. It wasn't long before he found a news- stand and saw the date: July 19, 1998. At least he had the right century.

Back in the park, he sat astride the machine with the printout in one hand, frowning and wondering what might happen if he twisted a particular dial from right to left.

"Can't get your bike to start, mate?" someone shouted from nearby. "Just click your heels three times and think of home."

"Thanks, I'll try that," Alan shouted back. Then he vanished.

"I am a pirate from yonder ship," the man with the eye patch told her, "and well used to treasure. But I tell thee, lass, I've never seen the like of you."

Cecily groaned and ripped the page in half. She bit her lip and started again.

"I have travelled many galaxies, Madeleine," the alien bleeped. "But you are a life-form beyond compare."

"No, don't. Please don't," Madeleine pleaded as the alien reached out to pull her towards its rock-hard chest.

Her mother appeared in the doorway. "Whatcha doin' hon?"

She dropped the pen and flipped the writing pad face down. "My homework."

The next thing Alan knew he was in the middle of a cornfield. He hitched a lift with a truck driver who asked a lot of questions, ranging from "You work in a gas station, do you?" to "What are you, foreign or something?" and "What do you call that thing?" On being told "that thing" was a folding bicycle, the man muttered something about whatever would they think of next, and now his kid would be wanting one.

There were several Walkers listed in the Danville phone book. When he finally found the right house, Cecily was in the middle of her third birthday party.

He pedalled around a corner, checked his printout, and set the controls on "Fast Forward." He folded the machine and hid it behind a bush before walking back to the house. It was big and painted green, just as in

in the story. There was an apple tree in the garden, just as in the story. The porch swing moved ever so slightly, rocked by an early summer breeze. He could hear crickets chirping and birds singing. Everything was just the way it had been in the story, so he walked up the path, nervously clearing his throat and pushing back a stray lock of hair, just the way Cecily Walker had described him in *Woman's Secrets*, before finally taking a deep breath and knocking on the door. There was movement inside the house. The clack of high-heeled shoes across a wooden floor, the rustle of a cotton dress.

"Yes?"

Alan stared at her, open-mouthed. "You've cut your hair," he told her.

"What?"

"Your hair. It used to hang down to your waist, now it's up to your shoulders."

"Do I know you?"

"You will," he told her. He'd said that in the story.

She was supposed to take one look at him and realize with a fluttering heart that this was the man she'd dreamed of all her life. Instead, she looked at his orange jumpsuit and slapped her hand to her forehead in enlightenment. "You're from the garage! Of course, Mack said he'd be sending the new guy." She looked past him into the street. "So where's your tow truck?"

"My what?" There was nothing in "The Love That Conquered Time" about a tow truck. The woman stared at him, looking confused. Alan stared back, equally confused. He started to wonder if he'd made a mistake. But then he saw those eyes, bigger and greener than he'd ever thought possible. "Matrix," he said out loud.

"What?"

"I'm sorry. It's just that meeting you is so bullasic."

"Mister, I don't understand one word you're saying." Cecily knew she should tell the man to go away. He was obviously deranged; she should call the police. But something held her back, a flicker of recognition, the dim stirrings of a memory. Where had she seen this man before?

"I'm sorry," Alan said again. "My American isn't very good. I come from English-speaking Europe, you see."

"English-speaking Europe?" Cecily repeated. "You mean England?"

"Not exactly. Can I come inside? I'll explain everything."

She let him come in after warning him that her neighbours would come running in with shotguns if they heard her scream, and that she had a black belt in Kung Fu. Alan nodded and followed her inside, wondering where Kung Fu was, and why she'd left her belt there.

He was ushered into the living room and told to have a seat. He sat down on the red velveteen-upholstered sofa and stared in awe at such historical artefacts as a black-and-white television with rabbit-ear antennae, floral-printed wallpaper, a phone you had to dial, and shelf after shelf of unpreserved books. She picked up a wooden chair and carried it to the far side of the room before sitting down. "Okay," she said. "Talk."

Alan felt it would have been better to talk over a candle-lit dinner in a restaurant, as they did in the story, but he went ahead and told her everything, quoting parts of the story verbatim, such as the passage where she described him as the perfect lover she'd been longing for all her life.

When he was finished, she managed a frozen smile. "So you've come all the way from the future just to visit little ole me. Isn't that nice."

Oh Matrix, Alan thought. She's humouring me. She's convinced I'm insane and probably dangerous as well. "I know this must sound crazy to you," he said.

"Not at all," she told him, gripping the arms of her chair. He could see the blood draining out of her fingers.

"Please don't be afraid. I'd never harm you." He sighed and put a hand to his forehead. "It was all so different in the story."

"But I never wrote any story. Well, I started one once, but I never got beyond the second page."

"But you will. You see, it doesn't get published until 1973."

"You do know this is 1979, don't you?"

"WHAT?"

"Looks like your timing's off," she said. She watched him sink his head into his hands with an exaggerated groan. She rested her chin on one hand and regarded him silently. He didn't seem so frightening now. Crazy, yes, but not frightening. She might even find him quite attractive, if only things were different. He looked up at her and smiled. It was a crooked, little boy's smile that made his eyes sparkle. For a moment, she almost let herself imagine waking up to that smile... She pulled herself up in her chair, her back rigid.

"Look," he said. "So I'm a few years behind schedule. The main thing is I found you. And so what if the story comes out a bit later, it's nothing we can't handle. It's only a minor problem. A little case of bad timing."

"Excuse me," Cecily said. "But I think that in this case, timing is everything. If any of this made the least bit of sense, which it doesn't, you would've turned up before now. You said yourself the story was published in 1973 – if it was based on fact, you'd need to arrive here much earlier."

"I did get here earlier, but I was *too* early."

Cecily's eyes widened involuntarily. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I was here before. I met you. I spoke to you."

"When?"

"You wouldn't remember. You were three years old, and your parents threw a party for you out in the garden. Of course I realized my mistake instantly, but I bluffed it out by telling your mother that I'd just dropped by to apologize because my kid was sick and couldn't come – it was a pretty safe bet that someone wouldn't have shown – and she said, 'Oh you must be little Sammy's father' and asked me in. I was going to leave immediately, but your father handed me a beer and started talking about something called baseball. Of course I didn't have a present for you..."

"But you gave me a rose and told my mother to press it into a book so that I'd have it forever."

"You remember."

"Wait there. Don't move." She leapt from her chair

and ran upstairs. There was a lot of noise from above – paper rattling, doors opening and closing, things being thrown about. She returned clutching several books to her chest, her face flushed and streaked with dust. She flopped down on the floor and spread them out in front of her. When Alan got up to join her, she told him to stay where he was or she'd scream. He sat back down.

She opened the first book, and then Alan saw that they weren't books at all; they were photo albums. He watched in silence as she flipped through the pages and then tossed it aside. She tossed three of them away before she found what she was looking for. She stared open-mouthed at the brittle yellow page and then she looked up at Alan. "I don't understand this," she said, turning her eyes back to the album and a faded black and white photograph stuck to the paper with thick, flaking paste. Someone had written in ink across the top: Cecily's 3rd birthday, August 2nd, 1951. There was her father, who'd been dead for ten years, young and smiling, holding out a bottle to another young man, tall and blonde and dressed like a gas-station attendant. "I don't understand this at all." She pushed the album across the floor towards Alan. "You haven't changed one bit. You're even wearing the same clothes."

"Did you keep the rose?"

She walked over to a wooden cabinet and pulled out a slim hardback with the title, *My First Reader*. She opened it and showed him the dried, flattened flower. "You're telling me the truth, aren't you?" she said. "This is all true. You risked everything to find me because we were meant to be together, and nothing, not even time itself, could keep us apart."

Alan nodded. There was a speech just like that in "The Love That Conquered Time."

"Bastard," she said.

Alan jumped. He didn't remember that part. "Pardon me?"

"Bastard," she said again. "You bastard!"

"I...I don't understand."

She got up and started to pace the room. "So you're the one, huh? You're 'Mister Right', Mister Happily Ever After, caring, compassionate and great in bed. And you decide to turn up now. Well, isn't that just great."

"Is something the matter?" Alan asked her.

"Is something the matter?" she repeated. "He asks me if something's the matter! I'll tell you what's the matter. I got married four weeks ago, you son of a bitch!"

"You're married?"

"That's what I said, isn't it?"

"But you can't be married. We were supposed to find perfect happiness together at a particular point in space that has always existed and always will. This ruins everything."

"All those years...all those years. I went through hell in high school, you know. I was the only girl in my class who didn't have a date for the prom. So where were you then, huh? While I was sitting alone at home, crying my goddamn eyes out? How about all those Saturday nights I spent washing my hair? And even worse, those nights I worked at Hastings' Bar serving drinks to salesmen pretending they don't have wives. Why couldn't you have been around then, when I needed you?"

"Well, I've only got the first five pages of the manual..." He walked over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. She didn't move away. He gently pulled her closer to him. She didn't resist. "Look," he said, "I'm sorry. I'm a real zarkhead. I've made a mess of everything. You're happily married, you never wrote the story... I'll just go back where I came from, and none of this will have ever happened."

"Who said I was happy?"

"But you just got married."

She pushed him away. "I got married because I'm thirty years old and figured I'd never have another chance. People do that, you know. They reach a certain age and they figure it's now or never... Damn you! If only you'd come when you were supposed to!"

"You're thirty? Matrix, in half an hour you've gone from a toddler to someone older than me." He saw the expression on her face, and mumbled an apology.

"Look," she said. "You're gonna have to go. My husband'll be back any minute."

"I know I have to leave. But the trouble is, that drebbing story was true! I took one look at your photo, and I knew that I loved you and I always had. Always. That's the way time works, you see. And even if this whole thing vanishes as the result of some paradox, I swear to you I won't forget. Somewhere there's a point in space that belongs to us. I know it." He turned to go. "Good-bye Cecily."

"Alan, wait! That point in space—I want to go there. Isn't there anything we can do? I mean, you've got a time machine, after all."

What an idiot, he thought. The solution's been staring me in the face and I've been too blind to see it. "The machine!" He ran down the front porch steps and turned around to see her standing in the doorway. "I'll see you later," he told her. He knew it was a ridiculous thing to say the minute he'd said it. What he meant was, "I'll see you earlier."

Five men sat together inside a tent made of animal hide. The land of their fathers was under threat, and they met in council to discuss the problem. The one called Swiftly Running Stream advocated war, but Foot Of The Crow was more cautious. "The paleface is too great in number, and his weapons give him an unfair advantage." Flying Bird suggested that they smoke before speaking further.

Black Elk took the pipe into his mouth. He closed his eyes for a moment and declared that the Great Spirit would give them a sign if they were meant to go to war. As soon as he said the word, "war," a paleface materialized among them. They all saw him. The white man's body was covered in a strange bright garment such as they had never seen, and he rode a fleshless horse with silver bones. The vision vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, leaving them with this message to ponder: *Oops.*

There was no one home, so he waited on the porch. It was a beautiful day, with a gentle breeze that carried the scent of roses: certainly better than that smoke-filled teepee.

A woman appeared in the distance. He wondered if that was her. But then he saw that it couldn't be, the woman's walk was strange and her body was misshapen. She's pregnant, he realized. It was a common thing in the days of over-population, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a pregnant woman back home – it must have been years. She looked at him questioningly as she waddled up the steps balancing two paper bags. Alan thought the woman looked familiar; he knew that face. He reached out to help her.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm looking for Cecily Walker."

"My name's Walker," the woman told him. "But I don't know any Cecily."

Matrix, what a moron, Alan thought, wanting to kick himself. Of course he knew the woman; it was Cecily's mother, and if she was pregnant, it had to be 1948. "My mistake," he told her. "It's been a long day."

The smell of roses had vanished, along with the leaves on the trees. There was snow on the ground and a strong northeasterly wind. Alan set the thermostat on his jumpsuit accordingly and jumped off the bike.

"So it's you again," Cecily said ironically. "Another case of perfect timing." She was twenty pounds heavier and there were lines around her mouth and her eyes. She wore a heavy wool cardigan sweater over an oversized tee-shirt, jeans, and a pair of fuzzy slippers. She looked him up and down. "You don't age at all, do you?"

"Please can I come in? It's freezing."

"Yeah, yeah. Come in. You like a cup of coffee?"

"You mean liquid caffeine? That'd be great."

He followed her into the living room and his mouth dropped open. The red sofa was gone, replaced by something that looked like a giant banana. The television was four times bigger and had lost the rabbit-ears. The floral wallpaper had been replaced by plain white walls not very different from those of his apartment. "Sit," she told him. She left the room for a moment and returned with two mugs, one of which she slammed down in front of him, causing a miniature brown tidal wave to splash across his legs.

"Cecily, are you upset about something?"

"That's a good one! He comes back after fifteen years and asks me if I'm upset."

"Fifteen years!" Alan sputtered.

"That's right. It's 1994, you bozo."

"Oh darling, and you've been waiting all this time..."

"Like hell I have," she interrupted. "When I met you, back in 1979, I realized that I couldn't stay in that sham of a marriage for another minute. So I must have set some kind of a record for quickie marriage and divorce, by Danville standards, anyway. So I was a thirty-year-old divorcee whose marriage had fallen apart in less than two months, and I was back to washing my hair alone on Saturday nights. And people talked. Lord, how they talked. But I didn't care, because I'd finally met my soul-mate and everything was going to be all right. He told me he'd fix it. He'd be back. So I waited. I waited for a year. Then I waited two years. Then I waited three. After ten, I got tired of waiting. And if you think I'm going through another divorce, you're crazy."

"You mean you're married again?"

"What else was I supposed to do? A man wants you

when you're forty, you jump at it. As far as I knew, you were gone forever."

"I've never been away, Cecily. I've been here all along, but never at the right time. It's that drebbing machine; I can't figure out the controls."

"Maybe Arnie can have a look at it when he gets in, he's pretty good at that sort of thing – what am I saying?"

"Tell me, did you ever write the story?"

"What's to write about? Anyway, what difference does it make? *Woman's Secrets* went bankrupt years ago."

"Matrix! If you never wrote the story, then I shouldn't even know about you. So how can I be here? Dammit, it's a paradox. And I wasn't supposed to cause any of those. Plus, I think I may have started an Indian war. Have you noticed any change in local history?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Look, I have an idea. When exactly did you get divorced?"

"I don't know, late '79. October, November, something like that."

"All right, that's what I'll aim for. November, 1979. Be waiting for me."

"How?"

"Good point. Okay, just take my word for it, you and me are going to be sitting in this room right here, right now, with one big difference: we'll have been married for fifteen years, okay?"

"But what about Arnie?"

"Arnie won't know the difference. You'll never have married him in the first place." He kissed her on the cheek. "I'll be back in a minute. Well, in 1979. You know what I mean." He headed for the door.

"Hold on," she said. "You're like the guy who goes out for a pack of cigarettes and doesn't come back for thirty years."

"What guy?"

"Never mind. I wanna make sure you don't turn up anywhere else. Bring the machine in here."

"Is that it?" she said one minute later.

"That's it."

"But it looks like a goddamn bicycle."

"Where do you want me to put it?"

She led him upstairs. "Here," she said. Alan unfolded the bike next to the bed. "I don't want you getting away from me next time," she told him.

"I don't have to get away from you now."

"You do. I'm married and I'm at least fifteen years older than you."

"Your age doesn't matter to me," Alan told her. "When I first fell in love with you, you'd been dead three hundred years."

"You really know how to flatter a girl, don't you? Anyway, don't aim for '79. I don't understand paradoxes, but I know I don't like them. If we're ever gonna get this thing straightened out, you must arrive before 1973, when the story is meant to be published. Try for '71 or '72. Now that I think about it, those were a strange couple of years for me. Nothing seemed real to me then. Nothing seemed worth bothering about, nothing mattered; I always felt like I was waiting for something. Day after day I waited, though I never knew what for."

She stepped back and watched him slowly turn a dial until he vanished. Then she remembered something.

How could she have ever have forgotten such a thing? She was eleven and she was combing her hair in front of her bedroom mirror. She screamed. When both her parents burst into the room and demanded to know what was wrong, she told them she'd seen a man on a bicycle. They nearly sent her to a child psychiatrist.

Damn that Alan, she thought. He's screwed up again.

The same room, different decor, different time of day. Alan blinked several times; his eyes had difficulty adjusting to the darkness. He could barely make out the shape on the bed, but he could see all he needed to. The shape was alone, and it was adult size. He leaned close to her ear. "Cecily," he whispered. "It's me." He touched her shoulder and shook her slightly. He felt for a pulse.

He switched on the bedside lamp. He gazed down at a withered face framed by silver hair, and sighed. "Sorry, love," he said. He covered her head with a sheet, and sighed again.

He sat down on the bike and unfolded the printout. He'd get it right eventually.

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Molly Brown has been everything from an armed guard to a stand-up comic. She started writing fiction less than two years ago and has so far sold short stories to several anthologies, including *New Crimes 2*, *New Crimes 3*, *Fresh Blood* and *Villains*. She also writes obituaries, and if pressed, will admit to once having had a story published in *Woman's Own*.

Notice to *Aboriginal SF* Subscribers

Charles C. Ryan, editor of *Aboriginal SF*, has informed us that his issue 29, due to have been published in August 1991 (and cover-dated "September-October"), has been unavoidably delayed. It will now be combined with issue 30 in a special double number which should be out about the time this issue of *Interzone* appears. Apologies to all those who subscribed to *Aboriginal SF* through *Interzone* – your subscriptions have been recorded and passed on to America, and your first (double) issue should be on its way to you: please allow time for transatlantic mail. **(DP)**

Cyberpunk: A Schematic Guide

Richard Kadrey and Larry McCaffery

A quick list of the cultural artefacts that helped to shape cyberpunk ideology and aesthetics, along with books by the cyberpunks themselves, in roughly chronological order.

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley (1818). The recycling of body parts, the creation of life (or monster making), murder, sex, revenge, the epic chase, the brilliant scientist working outside the law, a brooding, romantic atmosphere – this book is a veritable sourcebook for sf motifs and clichés. It also created the first great myth of the industrial revolution, and reflects the deeply schizophrenic attitude toward science so evident in postmodern culture and in the fiction emerging from this culture.

Red Harvest by Dashiell Hammett (1929). Established the basic template for the hard-boiled detective format. The tough guy – loner confronting a vast system of corruption with his own private code of ethics, the vividly drawn underworld populated by sleazy criminal types, the richly idiosyncratic lingoes, the violence and surrealism of urban life – these motifs proved readily transferable to cyberpunk's portrayal of survival in a multinational version of street life.

Last and First Men by Olaf Stapledon (1930). Hardly a novel at all. More like a long, brilliant encyclopedic essay on the next billion-or-so years of human evolution.

The Big Sleep by Raymond Chandler (1939). Chandler's smooth, polychromatic prose style and vision of the detective as knight-errant has influenced more than one cyberpunk.

"Coming Attraction" by Fritz Leiber (1950; in *The Best of Fritz Leiber*, 1974). Virtually without precedent in 1950s sf, this grim short story of the future was told in sharp, surreal images, highlighted by an unflinching *noir* viciousness and terse prose. Its opening sentence is a paradigm for much of cyberpunk: "The coupé with the fishhooks welded to the fender shouldered up over the curb like the nose of a nightmare."

Limbo by Bernard Wolfe (1952). Wolfe, ex-Trotsky bodyguard, wrote this great American dystopia (and proto-cyberpunk) novel. Self-mutilation, lobotomy, and prosthetics are seen in a postnuke North America as the cure for war. *Limbo* is a brilliant black comedy, which is probably why it has been so neglected. Average sf readers don't score high on *irony* tests.

The Stars My Destination by Alfred Bester (1955). Body modification, corporate intrigue, baroque settings and characters, and a walk down the gray line that separates criminals from the straight world. But it's the protagonist's purely anarchic belief in humanity that makes this book remarkable. This remains one of the few truly subversive books ever to come out of science fiction.

The Naked Lunch by William S. Burroughs (1959). A blast of maniacal laughter from Hell. A combination as black as clotted blood. Dr Benway's twisted medical speculations, tales of the criminal underground, and sexual fantasies that tear at your inseams like a rabid brontosaurus, all told in a fragmented prose style that still reads like the raw, beautiful poetry it is. The influence of this book is enormous. Without *Naked Lunch* there would probably be no cyberpunk.

The Gutenberg Galaxy, *Understanding Media* and *The Medium is the Massage* by Marshall McLuhan (1962, 1964, 1967). McLuhan was to the 1960s what Baudrillard, Kroker and Cook, and Deleuze and Guattari are to the postcyberpunk era: grasping the profound implications of how technological change (in the form of the printing press, television, movies, the telephone, and so on) was reshaping human interactions, perceptions, and self-concepts, McLuhan presented his message in a medium that was "postmodern" before its time – that is, via a jagged mosaic of audacious speculations, samplings of quotes, photographs, footnotes, digressions. Another candidate for the "Godfather of Cyberpunk."

A Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess (1962). Alex is the subject of a mind control experiment in a bleak near-future world overrun by youth gangs obsessed with violence and trendy fashion. Told in a well thought-out patois collaging bits of Cockney rhyming slang and various Eastern languages.

The Soft Machine, *The Ticket That Exploded*, *Nova Express*, *The Wild Boys* by William S. Burroughs (1961, 1962, 1964, 1971). In this sequence of novels (or prose poems), Burroughs draws more heavily on the sf pulp motifs of his childhood than in *Naked Lunch*. Space odysseys, Uranium Willy and the Heavy Metal Kid, image banks and silence viruses, protopunk "wild boys" engaged in apocalyptic guerilla warfare, body and mind invasion, the Nova Mob matching wits with the Nova police (hampered by the corrupt Biologic Courts) for control of the Reality Studio – these hallucinatory sf elements interact with shards of poetry by Rimbaud, Shakespeare, and Eliot (and much, much more) to fuel Burroughs's atomic-powered strap-on, which probes the asshole of society with more glee and wicked humour than anyone since Swift.

The Crying of Lot 49 by Thomas Pynchon (1966). Like Pynchon's first novel, *V.* (1963), this book served up bits of history, science, philosophy, and pop psychology in a sauce wonderfully spiced with rock lyrics, sophomoric jokes, and truly *twisted* character names and types; when these elements are heated by paranoia and alientation, severe turbulence occurs. Less dense and less grounded in technology than his massive next novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Lot 49* nonetheless anticipates cyberpunk in its wondrous use of scientific metaphors, its slam-dance pacings, its depiction of an exotic underworld of alienated weirdos, and its rapid modulations between the realms of "high culture" and the pop underground of drugs and the media culture.

Andy Warhol Presents the Velvet Underground and Nico by the Velvet Underground (1967). Lou Reed and John Cale took pop audiences for harrowing rides into the darkness existing not on the edge of town but right in its centre. Combining avant-garde, industrial-strength noise and back-to-basics impulses, VU's brutally honest depiction of drugs, S&M, and desperation was a breakthrough for a pop culture then entranced by the Summer of Love. The epitome of cool, bored-but-hyper hipness and street smarts, Reed –

resplendent in black leather jacket and mirrorshades – created adult songs about characters whose arrogance and paranoia clashed headlong with their human frailties. As musicians and as cultural icons, the VU were seminal influences on the 1970s punk and the 1980s cyberpunk scenes.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? by Philip K. Dick (1968). Renegade androids escape to earth from off-planet, and robot killer Deckard must track them down. Identity is the big question here: who is more human, the androids who want to live or the cop who wants to kill them? Basis for the film *Blade Runner* (1982).

Nova by Samuel Delany (1968). Stylistically, the bridge between the baroque 1950s sf of *The Stars My Destination* and the harder edge worldview of *Neuromancer*. A space opera full of feuding families and oddball characters, but with a respect for the science that makes it all run.

La Société du Spectacle by Guy Debord (1967; trans. *Society of the Spectacle*, 1977). The first comprehensive examination of the far-reaching effects of postindustrial capitalism on individuals. The book opens with the following startling statement: "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation." From there, we are only a hop, skip, and a jaunt from Baudrillard's "simulacra," Rucker's software, and Gibson's cyberspace.

The Cornelius Chronicles volumes 1-3 by Michael Moorcock (1968 onwards). The semicomplete story of the life/lives of Jerry Cornelius, Nobel Prize-winning scientist and rock and roll musician. The existential plotting, ambiguous sexuality of the main characters, and general low life/high brow feel makes these very important works in the canon.

The Atrocity Exhibition by J.G. Ballard (1970). Ballard studied medicine while in college and it shows here. Through a series of fragmented "compressed novels," Ballard traces the breakdown of a doctor at a mental hospital.

Future Shock by Alvin Toffler (1970). Information increased and comprehension decreased. Sound familiar? Get ready. The future is only going to get weirder.

Dub Music (1970-present). Reggae, all dreads and drive, collides with modern tech toys like digital delays and rhythm machines. That bastard offspring is called Dub, a hypnotic dance music from Jamaica, a brain graft of primitive glee and cool digital grace. Sly & Robbie, Prince Far I, the Mad Professor, as well as British honky Adrian Sherwood, are all masters of the style. This melding of tech and street music was extended even further by adding sampling machines (digital shoplifting of sound) by Rap musicians.

Dog Soldiers by Robert Stone (1973). Stone's post-Beat prose style and vision of America as a morally bankrupt party town tearing itself apart is as harrowing as Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." The difference is that like most cyberpunk, the action in *Dog Soldiers* could be happening right next door.

"The Girl Who was Plugged In" by James Tiptree Jr (1973; in *Warm Worlds and Otherwise*, 1975). A near-future Pygmalion story in which a hideous street girl is fitted with a sleek new "perfect" body and groomed for media stardom as a sort of living-breathing ad for all things marketable.

Crash by J.G. Ballard (1973). The erotic thrill of violence, the secret satisfaction of watching machines fuck up and go haywire, and the numbing power of mass-produced imagery have never been presented more convincingly. If you've ever wondered what it would have been like to be approaching orgasm with Jayne Mansfield just before the Fatal Impact, this book is for you.

Gravity's Rainbow by Thomas Pynchon (1973). The best cyberpunk ever written by a guy who didn't even know he was writing it. Pynchon's most difficult (and rewarding) book puts you into the bad brains of soldiers, scientists, hookers, losers, and more during World War II, when science was about to Change Everything.

Soon Over Babaluma by Can (1974). Trance music from the band that practically invented what we now call "modern rock." Bassist Holger Czukay studied with Stockhausen for several years before jumping into a rock band. Their sound influenced everyone from Soft Machine to Public Image Limited to the Talking Heads.

Horses by Patti Smith (1975). Patti Smith's androgynous, defiant, radiantly obscene stage personality showed a generation of would-be women rockers (and a number of cyberpunk authors) that females could be every bit as tough, raunchy, and daring as their male counterparts. Drawing equally from the realms of the artistic avant-garde (Rimbaud, Genet, and Burroughs) and of pop culture, Smith dipped down into the sea of possibilities and conjured up a jagged, delirious vision that drew its intensity from the same sense of desperation and exhilaration that characterized cyberpunk.

Shockwave Rider by John Brunner (1975). When people are little more than bytes in the government data stream, can anyone remain human? Fugitive Nicki Heflinger wants to find out, and change a few things.

Galaxies by Barry Malzberg (1975). Pure postmodernism in sf drag. A novel about a trip to a "black" galaxy, as well as a novel about writing a novel. Self-referential and reflexive in the extreme. Like reading Wittgenstein in a hall of mirrors.

Plus by Joseph McElroy (1976). A dying engineer who has his brain removed awakens to find he has become, literally, a mere communication device, attached to a computer inside a satellite orbiting the earth. As "he" (Imp Plus) gradually recovers his memories and reinvents language, he transforms himself into a fully conscious biological and chemical laboratory. Eventually he discovers a means of rebellion against the people and world that put him where he is. Told in a dense, poetic blend of Beckett and computerese.

Never Mind the Bollocks by The Sex Pistols (1976). The band that shook the world and said "No" in power chords so loud and elegant that they were heard by a whole generation of artists wishing to escape the emptiness and safety of the corporate consumer mentality. The dadaists performing nightly in Zürich's Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 performed an experiment in which the language used to justify the great war raging outside was destroyed. If they had had access to electric guitars and amplifiers, those dadaists would have sounded like this. Enter cyberpunk, which appropriated punk's confrontational style, its anarchist energies, its crystal-meth pacings, and its central motif of the alienated victim defiantly using technology to blow everyone's fuses.

Second Annual Report by Throbbing Gristle (1976). Throbbing Gristle completely abandoned the pretence of playing anything like conventional music. Their albums and performances were psychological assaults of the most extreme, where creative use of pure noise substituted for songs. The Futurists performed similar experiments in the 1920s. Throbbing Gristle's brilliance, however, came when they approached their noise assaults as rock and roll shows, seducing thousands of listeners who would normally run screaming from anything called "art."

Low by David Bowie (1977). Bowie's first collaboration with Brian Eno resulted in the album that mended the rift between the razor heat of rock and the cooler geometry of electronic/progressive/avant-garde sounds. A happy mistake early in the recording process resulted in a fresh drum sound still being copied.

The Ophiuchi Hotline by John Varley (1977). Cyberpunk ideas presented in their larval form are the highlight of this otherwise vastly disappointing first novel. Though the prose is graceless, Varley has a fine feel for the infinite malleability of flesh through technology, and his multiple clones of a single female character and their wildly different fates is an excellent depiction of the fragmentation of a single personality.

Dawn of the Dead by George Romero (1978). The mindless zombies who can eagerly (but placidly) rip-and-devour the flesh of gun-toting bikers (when they're not riding the escalators or being drawn to Blue Lite Specials) and prowl the shopping mall scene of this classic, horrifically funny film are, of course, the same folks we've hurried past on our way to the Cineplex 12. The nightmarish, punk extremities of surreal violence, the relentless exposure of capitalism's banalizing effect on individuals, the insistence on visceral, bodily reality that our airbrushed, roboticized exteriors deny – all would find their way, in transmuted form, into cyberpunk's own brand of dark humour, aesthetic extremity, and notions of guerrilla-tactics survival.

Blood and Guts in High School by Kathy Acker (1978). Her influence is similar to that of Burroughs and Moorcock, but Acker started out as a poet, so her prose is infused with the poet's lust for words. That and her moral outrage make her very important. If Genet had sung for Black Flag, he might have sounded like this.

Survival Research Laboratories by Mark Pauline, Matt Heckert, Erick Werner (ca. 1979-present). These San Francisco-based industrial sculptors and performance artists have literalized the machinery-run-amok theme by staging spectacular, alarming, and often nauseating catastrophes. As these surreal, grotesque mechancial simulacra (which are often rigged up to dead animals magically brought back to a pathetic parody of "life") attack effigies, images, targets, and eventually turn on each other, our culture's deepest emotional responses toward the technological milieu are played out in ways not soon forgotten by anyone who was there (and survived).

The Postmodern Condition by Jean-François Lyotard (1979). This difficult but provocative "Report on Knowledge" lays a philosophical blueprint for cyberpunk (if anyone can read the map). How to react to the computerization of society? or the dystopian prospect of a global private monopoly of information created by the profitability of the new technological and information revolutions? or the crisis of representation? Lyotard has a quietly optimistic view that science's capacity for change, innovation, and renewal will ultimately be the undoing of the repressive system that supplies it with grant money. Stay tuned.

MTV (1981-present). Mundane music (for the most part) is genetically altered into a pure info monster comprising collage, rapid-fire imagery, and a stream-of-consciousness sense of timelessness and placelessness. All these things made MTV an influential point of reference for the age when information overload is more chic than a pierced nipple.

Easy Travel to Other Planets by Ted Mooney (1981). Blending mainstream's emphasis on psychological depth with an eerie ambience of sf (an impending war in the Antarctic, information sickness), this haunting, lyrical novel perfectly exemplifies the blend of the postmodern mainstream and sf that Bruce Sterling has dubbed "slipstream." If affairs with dolphins, the fear of death, the throb of reggae, and the lure of what the next twist of your joystick pretty much describes the world you live in – a world that's rushing away from you at every moment – give this book a whirl.

Big Science by Laurie Anderson (1982). Okay, so she does seem occasionally too cute, precious, and "profound" to be mingling with this roughhouse gang. But there's an undercurrent of minimalist dread, alienation, and paranoia that wafts over you so gently, as you sit entering spreadsheet data on your laptop while sipping cocktails in the business class of a 747. Slowly it dawns on you that you're only seconds from impact, that the reassuring voice of the "pilot" was only another recorded message, that the arms of the loved one gripping you in a last embrace are really automatic, electronic arms, that all those amazing chemical reactions going on inside your body right now to protect you aren't going to mean a thing when this lumbering, gas-guzzling pile of metal ploughs into a Kansas cornfield at 600 mph with you strapped inside like the meat puppet you are. Stand by.

Blade Runner by Ridley Scott (1982). This film has (and deservedly) been compared with Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and for good reason. The claustrophobic feel of Scott's mise-en-scène, with its over-abundance of exotic images and information, its mixture of Asian and American, glittery high tech and refuse-strewn lowlife, plus the sheer intensity of its presentation – these are the cinematic equivalents of Gibson's prose. Just as important, the movie shares with *Neuromancer* a focus on the moral and epistemological questions created by technology. No answers in sight.

Simulations by Jean Baudrillard (1983). French Marxist theorist Baudillard runs amok in the labyrinth of epistemological quandaries, simulated experiences and desires, and all-too-familiar banalities that comprise postmodern American life. His elaborate, playful theorization of the concept of the "simulacra" – a copy of something which has no original – has been a landmark in the theorization of postmodern culture. Beneath all the neologisms, undecipherable rhetoric, and confusing analogies, readers sense that in his probings of Disneyland, Reagan, and celebrity hijackers he has indeed put his finger upon something real in the wispy abstractions of postmodernism. (Or was that finger in a data glove?)

Videodrome by David Cronenberg (1983). Cronenberg explores one of cyberpunk's favourite themes – the denaturing of the body, the displacement of the real by the "hyperreal" of television. A Dickian vision, troubling in its gruesome but perceptive take on how society has become transfixed as it consumes its own desires and fears in the form of media-produced images.

Frontera by Lewis Shiner (1984). The first privately funded mission to Mars after the collapse of NASA turns nightmarish when the protagonist, Kane, finds himself programmed to bring something back to Earth, at any cost.

The Terminator by James Cameron (1984). Arnold Schwarzenegger is a time-travelling killer robot sent to 1980s L.A. to murder the woman destined to give birth to the leader of the future rebellion against the sentient machines who have taken over the planet. Like much cyberpunk, this film is a conscious throwback to earlier pulp forms, full of genre references; a sf potboiler saved by a bent wit and savage speed-freak energy, it was the model for virtually every action movie for the remainder of the decade (and beyond).

Neuromancer, *Count Zero*, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* by William Gibson (1984, 1986, 1988). The evolution of the Matrix, a computer-generated reality created by data from all the world's computers, and the lives of those that live in and through it.

"Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" by Fredric Jameson (1984, *New Left Review*). This seminal essay remains the most cogent and compelling description of the central features of postmodernism. What is interesting is the way Jameson's central, oft-quoted premises about postmodernism – its impulse toward collage and pastiche, its eschewal of "depth" and its emphasis on "surface," the deliberate foregrounding of sensory overload and proliferation

of signs without reference (with the resulting inability of individuals to locate themselves, physically or psychically), the odd response of "euphoria" when confronted with sensory overload, the lack of affect, the "nostalgia mode" – read almost as a litany of cyberpunk thematic and stylistic tendencies.

White Noise by Don DeLillo (1985). DeLillo mixes dystopian premises (a toxic cloud raises havoc in an Everytown, U.S.A.) with utopian ones (the development of a drug that eliminates the anxiety of death) in a novel that portrayed the most essential dilemmas, absurdities, and wonders of postmodern life. Wonderfully comic and yet deeply moving, this was written with more wit and sympathy than any other novel of the 1980s.

The Soft Machine: Cybernetic Fiction by David Porush (1985). The first important investigation of the ways in which recent concepts of cybernetics and AI have begun to provide contemporary writers with key sources of images and literary techniques. While Porush focuses mostly on writers whom Bruce Sterling would later dub "slipstream authors" (he examines Burroughs, Barthelme, Vonnegut, McElroy, Beckett, and Pynchon in detail), his analysis of the struggle taking place between those who accept the mechanical model for human intelligence and communication and those who resist it leads him to propose the recent evolution of a literary synthesis that has striking applications for cyberpunk fiction of the 1980s.

Blood Music by Greg Bear (1985). A renegade gene hacker injects himself with his own experimental microorganisms and gets up close and personal with Information. Theory and a too, too malleable reality. Visually, this book is worthy of Salvador Dali.

Eclipse, Eclipse Penumbra, Total Eclipse by John Shirley (1985, 1987, 1989). A large-scale story on the re-emergence of fascism as a major political force, told in a vivid, hallucinatory prose style.

Max Headroom by Peter Wagg, producer; Steve Roberts, original screenplay (1985). Travelling just 20 minutes into the future, we arrive in cyberpunk land – a place where video-generated talking heads call the shots for the anonymous guys with *real* power (the multinational bigwigs), where capitalism's goal of transforming every point in space and time into a potential sale opportunity has never been realized, where the present moment seems to disappear into a turbulent sea of disconnected words and images that all seem vaguely exciting *and* banal. And you forgot your life jacket.

Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology ed. Bruce Sterling (1986). Could be subtitled "A Young Person's Guide to Cyberpunk." The first and still definitive collection of cyberpunk short fiction.

The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics by Arthur Kroker and David Cook (1986). Kroker and Cook examine "sign crimes," "panic sex," "body invaders," the role of television as a "consumption machine," and other central bummers of the technological age. In its own way, their vision is as extreme and hysterical as that of anything found in cyberpunk (for example, they claim that Saint Augustine was the first postmodernist!).

Mindplayers by Pat Cadigan (1987). Deadpan Allie is a sort of future psychiatrist who works on her patients by entering virtual representations of their psyches.

When Gravity Fails by George Alec Effinger (1987). Petty criminals in a postsuperpower Arab world augment themselves with designer drugs and personality chips in a Chandleresque murder mystery.

You Bright and Risen Angels by William T. Vollmann (1987). In one of the most ambitious and original debuts since Pynchon's *V.*, Vollmann develops a dense, sprawling, novelistic "cartoon" in which bugs and electricity become motifs used to explore the revolutionary impulses that have arisen in response to the evils of industrialism. Moving across vast areas of history and geography filled with arcane information and surrealist literalizations of sexual longings and violence, this book's wild flights of improvisational prose and intensity of vision signal the arrival of a major talent.

Daydream Nation by Sonic Youth (1988). The ultimate cyberpunk musical statement to date, this double album evokes the confusion, pain, and exhilaration of sensory overload, via chaos theory-produced blasts of sound and sonic textures whose dissonance and wildness are matched only by their soaring beauty and wicked sense of humour. What becomes a mirrorshade most?

Islands in the Net by Bruce Sterling (1988). A thoughtful extrapolation of a future in which nuclear weapons have been banned and information is the most valuable commodity. Don't overlook Sterling's other books, *Schismatrix* (1985) and *The Artificial Kid* (1980).

Empire of the Senseless by Kathy Acker (1988). Thivia (a pirate) and Abhor (part human and part robot) roam through a Sadean future ("dystopia" is much too mild) on a quest to kill-the-father (and hence demolish the world of patriarchy) on as many different levels as possible. Like the cyberpunks (and she appropriates an extended section of *Neuromancer* here), there is something oddly optimistic about Acker's vision of pirate-renegades stealing what they need from The Man and transgressing every taboo imaginable, while still trying to work out their own myth that lies beyond those devised by the hippies or the punks.

Metrophage by Richard Kadrey (1988). Art and crime meet literally, in the streets when a strange virus hits Los Angeles. If Tom Waits were a cyberpunk writer, he'd be writing something like *Metrophage*. [L.M.]

Wetware by Rudy Rucker (1988) Sentient robots ("boppers") on the moon want to interface with human beings and create the first "meatbop." This book netted Rudy his second Philip K. Dick Award.

My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist by Mark Leyner (1990). Imagine some sort of metal cylinder of near-infinite diameter that has been twisted into a circle; inside this cylinder, verbal elements of political and lit-crit jargon, cyberpunk, speed-metal rock lyrics, language poetry, movie dialogue, obscure medical and scientific text-books, television ads, and all manner of pop-cultural discourses have been accelerated to near-warp velocities, until they collide violently and begin to ooze out onto the page. If Rudy Rucker's claim that the essence of cyberpunk fiction lies in its information density and concern with new thought forms is to be taken seriously, Leyner, like Pynchon before him, wrote an instant cyberpunk masterpiece without even knowing he was doing so.

The above list is excerpted with permission from *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction* edited by Larry McCaffery (Duke University Press, January 1992). The book is available in the USA from Duke University Press, 6697 College Station, Durham, North Carolina 27708; and in the UK from AUPG, 1 Gower Street, London WC1E 6HA.

The Birth of Sons

Sharon M. Hall

There was no moment when this world began: this world without women: but many moments. Not one decision, but many decisions. Each moment a private moment. Each decision a private decision. Each choice an individual choice, made first by men and women. Then, increasingly, by men alone. And finally by men together. A world slipped into quietly. A world made possible by choice. But I lie. There *are* women in this world.

The lab technician shifted on his seat and peered at the woman. She lay in the fluid; red and warm, soft and pliable. He tickled her with the collector. Waited. Under his breath he mumbled: "Come on you bitch, give." A moment later the ovary released an egg and Jack sucked it quickly into the collector. Within a quarter of an hour the captured egg had been "cleaned" and prepared. Jack leaned back and looked at his assistant. The lad looked back.

"There's not a lot to the job," Jack said. "The waiting's the worst part."

The lad nodded and hooked his thumbs into the pocket of his jeans. He had nice hands, clean and strong. The jeans were tight. Jack gestured toward the coffee machine in the corner. It was positioned way back on a wide bench, making it difficult to reach. Jack smiled. "Tell you what, love," he said. "Fetch us a coffee."

Meanwhile, in another part of the Birth Centre, the parents-to-be entered a conception room. For a moment they stood behind the closed door, taking in the impersonal décor. Silk sheets on the bed, erotic pictures on the walls, a sheepskin rug on the floor. On each bedside cabinet there was a cup of life. They had been lovers for three years. They had taken vows, and filled in forms, and had submitted themselves to all the necessary tests. But this was different.

"Nervous?"

"I guess."

"Me, too."

A hesitation. Then: "They're waiting."

"I know." The one who had spoken sighed and ran his hand down his lover's back. Clothes fell to the floor aided by nervously-eager fingers. The sheets were cold and they laughed.

Later the two cups, consummated by the stuff of life, were handed to a conception technician. The contents were scrutinized and sorted, and the chosen united inside the woman's egg.

Then came the anxious time.

The parents-to-be, Jean-Claude and Michael, waited in silence. The corridor was bleak, painted in what they guessed was supposed to be a restful green. They drank tasteless coffee from a machine with a speech defect. There was nothing else to do. They conversed in touches and gestures, familiarity lending an ease to the mimed conversation.

Jean-Claude lifted the veil of blonde hair from Michael's ear. He whispered, "Don't fret," and kissed him – a brief butterfly kiss on the edge of the lobe. "Everything will be fine," he added. He spoke softly, with a slight trace of his native accent. Michael nodded and kissed him back.

"I know," he said, "it's just..." He finished his coffee and tossed the empty beaker into a brimming litter bin. It rolled onto the floor. Michael made a small movement, as if he had started to stand up then changed his mind. Jean-Claude squeezed his hand and smiled. "There is nowhere," he said. Nowhere to go. Nowhere to put the cup.

Beneath the soft check of his shirt Michael's budding breasts itched. He felt hot and uncomfortable and he couldn't help but fret. He knew that somewhere nearby the fragile beginnings of their son was being offered to a woman.

He worried, however, without need. The transfer went well. Later, Michael and Jean-Claude were allowed to visit their son. But all they saw was a dark shadow within the angry red of the woman's womb.

Jack waited for the hormones to take effect. His shoulders were aching, and he comforted himself with the thought of his assistant's hands easing the pain away. Later, perhaps. He tickled the woman impatiently and was rewarded with a released egg. This he placed within a waiting batch of separated and capacitated x-sperm. Then he went for a coffee.

Once the egg was fertilized, it was passed to Lewis. Lewis was a quiet and thoughtful man. He enjoyed his work and was often teased when the others caught him talking to his minuscule charges. At the appropriate moment Lewis took his knife to the embryo. This was not a metal knife, however, not even of the finest surgical steel. It was a chemical knife, and it cut with precision into Michael's embryo daughter, separating her head, her leg, her arms, until all that was left of her was an ovary and a womb. These he passed onto Frank for cultivation.

Eventually, Michael's daughter was placed beside

her mother. The mother did not know this. She had no mouth to greet her daughter. No arms with which to embrace her. Perhaps, after all, I did not lie.

Nine months after his conception Jean-Claude and Michael's son quietly entered the world. It was an easy, unremarkable delivery. The birth attendant eased his tiny blood-streaked body from the womb and placed it on a heated mat. Then with whispers and gestures he instructed the excited parents on how to stimulate their son. To encourage him to take his first breath. They dipped their hands into warm oil, then rubbed – here, like this. Firmly, but gently. Squeezed there. Tapped the foot with a finger, and at last the infant cried. A small protesting wail. Carefully, awed by the tiny fingers and watchful blue eyes, Michael placed his son against his breast. The infant searched and, guided by the helpful hands of the attendant, found the nipple. Michael sucked in a breath, surprised by the strength of such a tiny mouth. He had not expected that it would hurt.

"It gets better," the attendant said. "When the milk comes on."

Michael looked at Jean-Claude. "It's you next," he said. "Let's see you smile then."

Jean-Claude unfastened his shirt, rubbed a finger gently across the baby's dark, wet hair. "He has your eyes," he said.

"And your nose, poor boy."

"It is a very fine nose," Jean-Claude said, speaking to the baby. "Don't listen to Papa-Michel. He is only jealous."

"Of that?" Michael laughed. "Isn't he wonderful?"

The attendant hovered, helping to pass the baby between them. He showed them how to tickle his cheek, to let him find his own way to the nipple rather than trying to ram it down his throat. Eventually, he told them to let the baby rest. "Have you thought of a name?" he asked.

Michael and Jean-Claude looked at each other. Together they said: "Adam."

"We knew what to call you the moment we saw you," Jean said. As always when he was alone with his son, he spoke in the soft burr of his native tongue. "Look, that's you when you were just three days old. Can you see how tiny your hands were?"

Adam peered across the room. He saw Michael sitting on a strange bed with a baby in his arms. The baby was sucking noisily at a breast. Adam jumped down from Jean's knee and ran across the room. He studied the scene for a moment then pushed his hand through the baby's head. Jean laughed, and with the sudden movement of his head water rained from his wet black hair over his bare shoulders. They had just had a shower and both were naked. Adam ran back and sat on his father's knee. He slapped a hand against Jean's chest. "Gone," he said.

"Yes."

"Where to?"

Jean hesitated. Long before Adam had been delivered, or even conceived, he had promised himself that he would always tell his son the truth. But he had not known how hard it would be. "I don't know," he said. "They'd come back though, if we had another baby. Papa-Michel would like that. Would you?"

Adam shook his head – giggled at the resultant shower, then shook it again. Jean let out an exclamation, grabbed a towel and buried Adam in it. Adam resurfaced, giggled, tried to shake his head again – and a brief game was born. By the end of the game Adam was dry and dressed and ready for bed. Jean was wet and dishevelled and tired. He sat on the floor and watched as Adam searched through the "pictures." From time to time Adam jumped down from his seat and ran across the room to stare at, or kick, or punch some fragment of the past. Inbetween times he lay with his head on his arm looking half asleep. Jean knew that he ought to start on supper. But he didn't. Travel brochures and Birth Centre leaflets lay side by side on the coffee table in front of him, each offering a plethora of glossy choices. A thousand and one places by the sea, in the sun. A hundred shades of healthy blonde.

Michael wanted another son. He wanted helplessness and sleepless nights and damp shirt fronts. He wanted to make important choices. Viking-blonde hair and brown eyes and something the leaflets called "optimum stature." Jean remembered the feel of Michael's breasts beneath his hand. Their sweetness beneath his tongue. But it was a sweetness made sour by Michael's unease. By arguments and tensions. Michael was unadventurous; conservative. It was, therefore, a dangerous pleasure.

Adam was asleep when Michael came home. Michael carried him to bed while Jean made a salad. A bottle of wine and several hours later the Birth Centre leaflets were abandoned. They decided on Thásos.

"You weren't meant to find it. It has nothing to do with you. Nothing to do with us." That was Jean's voice, dangerously soft and low.

Adam had been awake for some time now, lying in the dark, listening to their whispers. He liked the comforting rise and fall of their voices. The occasional laughter. The long silences when he knew that they kissed. Then one of them, Papa-Michel, Adam thought, had gone into the bedroom. He had heard the footsteps crossing the room, drawers opening and closing. He had heard Michael say that he couldn't find it. And Jean reply that it didn't matter. And Michael call softly, hold on a minute. Then there had been a long silence, and after that, when Michael had returned to the other room, the sound of their conversation had not been comforting.

Adam wished that he was asleep. He wished that he didn't have to listen to soft explosions of their anger. Until now he had only been able to make out an occasional word. He reached down and slipped his hand between his legs. Now Michael said:

"Of course it's got something to do with us! It's got everything to do with us."

And Jean said: "Control yourself, you'll wake Adam."

"God! Adam," Michael said. He sounded as if a new horror had been suggested to him. He sounded afraid. "Will he be... have you... Oh, god. I can't believe this. I thought I knew you. I thought you loved me – and all the time you wanted *this*."

Adam couldn't hear Jean's reply. He hesitated a moment, then got out of bed and crossed the room. Quietly, he opened his bedroom door. Just a crack. Just enough to see.

Michael and Jean-Claude stood facing each other. Michael had a piece of paper crumpled in his hand. He was crying. Jean looked pale but resolute. He took a step toward Michael, but Michael shrank away from him.

"Don't," he said. "Don't touch me."

"Michel, please."

"Don't. Don't call me that. Not any more."

"At least try to understand –"

"No." Michael turned and headed toward the door. Jean called after him but he didn't stop.

The door closed with a sound that was like a slap in the face. After that, nothing.

Adam hadn't known that silence could spread outward like a wave. That it could tumble over you and leave you drowning, throat tight with fear. He hadn't known that it could be unbearable. He pushed his bedroom door a little wider. "Papa-Jean?"

"Go to bed, Adam."

Adam didn't move. He stood, staring at the back of Jean's head.

"Go to bed," Jean said, again.

Adam went and sat on his bed. After a while Jean came and sat beside him. "He'll be back," he said.

Adam nodded.

"How much did you hear?"

Adam did not reply. Jean took his hand and held it. "Papa-Michel is upset," he said. "Because he found a picture of a woman."

"A woman?"

"A person, sort of. A different sort of person."

"Like a fairy?" Adam said. He thought of the tales Grandpa Gilbert had told him about the tough little creatures that lived on refuse sites and came scavenging in the towns when times were hard.

"No, not like a fairy," Jean said. "Like us, only different."

"How different?"

"Well... they had breasts, all the time. But no penis. They had babies instead. In their tummies."

Adam nodded, imagining a creature as large as a Birth Centre, with breasts the size of hillocks, and row upon row of babies trapped inside a cavernous stomach. This sounded like a good story. He squirmed himself onto Jean's lap and rested his head against the smooth flat chest. "Did they eat the babies?" he asked.

"No, the babies grew there."

Adam chewed on his thumb. "But how did they get out?"

Jean hesitated. Did it really matter one way or the other, the truth or a lie? "Out of a door, of sorts," he said. "Between the woman's legs. But sometimes the door wasn't big enough and a man would have to cut the baby out." He rubbed Adam's arm. "Women bled a lot," he said. "And cried a lot. And sometimes the babies would be hurt. No one could watch over them, you see, inside the woman. So the doctors found a better way."

Adam considered this. His father's chest was warm and comforting against his cheek, but still he felt a touch of fear.

"There aren't any womans any more," he said. "Are there?"

"No, not here." Jean sounded sad. "Far away, perhaps, in the jungles..."

"Will they come back?"

"I don't think so." Jean kissed him. "No one needs them," he said. "Not any more."

It was during a biology lesson some years later that Adam realized the error of his childish imaginings. First, he discovered that it was possible to fertilize an egg with an x-sperm in order to grow a womb and ovaries. Then some days later he learnt that the womb and ovaries came attached to embryonic arms and legs and head, which had to be removed.

"So it would become a person," he said to his tutor. "If we let it."

"No," his tutor said. "It would become a woman."

Adam felt a moment of fear. A moment of curiosity. A long moment of relief.

"You mean there can only be women if we make them," he said. He started to laugh. In his nightmares he had imagined huge creatures one day rising from the jungles, dropping babies as they marched across the land. He looked at the tutor-screen. At the imitation of reality. This was woman. This small, slightly ridiculous, clump of cells. The force of his laughter brought tears to his eyes.

Michael and Jean-Claude separated when Adam was ten years old. Several months had passed between the night of the woman-argument and the day of their separation, and at the time Adam did not connect the two. He knew only that his parents quarrelled constantly. Nasty, hurtful little quarrels that twisted them into hateful imitations of their former selves. Quarrels that came out of nowhere, erupting, subsiding, but never ending. Sometimes, aware of his listening ears they would quarrel silently.

Both competed, constantly, for his attention. His approval. His allegiance. Sometimes, seeing his bewilderment, they would apologize. It doesn't matter, they would say. Come and sit with whoever you want. I'll tell you a story. Do you want to play a game? Come to me, me, me. Then they would watch with greedy, sorrowful eyes while he turned and walked back into his room. He spent a lot of time in his room, with his tutor. But he couldn't concentrate and his school work deteriorated.

Things were easier after the separation. Michael was awarded full parental rights over Adam, and sole occupancy of the house. Jean-Claude did not contest his claim, and in return Michael allowed Jean limited access. This was because Jean was a pervert, Grandpa Gilbert said. But when Adam asked, no one would tell him what a pervert was. And for some reason, perhaps the tone of Grandpa Gilbert's voice when he said the word, Adam did not ask Jean-Claude. Pervert, Adam decided, was just a name you called somebody when you didn't like them any more.

At first he saw Papa-Jean often. Every weekend they would go to the park, or swimming, or sit in a café somewhere and tell stories. And in the summer they would spend a whole week together. Michael always

wanted to know what happened on these visits, what was said, what was done. Don't let him corrupt you, he said. But like Grandpa Gilbert he never explained what he meant.

When Adam was thirteen he brought home his first lover. He was a member of Adam's socialization class. A boy called Craig. He had ginger hair and thick soft lips, and when Adam had dropped his plastic baby into the bath head first, Craig rescued the screaming slippery doll and showed Adam how to hold it, to quiet it down. His hands were gentle, yet firm. His eyes were brown. Michael smiled approvingly when they held hands under the table, and suggested that Craig stay the night. When he thought they were asleep he crept into the room and quietly covered their entangled bodies with the discarded sheet. Adam heard his sigh, and wondered, long after Michael had left, what he had done to cause such deep satisfaction.

It was in the summer following his sixteenth birthday that Jean-Claude took Adam to the Highlands. He had rented a remote cabin, and for the first few days they walked and fished and talked, each becoming accustomed, once more, to the physical presence of the other. Jean had spent two years in Parà, Brazil, and since his return a few weeks ago they had met only once. There had been calls, of course, gifts, greetings on his birthdays, and frequent, cheery little "pictures" from Parà, showing the colourful, volatile country in which Jean travelled. But there had been something missing, too. Something not-said. The "pictures" and messages were too carefully worded, too shallow in their descriptions of the touristy sights and sounds, and for a while Adam had entertained the terrifying and exciting thought that Jean might be a spy. Or dying of some terminal disease. Now, seeing that his father was as lean and agile as a fairy, he thought not.

On the fourth night of their holiday Jean said that he was expecting visitors. He seemed nervous, and Adam wondered if he was in trouble of some kind. Some of his concern must have shown, for Jean added quickly: "It's all right. Really, it is. But if you want to leave...any time..." He shrugged. "You're old enough to know what you want," he said. "Old enough to know the truth."

Jean spent the rest of the afternoon preparing for his guests. The smell of fresh-baked biscuits and bread filled the cabin, but Adam was not allowed into the tiny kitchen to help. In the evening, Jean rearranged the room, pushing the furniture out into the edges and corners so that there was a clear circle of space in the centre. Later, when it grew dark, this was lit by a single, soft spotlight that left the rest of the room in darkness. Adam sat in a corner and waited. And waited.

It was night when the first of the guests arrived. He was a large man with long dark hair which he wore in a high ponytail. His eyes were blue, but other than that Adam could not tell. The man wore a mask. It had been carved out of wood, badly, then sanded and varnished. There were holes for his eyes and a grinning gap for his mouth, the edges of which were painted bright red. When the other guests arrived, one by one, they too wore masks. All the masks were the same.

There were six guests in all, men of all shapes and sizes. Jean introduced them to Adam as "a friend," and Adam to them as "my son." When the last of them had arrived, he opened a bottle of red wine and filled seven glasses.

"We meet in blood," he said.

The guests each took a glass and drank, echoing the toast: "In blood."

Adam looked at the door. He had heard of orgies. He had heard of men who enjoyed pain, and of others whose pleasure was to inflict it. He had heard of dark rituals, and perversions of the mind which the Birth Centres had not yet eradicated. He heard Grandpa Gilbert's voice saying "pervert" over and over again in his head. He looked at Jean, and stepped further back into the darkness. His knees touched the edge of a chair and he sat down.

The guests had finished drinking, and were now undressing. Some dropped their clothes behind them, others folded them in neat piles and placed them on a nearby chair or table. When they were all naked they knelt in a circle. Adam noticed then that Jean had fetched a white tablecloth from the kitchen and a squeezy bottle of red sauce. Jean opened the cloth out and spread it flat, as if for a picnic. Then he took the sauce bottle, and with the thin dribble of red began to draw a human outline. Head, arms, legs. He added two circles (the breasts of an expectant father?) then between the legs added another smaller circle. An absence. A castration. Adam closed his eyes. He thought: no.

There were slight sounds of movement, but no hands grabbed him, and when he looked again, there were other things on the cloth. A model of a non-man made out of pink dough. Biscuits, shaped and marked in the same way as his father's drawing. Tiny loaf-men with bulging breasts, but lacking a penis. Others were less easily identified. But all of them, Adam saw, were either edible, or easy to destroy without a trace. Even his father's drawing would disappear as soon as the cloth was washed.

Adam stood, and one of the guests moved slightly, preparing to rise. He was fat, fair skinned, red haired. His chest was hairless, though not naturally so, and his excess weight gave him small breasts. His penis was barely visible beneath the overhang of stomach. Even so Adam knew that the man would reach him before he reached the door. His father had lied.

"I have something to show you," Jean said.

He reached into the hollow created by his crossed legs and tossed something onto the cloth. It landed, circle covering circle, between the red legs of his drawing. A mnemic hologram. There was a pause, then, activated by the light, it flared into life. An erect column of white erupted from its centre, hesitated, then blossomed, forming a dome – and there it was. A woman.

It was standing in a river, laughing as the water bubbled around its knees. It was naked, marked with patterns of red on tanned skin. Its eyes and hair were black. A man ran towards it, put his arms around its waist. It made a strange, high pitched squawking sound and pulled away. The man laughed, and reaching into the river splashed the woman. It splashed him back. When the man grew tired of this game, he took the woman's hand and together they ran into

deeper water, to swim. Just before the image faded, Adam saw that they kissed.

The man was his father.

"I have touched woman," Jean said.

He began to move his body back and forth, jerkily, keeping to a metronome rhythm. The womb in which he had grown had not walked. He had not felt the vibrations of its laughter. The other men copied his action. They held hands. Excitement licked around the room. Adam felt his own stomach tighten in response. The red-head reminded him of Craig.

Jean smiled. "Join us," he said.

Adam lay naked on the cloth. Red wine nestled warm inside him. At his father's instruction the guests lifted the cloth and began to swing it from side to side. Adam grasped at their hands. The motion frightened him. He felt as though some part of him, some hidden, terrifying part of him, was about to break free. He screamed. Then laughed.

When his laughter turned to tears they placed him once again onto the firm sanity of the wooden floor. Someone had turned out the light. He felt heavy breasts press against his chest. He heard a voice whisper: "Woman." There was a touch. Not a hand. Something encompassing. Moist. Warm. Someone kissed him. Through the wine Adam recognized the taste of his father.

"I have touched woman," Jean said quietly, in his native tongue. "I have held the infant from its womb. The woman is called Klichi. I am the infant's father."

The guests left before morning. The objects they had brought with them were destroyed or eaten. Adam did not see their faces.

When he returned home, he told Michael about the fishing and talking and walking. He told him that Jean was returning to Parà, and that he had asked Adam to join him there. He told Michael that he would not go.

The following year, and for many years to come, Adam returned to the Highlands alone. He walked beside the lake and listened to the trees whisper stories of how one day woman would come striding out of the jungles, dropping babies as she marched back into the land of men. And in the seclusion of a rented cabin he built himself a hammock, and every night, for seven days, he lay in the cocoon of white cloth and rocked himself to sleep. In memory of woman.

Sharon M. Hall has contributed to *Interzone* just once before, with "The Last Game" (issue 33). That story was reprinted by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling in a recent volume of their *Year's Best Horror and Fantasy*. Sharon lives with her husband and family near Nottingham.

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Enola

Alastair Reynolds

Lucky, Trader Kodaira's niece, worked days in the stalls and bazaars of Cockatoo's Crest, selling trinkets gathered during winter when the Kodaira family had travelled north into the deserts of the Empty. The trinkets were small things, relics fashioned by folk who'd lived hundreds of years earlier, before the silver light of the Hour. Some talked in shrill voices, often in the languages of the northern islands. Others were valuable merely for their charm; images of the dead, like the hologram faces she wore in a chain around her neck, or syrinx-boxes that sung without repeating a single refrain. Others were mere curios: a paperweight fashioned in the shape of Broken Bridge, standing intact. Liquid metal in the flashing glass labyrinth of a toy bagatelle board, like a chromed slug. A tiny globe, showing the world as it appeared from space, marked darkly against sepia parchment. Lucky Kodaira liked it so much that she hid it at the back of her tray.

She wore the wooden tray the whole time, the Kodairas lacking sufficient prestige to afford a stall. Come noon, tired from the endless haggling and arguing, Lucky would leave Cockatoo's Crest for an hour and walk into Broken Bridge's latticed shadow, where she'd sit and eat fruit and dried meat pastries. It wasn't quiet; music from the Cockatoo's players carried for miles, though it was the drumming that she mainly heard, dipping toes in the water and turning the holograms in her necklace against the sky, gazing into the faces of the dead, rilled in rainbow colours of great subtlety. As the drums rattled, Lucky filled in the gaps with half-formed melodies, imagining that she'd made the real music of which her melodies were traceries, in another life, not far from where she sat.

With sunset, she'd leave the markets, money in a purse, and walk across New Bridge to the south where she'd meet her uncle in the auto-repair shop and catch the bus home. She liked it then, the setting sun lighting the barrage balloons tethered from the skyscrapers, making them gold Christmas baubles. Each year there were fewer balloons; sometimes the tethers snapped, sometimes balloons came down overnight, draping across the canopies of the plane trees. In the past, when there had still been Enolas in the air, it had been a constant labour just to maintain the barrages. But no one had seen an Enola for years, they said, so the barrage fell into disrepair. Only the old worked on the balloons now, camped in the penthouses, furiously sowing, repairing the quilted mylar, criticizing the youngsters for their all-night carousing.

Once, her uncle said, the balloons had formed a curtain surrounding the city. She didn't imagine that had been much fun, for the sun would have been obscured most of the time. But the old days seemed unpleasant all round, if the stories that the Pastmasters told were half-way accurate. (But as Kodaira always said: who could honestly tell?)

They lived in one room of a red building called the Monk's Hostel, shrouded by cool trees, home to nomadic families during summer. Kodaira knew most of the other traders; they'd met out in the Empty, pausing to swap engine parts or oil for their overlanders. The Empty was big enough, the city itself big enough, that no one encroached on the potential wealth of anyone else. So much had been manufactured before the Hour, it was said, that you only had to scrape away a few inches of dirt anywhere in the Empty before you found something bright, new and unfamiliar that some city-dweller would cough up for.

Nightly, in the atrium of the Monk's Hostel, families converged around trestles and dined, then invariably drank and sung together. There were stories to relate, reminiscences to rekindle. Lucky, when she was allowed to stay up late, gulped in the atmosphere, wide-eyed with joy.

A woman trader passed Kodaira a stein of beer, telling him that she'd seen a Maker out in the desert, still crawling along the flats, scavenging for metal and plastic. If there were Makers, someone said, in a tone of grim warning, then there might also be Enolas. But he was rebuffed; the Makers were made by people around the time of the Hour, while the Enolas had come from the sky, from the stars. The Enolas were all gone; none had been seen for ten or twenty years, and it was possible that for many decades there'd only been one left, a straggler wily enough to avoid being shot down by the defences of the Makers. A roving Maker – that was interesting, sure – but no one should lose any sleep over it.

Uncle Kodaira laughed. "There's more crazy stuff out in the Empty than anyone of us imagines," he said. "Things I've seen... distant shapes on the horizon..." he took a swig of the beer. "Way I reckon is, if there are still machines out there, they want to leave us alone as much as we want to leave *them* alone. Because it's only the smart ones that survived. And smart ones don't want trouble."

"But uncle, are there still Enolas?" asked Lucky.

"No way," said the trader tenderly. "The Enolas were bad things, once upon a time, but they're all

gone now. Just like the dinosaurs I showed you in the museum, remember?"

And she did; she remembered the fallen bones, downy with dust, sprawled across shattered marble. But she didn't remember where the museum had been, what town it was. She nodded. "But the old people say the Enolas will return, don't they? And they don't say the dinosaurs will return."

The trader knelt down, until he was face level with his niece. "Darling," he said. "Why do you think they have to say that?"

She shrugged. "Don't know. Maybe so they don't think they're wasting their time sewing all day."

He laughed. "That's half of it, for sure. The rest is so we younger people keep believing they're doing us some kind of big favour." He stroked her chin. "Because, darling, we keep them fed and warm. If we stopped thinking it was worth it, we'd have to run to the top of the skyscrapers and throw them all out the windows. That'd stop them moaning, wouldn't it?"

For a moment she thought he was serious, then she caught the curve of his mouth, his mocking grin. If he could make light of them so easily, she thought, maybe they were wrong after all. Maybe they just liked sewing so much that they had to have a reason.

Kodaira wiped a rime of beer from his chin, then put down the stein and swept her from the floor. "Know what I think, little princess?"

She looked into his eyes, fearing what he might say. "No," she said.

"Reckon it's way past your bedtime."

She shook her head. "I'll have the bad dream again, I know it." But all along knowing that her words would have no effect, and who could blame her uncle anyway? She never could remember what it was about in the light of day.

Her eyes were closed to the walls of the Monk's House, closed to the nicotine-darkened images of the Crucifixion. They were open to the contrail-smeared skies of the battlefield. She dreamed she was in the air, above a landscape of snakeskin and rust. Smoke rose into the stratosphere from wrecked machines on the ground. She searched the horizons and came back with the same silence she'd heard for most of two hundred megaseconds. She was the last in the air; all the rest had gone to ground, burrowed, or been destroyed by the hemispheric grid.

Stirring fitfully, she found a cooler place on her pillow, remembering faintly the globe she'd hawked around Cockatoo's Crest. Saw it webbed over with a tracery of red lines, radiating out from two landmasses she couldn't name, but knowing that she owed allegiance to one of those territories; saw flecks of golden light spangling the continents, filaments of the red tracery darkening permanently. Then she slipped into the dream fully, drowning in memory rather than treading its sleepless shallows.

The war, inasmuch as it meant anything to those that had initiated it, was now over. The grid was gone, so neither side could communicate with its scatterlings. Most population centres had received some attack; many cities simply cratered out of existence. War zones were chaotic; troops deserting and reaggregating into mutinous brigades, hunting food, water and medical aid. Machines that had survived the first fifty minutes were loitering, awaiting instructions. Like herself, prowling near enemy installations when she targeted the Factory module, rumbling across a sea of dunes.

She'd dreamt of the encounter with the Factory many times, enough now to see it as the beginning of her transmigration. She'd hardly been conscious when she met it, yet it had begun an evolution that had brought her... this far, across this much time and distance. Although just a damaged machine, long since wrecked, she felt strange affection for it, the affection she might have felt for an old, moth-eaten toy. She'd planned to destroy it with a salvo of diskettes, considering it too small a target for her warhead. Like a bee, she only had one sting, and she wouldn't be around too long after using it.

She'd cusped her wings and swooped in low, hypersonically skimming the ground. She'd been a second from kill when the target lasered her. Not an attempt to shoot her down, but a message coded for her brain smartware. She was wary, all the same, spending microseconds filtering for viruses before allowing it into her mind. She cogitated on it for a few mikes more.

It was a form of defence. Simulations, many of them. They showed her attack profile, releasing the diskettes, spreading into a nimbus of spinning flecks, then each being parried by counter-weapons from the Factory, before they had a chance to wreck it. She understood the point of the argument after several more mikes: *Go away; you're wasting your time with me – save your weapons for a target you'll have a chance of destroying for good. You're only looking at collateral damage here – a little degradation of my armour, a few minor systems failures...*

And she thought, yes, but what about the attack profiles you haven't considered? She saw other approach angles and release points. Working from the simulations she'd been sent, she ran her own to investigate whether the Factory could parry those as well. The results gave her pleasure; it wouldn't be able to. But she decided to fire one of her sims first, out of curiosity, to see how the Factory reacted. Still time; she wouldn't have to commit to a particular profile for point two seconds. She waited for the response, idly running self-diagnostics and weapons checks. Eventually the Factory responded, blipping out another laserburst. Too comprehensive, she realized. It had run these sims already. Playing games. She examined them desultorily. Each was essentially the same; yes, she *could* take out the Factory, but the catch was that it would destroy her, as well. *Try that trick, I'm taking you with me*, it seemed to say. It wouldn't even bother trying to limit its own damage. *Think about it...*

Yes, she needed time to think. More than point two seconds. The situation was outside her smartware parameters. This was not a contingency anticipated by her designers, clever though they'd made her. She pulled out of the attack, sheathed her wings and went to ground, burrowing deep into the sand. When safe she deployed a remote to talk to the Factory, a kilometre away, walking on eight clawed legs. The Factory was a construction unit, scavenging for waste and wreckage and manufacturing anything in its

memory. It made the enemy counterparts of herself, for instance. She thought about that, letting the idea tick over for several more mikes. She was adaptive, and she was beginning to think along similar lines to the Factory.

Her brain lit up like a bagatelle board.

A flash of inspiration. She hit the Factory with a a detailed blueprint of herself, showing component failures, fatigue points, battle-damage. Much of it true, some of it deftly exaggerated. She was careful to stress the functionality of her warhead, while making the rest of herself seem in bad shape. She hoped the import of the schematic was clear enough: *Think again. I'm not going to be around much longer anyway. I might as well Blow and take you out from where I'm sitting now...*

She got an answer more swiftly than she'd expected. A burst of schematics, waves of blueprints and performance numbers. *Don't be hasty, I'm sure we can come to some...agreement. I can fit you up with a new turbine subsystem, or a new fuselage assembly...why don't we discuss this in more detail ?...*

She considered, then pulsed out data on some motor parts she badly needed. The Factory responded, projecting a profile that showed her flying into its forward landing bay, robotic arms replacing parts of her motor, her flying into the sunset, both machines still in one piece.

Yes...

She retracted the remote, then lifted herself out of the ground in a mini-tornado of noise, fire and sand.

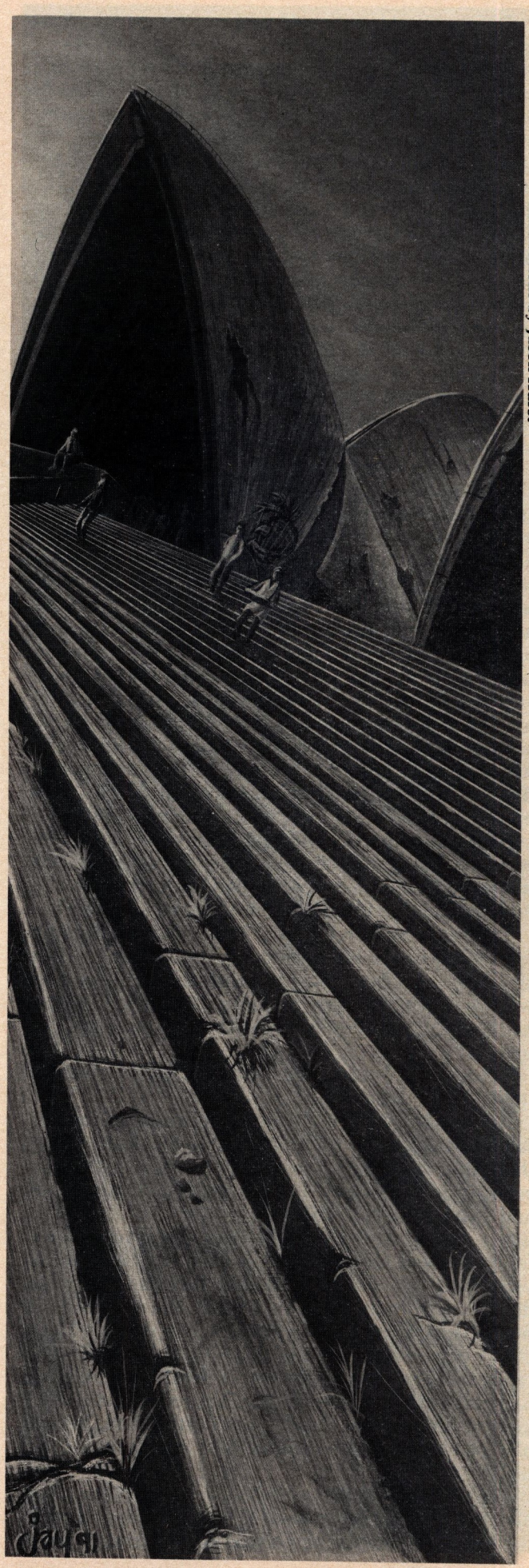
She didn't see the Factory again, after she'd left it intact on the ground. Perhaps it was killed later by some duller machine that hadn't appreciated the potential trade-off. Or maybe it'd just burrowed into permanent reclusion.

Whatever the case, she'd become addicted to its game.

She met other machines in her travels, not all of them enemy. Eventually she stopped distinguishing. If they had something she needed, she used the same gambit, threatening to trigger herself. There was an evolution working. The machines that had kept going this long into the war *had* to be smarter than the rest. They were like her, capable of grasping the niceties of a fair bargain.

Driven by the lingering imperatives of her builders, she equipped herself into a swift aerial fortress of fearsome destructive potential. But it wasn't a process she could continue forever, and after several dozen megaseconds she began to tire of endlessly upgrading her engines and weapons. It had become pointless; few machines anywhere nowadays, and hardly any airborne at all. So long as she had her warhead, so long as she had her communications, so long as she avoided the most obviously stupid machines, she could keep going indefinitely.

Instead she started to bargain for software and extra smartware modules to plug into her brain. Getting these units installed was tricky, since she usually had to yield some control over the warhead. But the remaining Factories were too cautious to try anything risky, like attempting to defuse her while her brain was being expanded. In any case, if they'd done business before, there was usually an element of *trust*.



Illustrations by Jason Hurst

She got smarter with each add-on. Some of the Factories had begun to sift through the war wreckage, accessing fragile data-memories locked in the debris of the cities. Some were the electronic simulacra of real people; leaders and artists of the prewar world. Initially she stored these personalities to enlarge her negotiational skills. But gradually she began to assimilate them purely for their own sakes, loading the dead into her mind and allowing them to interact, blooming like flowers in a rock-garden. As they subsumed more and more of her mind, she and they became less separable; hundreds of half-minds merging in her. After a few decades, however, the Factories stopped finding readable data. It had been corrupted by time. So the Factories offered her holographic images of the dead as a substitute. She read their faces now, her mind growing heavy with the weight of storage. She could still fly, but she was no longer as agile as she'd once been, before she met the Factory.

Thousands of megaseconds ticked by.

After a century, even the Factories and the other ground machines became rarer. She'd cruise for many megs before finding a machine that she could talk to. She always felt pleasure when she located one; there were scarcely any dangerous machines left, and she regarded the others as friends, while unclear precisely how they felt. They knew that she'd protect them from predators, but there simply weren't any left. Time had winnowed out the killers, machines incapable of evolving to meet the postwar world. As the encounters became rarer, she'd accept things that had no obvious value, but which might become useful in the future. Small things that the crawlers had dug up and fixed – trinkets, really. Tokens of goodwill. She opened spaces in her hull, discarding weaponry and certain engine parts. Strangest of all was a thing that wove nanomachine viruses, using the organic DNA molecule to store impressive loads of information. A Factory had dug it out of a bioweapons laboratory.

The years kept on passing. Time was speeding up for her, she realized. Her circuits were dying, albeit slowly. It took her longer to think about things. She was wearing out, failing, beginning to clock the internal damage that the Factories had postponed for so long.

Ironically it was only now that history was restarting on the ground.

As the sky began to heal, small bands of nomads left the seaboard cities for the war zones. She studied their migrations from above the clouds, occasionally sending down nano-remotes to probe their languages and learn their histories. They went out in winter, when cloud cover was thickest. Wise. She'd learnt from accessed military data that the radiation in the wastelands – what they called the Empty – was dangerously high. Even in winter, there were still hotspots; isotopes leaking from ancient wrecks. They didn't understand much of that – they'd lost all written records of the prewar world, while the archives had been ruthlessly corrupted. They relied on the spoken recollections of the old, the Pastmasters. *Naturally*, said one of her minds. *The oral storytelling tradition's strong in us...*

She learned that they called the war the Hour, after all the time that had passed. The minds argued and opined ceaselessly. The people on the ground were savages. No, they were striving to reconstruct former glories. No, *savages* – look at them. And images flickered from nowhere through her mind. She saw a white building, scalloped like some beached shell, splintered now and fallen, waves lapping its curved flanks. She saw the people on the ground looting its treasures. *Savages*, said the dead voice trenchantly. *I conducted a symphony where they're pissing...*

Screw your symphony. My company built half the towers down there – now look at them! Spinifex up to the third floors... squatters in the penthouses...

Bastard capitalist! You made the machines that did this, don't forget...

Friend, it's one of my bloody machines that's keeping you alive, though God knows why...

She closed her mind to the clamour, only boxing it so that it echoed more noisily. She understood *why* they argued. They were frustrated, locked in her while the living scurried below. She'd made a mistake in studying the nomads; reminding the dead of their own lost humanity. They'd begun to crave life again, turned embittered by the survivors. Yes, she understood – but she didn't like it. She preferred dealing with the Factories. They understood. The machines had never known any other kind of life, anything other than the calm warmth of the Empty. She'd saved the dead – now they were at each other's throats, squabbling in her.

You're a traitor to your own species...

She began to weed out the noisiest, erasing their smartware memories. It was a strange feeling, their hectoring voices stalling in mid phrase, gradually dying on a reverberating note. She thought of the city lights dimming on the globe she'd hawked all day through Cockatoo's Crest, realized that was a memory out of time, a dream within a dream. She erased the men who had made machines like her, and was about to erase the musician, when some compassion made her still herself. The others started noticing, shutting up quickly. She felt freer now, lighter. She knew that was how they felt, inside her. They'd more room in which to expand. They seemed to sigh, collectively.

We're sorry... they said. *We were selfish... you rescued us from oblivion, and we ignored you...*

She told them she understood, but the weeding of the others had been necessary. *In my youth*, she said, *I took the minds of the powerful, because I was a thing of war. But now I have no need of their guidance. I took your minds because I wanted to recreate what you'd been, for your own sakes. Because I hoped to learn from you.*

But we're still the dead...

I know. But I don't know how I can help you live...

And they swarmed among themselves, and returned to her, many mikes later. *We have an answer*, they said. *But you may not like it...*

She returned them to the Empty. It was winter, the sky lowering with grey clouds, lightning pricking the horizon constantly. They shadowed a nomadic tribe, outlaw raiders who never returned to the cities, even in summer. They survived by robbing the traders who journeyed out to forage. The minds within her had formed a collective by now, a consensus personality. She herself could be seen as an aspect of it, one facet. They shared the same smart-

ware (though by now it was organically based neural tissue, a benign mould that she'd engineered with the nanomachinery, slowly transforming her dying circuits). If two minds share the same substrate, they'll blur and merge like ink on blotting paper. She was them. They were her.

They had a plan in mind.

The raiders were a family; she'd tracked their movements through the interior for most of the last hundred and thirty years. She'd been monitoring their genetic makeup for almost as long, sampling the individuals of each generation with mosquito-sized miniatures of herself that could flense skin from a cheek and suck blood from the tiniest of wounds. The raiders were in poor shape. For a while she tried medicine, introducing viruses that gave them invisible, unsuspected gene therapy. Attempting to correct their inwardly spiralling incestuous gene-bank, and slowly failing. They began to die out. They didn't know what was happening, only realizing that their children weren't developing normally. Some they slaughtered; an atonement ceremony directed at the sky, at the angels of death known as the Enolas. That part was the strangest: it was as if they'd forgotten just who had made the machines like herself, or even as if they'd somehow *elected* to forget, by warping their oral recollections down the generations until the truth was hidden. The hands and minds of men had made their world just the way it was, yet they'd shifted the blame onto figurative demons from the sky. As if, now that the world was a simpler place, there was no compulsion to recall the atrocities of the past. And no time for guilt either, she observed, for they showed little compassion over the sick children they left behind in the sands as their caravans moved on.

But she was sick herself. She'd repaired her mind, but her body was still failing. She was slow now, prone to black-outs during solar flares. Finally she reached one of the children before the dunes covered its sleeping form for good, or the dogs of the Empty came out for the night. It wasn't breathing when she found it. She brought it within herself, nursed it to a kind of vitality. She mapped its mind, understanding soon that there was grave damage to the brain, starved of oxygen. No pattern there, nothing on which a life could be imprinted through learning and sensation. This was what she had expected. The child was a *tabula rasa*. She would not, she decided, be denying a particular life by her actions. Any more than a composer denied the world the infinite symphonies that fell between his inked notes.

She released a virus into its blank glial tissue, and waited for nearly eight megaseconds. The virus wove a neural framework, then began to unpeel information coded in its DNA, in order to structure memory and personality into the developing mind.

She knew – they knew – that the virus could never transfer more than a fraction of a percent of what they'd become, and that what they'd become was still far from life. But the child, the girl, would contain their shadows. *Like a canvas overpainted, many many times*, said the artist in her. And the girl would carry ghosts of their past selves until the day she died, though as she grew her own personality and force of will would sublimate, subsume. She'd carry them as trinkets, as the machine had carried them in the air.

Later in the winter she found Kodaira's family, camped near a waterhole. She wasn't flying by then; it was all she could manage to leave the child where they'd find it, sterile Kodaira and his ill wife, before something made the sky darken to a shade of black she'd never imagined before, and the voices in her were suddenly, calmly silent. But she dreamed that part from afar.

Lucky was awoken by her uncle, sitting gently by the side of her bed. He'd been there a while; she could tell. Just looking at her, a doting silhouette against the dawn sky, purple washed over by tangerine.

"You were restless," he said. "I came to see you. But when I got here you were sound asleep. Guess I just wanted to sit and watch you sleeping."

"I had the bad dream again," she said.

"You were sleeping like a log."

"It's only a bad dream in the beginning," she said. "Then the people all get to live again, after being in the air for so long." Realizing as she said it that it sounded *dumb*, baby language. But how could you explain a dream like that? Especially when she'd had it so many times before, though maybe not so frequently this summer. She sat up in bed on her elbows. "Uncle," she said. "You said the Enolas were a bad thing, didn't you. The same thing that the people in the skyscrapers say. But I don't know why... what did the Enolas do to make them bad?"

He smiled. "Well, that's a long story, isn't it. And look – I can see the sky getting brighter. Soon the birds'll be singing. Don't you think you should go back to sleep?"

She shook her head defiantly. "Tired of sleeping."

He shrugged. "All I know is what the Pastmasters tell me, darling. If I could read – maybe I'd find a few books that didn't fall to pieces as soon as you opened them. Maybe I'd be able to guess if they were right or wrong. For now, though, I only know what they tell us all. About the past, about the Hour and the Enolas. How they came from space, at the end of the longest peace the world had known. How there were two great cities in the islands to the north, and how, within a few days of each other, Enolas appeared over the cities and made them disappear in silver light. How the people were blinded, how they became shadows on the walls where they'd stood. How when the light faded, there was *nothing*, just a flatness where the cities had stood."

He reached out and took her wrist, opened her palm and began to draw spirals in the skin with his finger. "The Enolas came again, yet without the element of surprise. The Makers defended us, fighting against the Enolas during the Hour. Shooting them from the sky – they weren't invincible, you see. A great city like this – much of it still as it was before the Hour, because the Enolas couldn't get close enough to shine their silver light. The years passed and the Enolas grew less frequent. They were vulnerable as well." Kodaira was silent for several moments. "Old people have to have something to live for, darling, but it shouldn't give you nightmares, not any more." He grinned; she could see his crooked teeth in the half-light. "When's the last time you had a bad dream about a dinosaur, I wonder?"

She giggled at the thought of it.

He tickled her palm, then knelt closer to kiss her on the cheek. "Darling, once Enola was a girl's name. A lovely name, not one for a demon of terror. When you were born, no one had seen one of the sky machines for many years, no one that you really believed. Now, our friends all call you Lucky, and that's what you were, very lucky for me to have found you in the sands before the night came. But when we returned to the city, we called you Enola, to give back the name to something we cherished. Maybe you'll never call yourself by that name, I don't know. But I know one thing, here and now. You're too beautiful by far to have any nasty dreams, my little princess Enola."

He left her then, as the dawn sun began to pick out the golden threads of the balloons, miles across the city. She slept peacefully, dreaming of the coming day, of the smell and noise of Cockatoo's Crest, of the music of the syrinx-boxes, the rainbow-shimmering faces of the dead people, of the empty sky.

Alastair Reynolds wrote "Nunivak Snowflakes" (*IZ* 36) and "Dilation Sleep" (*IZ* 39). He lives in St Andrews, Scotland, where he has recently completed work at the university towards his PhD in astronomy.

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The Druid of Shannara

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A Punner at the Well

John Clute

Five words into *Jago*, and we begin to wonder. Half a page onwards and we begin to think we know it all. And maybe we do. **Jago** (Simon & Schuster, £14.95), which is Kim Newman's eighth novel in something like three years, introduces a Christian minister half a breath into its first sentence, which in any horror novel almost certainly guarantees a great deal of diseased ecstacy of the sort typically generated by the minions of any desert sect dead scared of women and the flesh; and a paragraph or so downwards into the depths we are further given to understand that the Reverend Mr Timothy Charles Bannerman has gathered, with his flock, in the middle of winter, in the middle of the night, in the middle of the 19th century, in the middle of the country, around a bonfire. This sort of shenanigan bodes ill, as we know, for any Christian (god bless the dears).

"Epileptic flickers lit the insides" of this ominous blaze, we learn, "and dancing black bars of shadow were cast upon the villagers." Sure as shooting, this little escapade is going to end in tears: and there's more to come, here in highly rural Somerset. Bannerman *likes the fire*. "The vicarage library was in there. The collected sermons of his predecessors could serve no better use, and there would be little further call for novels, tracts or bound periodicals." Soon we hear rumours of a Burning Man, and confluences of psychic intensity jiggle the titties of the Christian maidens, and a general sense begins to dawn – promulgated by the minister – that the end of the world is nigh, and that only the righteous – him, in other words, and the other Christians of his singularly nasty little flock – will survive the moment of reckoning. But the night passes; clothes are cast off; fornication occurs; and the world does not dissolve. The terrible sourness of the agenbite of shame now afflicts the Christians, right on schedule. And the Prologue to *Jago* is done. It has ended in tears.

We begin the real book, which is very long, and which we fear. The Prologue, which ran twice as long as it needed to, had already alarmed us: not only because it can take an awful lot of pages for someone as skilled and fluent (and other things we'll get to) as Kim Newman to run out of words; not only because we were not exactly enthralled at the thought of having to spend an entire book in the company of Christians with damp underpants; but also because Kim Newman is so good at being a professional writer that we hardly noticed the impersonality and the poisonousness of the tale he seemed to be beginning to tell us. The words of storytelling seem to be his to play with; narrative conventions his to rule. He is dangerously in command of his gifts, and as the pages pass, a savage servility – to quote Robert Lowell – slides by like grease, and the text eases us into the nada nada of horror with a moue of slithery steel, a dangerous craftsmanlike courtesy, and we figure Kim Newman Novel-Spouter Inc grinning like a dapper little bastard, to quote someone who couldn't stand Mozart and no wonder, and here we are, stuck inside the mobile lips of a tale we do not particularly wish to hear whispered, subliminal and chill, like an extremely expensive coffee ad, into our dream of reading. And so we begin the real book, which is set in the latter decades of our own dear haemorrhage of a century, and we feel something very close to fear.

And indeed there are things to worry about. *Jago* has already laid itself out in the Prologue as a horror novel whose denouements will – because of the Christians – almost certainly invoke the dire incoherence of Revelations; and because Kim Newman is a professional writer more than half in love with the conventions of popular literature and classic cinema, we know that it will be very difficult for him to avoid keeping faith with the laws of genre horror he has so conspicuously invoked. Moreover, he introduces, very quickly, a large and variegated cast of characters, which means two things right off: one) he is writing a bestseller-style book, for at the heart of every bestseller-style book lurks a cod Narrenschiff; and two) a lot of people are going to die. We meet Paul and Hazel, newish residents of Alder; Paul is completing a dissertation on "The End of the World in Turn-of-the-Century Fiction," and Hazel is a blah potter. We meet Teddy and Terry, good brother and bad brother, both of whom speak rural cute. We meet a passel of shagged-out leftovers from the sixties, en route to Alder to take part in the rock festival being mounted at the end of this singularly hot – greenhouse-hot – summer. We meet the Maskells, the dominant farmers in the locality, who are still treated as newcomers after quite a few years. And we meet various members of the Agapemone, a name which designates both the sect they espouse and the abode of love – the large house on the hill – where they live and worship their Beloved, whose name is Jago.

About the tenets held by the Agapemone it is hard to say anything at all, and certainly Newman doesn't do more than fill their mouths with a glossary of those awful things pentecostal Christians say when the milk has gone sour. After the manner of this sort of Christian, the members of the Agapemone think it's high time for the rest of us to start paying for their sins, and anticipate the end of the world with pasty relish. About Jago himself, Newman is clearer and more clever, and it is a relief; it is the first relief – other than the compulsed joy of reading a book whose competence is very great – that we have been afforded. Jago, we learn, is an extremely powerful "psychic prodigy," a man capable of imposing his version of reality on the world around him, just like some godling out of Philip K. Dick.

"Everyone," explains a less powerful psychic spy seconded by the incompetent British government to monitor him, "has dreams, fantasies, beliefs. Around Jago, they become concrete things. Monsters, angels..." And once we understand that, we understand the entirety of the surface of the book, as the rock festival coincides with the Apagemone's apotheosis, and the shit hits the fan. We understand why Paul sees Martian war-machines straight out of the original magazine version of *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and why these machines are solid. We understand how it is that Maskell – haunted by the destruction of his beloved farm through yet another of the man-made droughts that plague our time – metamorphoses into a Green Man as gnarly as any Rob Holdstock dream of Britain instrinsicate with root and briar and other stuff. We understand how it is that corpses can stroll into town, mean boys turn into wolves, slags turn into Circes. We understand how it happens that the vilest visions out of *Revelations* can trudge, cliché-pustulant, through human fields, reaping human corn, chewing the eyes and sweetmeats of those of us who are not saved. We understand that – although the surface tale of *Jago* leads irrecoverably into the nada nada of horror, into the terrible banality of bigthink genre Evil – there must have been *some* reason for writing the book. Or why did Newman bother to write all this highly superior stuff?

I'd suggest two motives – if motives can be defined as ley-lines within the text itself. The first lies in the sense that the Narrenschiff castlist of *Jago* constitutes a kind of spectrum, that the almost total lack of any *content* in the Agapemone's philosophy constitutes a kind of analysis of certain parallel poverties in the real world outside the book, and that the drooping fatuity of the secular response to the crisis created by Anthony Jago constitutes a kind of indictment of the ideological paralysis that currently famishes our own real land. *Jago*, in other words, is a Condition of Britain text; and as such it chants a devastating litany of losses. (If the horror novel has one virtue, it is perhaps that it mocks theodicy.)

The second motive ley-lining through the text is precisely the text itself, the joyfulness of the telling of the thing, the lucid wordplays of a writer whose puns are not composts of word-soil but paronomasias of genre. Let me explain. There are – it could be argued – only two kinds of creative writers in the world: the horizontals and the verticals. Horizontal writers (like Thomas M. Disch) are what one might call the lucid dreamers of literature. Vertical writers (like Shakespeare, for whom each word breaks vertically into layer upon layer of notes so that he seems to be dreaming several melodies at the same time) are what one might call the paronomastics, the punners at the well of being. Kim Newman is a paronomastic, though one of a very strange order, because his puns do not connect word to word but genre to genre. What his ear catches is not the etymology or the sound-horizon of the word "itself," but its generic location. The genres he registers are popular literature and popular film. In *Jago* they meet, in the quiet of a paronomasia which flows like breathing. Verbal and visual echoes of films throng the pages of the book, incest sisters of the telling, sound-chambers of the act. Paronomasia is the secret of the strangely hermetic fluency of Kim Newman, which breeds in the acceleration of the pun. He spun *Jago* because he could not resist reeling.

Notes. It took only a high heart and good memories of *Expecting Someone Taller* (1987) to open Tom Holt's latest comic novel, **Flying Dutch** (Orbit, £12.95), but it took some grit to finish the thing, just as it must have taken all the gumption Mr Holt possesses to keep on at the task. Not that the story is that bad, as conceived in outline, perhaps. It is a very straight repeat of *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?* (1988), a tale even better than its aerated predecessor.

A figure out of legend – this time it is the Flying Dutchman – is brought – in this case simply *perseveres* – into the modern world where, accompanied by a crew of fixedly comical extras and a girl who comes to love him, he takes the 20th century straight down to the laundromat and gives it a wash. But this time the brew gells and freezes shut. Cornelius Vanderdecker himself fits uneasily into the template of the rumpled but secretly charismatic leader; Holt cannot for the life of him figure out any particularly good reason to keep the girl who loves him anywhere near centre stage; the Dutchman's quest for the immortal alchemist who accidentally dosed him into living forever, so that he can be relieved of the burden, is very hard to generate comedy out of; and everywhere the writing shows a powerful – and as it were almost animate – reluctance to keep on writing. (I kept seeing a cartoon quill with a Muse on Strike sign stuck into its feather.) Holt is far too intelligent an author to write books that sound as though he were sorry he'd started, but *Flying Dutch* reads like, at moments, like just such an artefact. Pure willy-nilly. All the same, now and then, you could laugh aloud. But I doubt that's enough for Holt.

Karen Joy Fowler's **Sarah Canary** (Holt, $22.00), an excerpt from which appeared in *Interzone* 42, now unfolds its full and sumptuous glory. The structure of the book, with its interlinking palimpsests of alienation hovering around the deeper alien within its text, can now be properly apprehended, for the *Interzone* episode could do no more than hint at the depths from which the alien – the woman – the Chinaman – the Other speaks. I've already reviewed *Sarah Canary* elsewhere, and can say no more now than to repeat one claim I made: that it was perhaps the best First Contact novel ever written.

And that it claws itself from the swaddling clothes of sf like a butterfly.

(John Clute)

Examined Assumptions
Mary Gentle

Some real science fiction this time around.

Janet Kagan's **Mirabile** (Tor, $18.95) has a wonderful opening line – "This year the Ribeiro's daffodils seeded early and they seeded cockroaches." How can you resist that kind of hard-science surrealism? The explanation of it lies in the plot: ecological stock carried by a colony starship has recessive genes genetically engineered into its DNA material, capable of breeding under the right conditions ("chaining up to," in *Mirabile*'s patois) another entirely unrelated animal or vegetable lifeform. On the colony world of Mirabile it isn't the Earth-authentic cows and corn that are the problem. It's the effect of alien conditions on earth DNA which then produces hybrid species, "Dragon's Teeth," some cute and some dangerous, which are currently being trouble-shot by the narrator of the stories, Annie Jason Masmajean.

The idea of secreting genetic material inside DNA and breeding hybrids is respectable hard-science speculation at the moment. I remember an article speculating on the possibility of breeding a combined duck *à l'orange* with genuine duck and genuine oranges. There's a credibility problem with *Mirabile* in that it's difficult to believe that *no* native lifeforms (right down to the microscopic) are dangerous to the colonists, given an ecology that allows earth plants and animals to flourish. Unfortunately the reason for the lack of danger is to be sought elsewhere than plot-logic.

Maybe this should be called a less than wonderful *adult* novel. *Mirabile*'s narrative tone is fixed firmly in the juvenile, right down to the coy scenes of "necking" between the middle-aged protogonist and her (there is no other word) boyfriend Leo. Perhaps Annie Jason Masmajean spends so much of the book being substitute mother to a relentless stream of cute prepubertals and adolescents that it would seem faintly improper to have her use the vocabulary of steamy sex. But even books for adolescents do not benefit by enshrining the shape of adolescent hang-ups in their narrative tone.

It was around the umpteenth geddit joke – was it Mama Jason and her Dragon's Teeth, or Kangaroo Rex or Frankenswine? – that I realized *Mirabile*'s charm had begun to pall. There are a few real dangers on Mirabile, no evil people – they are all misunderstood – and a distinct surplus of cute kids and a gronking dodo. It's *cosy*. Boy, is it cosy. It's the kind of book written not for children or for young adults, but for old adults who don't want the harsh realities of life intruding on their folksy tales. And although the courtship of Mama Jason and the exploits of her adoptive family run through all six stories in a novel-plot, the structure of each section (troubleshooter finds menace, troubleshooter is threatened by menace, troubleshooter saves/destroys menace) is so repetative that you'd be better off leaving a good space of reading-time between the sections.

Heavy Time (New English Library, £14.99) is C.J. Cherryh doing something she is good at – the forlorn male – a trope which has been turning up in her fiction at least since Nhi Vanye in the Morgaine books. Here it's Dekker, deep space miner, whose partner

Cory has been killed in what the Company claim is an asteroid-belt navigation accident, and he maintains was an off-course, illegal Company ship. Dekker is found in the smaller wrecked ship, semi-conscious, and is for much of the book disabled by grief and guilt; a damaged innocent.

One of the Merchanter novels, and something of a novel of character, *Heavy Time* is best where it concentrates on the relationship between Dekker and the two Belter miners who salvage his ship and rescue him. Morris Bird, the older man, is Earth-born; which in these terms means prodigal of his resources, his charity, his kindness. His younger partner, Ben Pollard, is the asteroid belt's version of a yuppie, a man who cannot understand why they should waste resources on Dekker when he can't profit them, and can bring them into conflict with the all-powerful Company. The belt is a place of strained resources, humans living on the edge both physically and politically, and Dekker's story, ship, and evidence start a cascade through the social system of pilots, company men, military, and Earth government – his partner Cory, it seems, was the daughter of an Earth senator...

The usual union-and-boss struggles of the Cherryh universe are on-going. Most of the players in the game have mixed motives, to say the least, which also applies to the personal relations – are Bird's pilot friends Sal Aboujib and Meg Kady his friends purely because he can put business their way? It would have been good to see more done with the female characters in this novel, their potential interest is not fully exploited. *Heavy Time* is good on the nuts and bolts of life aboard a space station, where increasing levels of gravity finally culminate in Earth-normal. Pilots, used to months in weightlessness, adapt by stages back to gravity, their time spent at One-G being the "heavy time" of the title. And a heavy time of trouble, too.

If there is a problem here it's the one science fiction is often accused of, which is portraying yesterday's tomorrow. *Heavy Time* is pretty exactly the tomorrow of the mid-1970s. The information revolution hasn't hit the asteroid belt, and there's no hint that the genetic engineering taken for granted in *Mirabile* has even been thought of. The rebellious youth of the "Rabfad" are an odd combination of punk dress, ageing hippie sensibilities, and analogue nuclear angst. Too, in the post-cyberpunk era one feels somehow a little abandoned if there is no mention of interfaces, networks, mainframes, and hackers – they should be there, if not as the focus, then as the background which sf must sketch in. And there is no echo of the present right-wing backlash either, the politics are unchallenged mid-Left. The whole feel of the novel had me looking to the copyright date, but 1991 is what it says.

There may be some difficulty in dealing with Storm Constantine's **Aleph** (Orbit, £7-99) since it deals in an unchallenging way with a touchy subject. The prior novel, *Monstrous Regiment*, postulated a minefield of a what-if. What if you had a feminist utopia and it didn't work? With its leather Dominatrix, hatchet-faced bulldyke generals, and femme protagonist, even the manner of planet Artemis's failure was itself one of our clichés.

Aleph picks up the story after Corinna Trotgarden and the would-be egalitarian marsh-dwellers have moved up north from the capital city of Silven Crescent, set up "Freespace," and started to suspect the influence of Artemis's indigenous lifeform. *Aleph* explains the ultimate origins of the Greylids, by way of a plot that brings back Corinna's ex-girlfriend, General Carmenya; and introduces the male representative of an offworld tourist firm, Zy Larrigan, scouting the feminist utopia for potential sites for the local equivalent of the Holiday Inn. You *have* to love *Aleph* for that tourist agency alone. That and the shamblefracks. The book is a glossary of wonderfully silly names.

The plot meanders among sexual encounters, tropes of alien sexual attraction, and male and female castrati. *Aleph* improves considerably on *Monstrous Regiment* by having Corinna, experience gained, at least a mover and shaker in the plot. But what the novel does, essentially, is to say that the white, western, 20th-century received perception of male and female natures (not to mention lesbian separatism) is, by and large, true. Science fiction can say that, of course. But not, as it used to say on old maths test papers, without showing your working-out.

Sheri S Tepper's **Raising the Stones** (Grafton, £14.99) has its fair share of silly names but is otherwise well written and very satisfying. The settlers of Hobbs Land, a Company-owned worldlet, arrived in time for the last of the native inhabitants, the Owlbrit, to die out, leaving only their last statue-God and temple behind. The God becomes a kind of monument or pet, until it finally dies. After a period of stress, Settlement One builds a replica temple...

This is only where a very complex plot begins. The stages by which the nature of the Owlbrit deity become known, its material substance, and its effects, are interwoven with the stories of Maire Manone and her son Sam, refugees from Voorstod. Voorstod is a world based about half and half on apartheid Afrikaaner and Islamic fundamentalist cultures, those being, I suppose, the people whom it is safe to have wearing the black hats these days. And Hobbs World and Voorstod are set in a small universe of diverse cultures, and some spectacular nastinesses, among a functioning trade economy, a creaking bureaucracy, and a very strange military indeed.

The novel cheats somewhat by making its main male protagonist (in a matrilineal society where children have no fathers, only uncles, and men lives in lodges apart from the women) into a father-obssessed son from Voorstod, the ultimate patriachy. Where *Aleph* demands no explanations for gender roles or human wickedness, *Raising the Stones* decides that we fall into two categories: the hardwired-for-evil, and the easily-led. As for aggression – well, men do that, don't they? *Women* don't do that. Women may be active, but are naturally co-operative.

Yeah, right.

For a novel that chooses fundamentalists as its villains, *Raising the Stones* has some remarkably authoritarian solutions to problems. I suppose what is curious is that all the tropes of golden age science fiction are here – mind-control, bio-engineering, alien takeover, forcible limitation of human aggression – without the inherent paranoia. Whether these tropes approach the heroic is something the book may or may not finally seek to constrain us into deciding.

Having had the four women writing hard sf, one therefore must have the token male writing fantasy. David Eddings' **Seeress of Kell** (Bantam Press, £14.99), volume 5 of *The Mallorean*, is essentially a re-tread of what has gone before – all ten books of it. When Eddings wrote the Belgariad he was hardly original but had a handy way with characterization. These days he is simply twee, with only the occasional incorrigible rogue to show flashes of the talent operating before Eddings went respectable on us. *Seeress of Kell* has nerve, though – if you're worried about why we keep doing the same things over and over, characters tell each other, it's because Time itself can't move on until we've reached our own plot-resolution!

Seeress of Kell cheats the reader. One would not, for example, write hard sf without researching the hardware. Eddings takes us to a lost island of Mimbrate knights chiefly to re-hash the fallacy that swords weigh a ton, and an armoured knight is helpless if he falls off his horse. Given that one of the medieval tests of knighthood was vaulting onto your warhorse in full armour...

Eddings in this book perpetuates also a "jolly" autocracy and a slave-women-selling-herself routine which

are perilously close to that other master of fantasy style, John Norman. It would only take a degree less attention to the actual realities of the situation. Nor does the fact that it is intended for humour really defuse the danger. *Seeress of Kell* has the ambiance of the 1950s, or maybe even the 1930s, where men go out of the room to boil water while "their wives" have babies, and women "triumph over" men by forcing them into marriage. There is a particularly offensive conclusion in which 90% of all known female characters sprog at the same time. I have a dreadful feeling this was meant to be heartwarming, but it hit me about six inches further down.

The question has to be asked, why do people in their multiple thousands read this series? Not for the originality of Eddings' fantasy world, since it isn't. Not for his prose, and not for dramatic suspense – there is not even a bare pretence made that Evil stands a fighting chance. Not for his characterization, since his people are (as was said in another context) well-behaved aunts and uncles looking after conformist nieces and nephews. Not for the consolation of seeing Good victorious, because we've seen it all before: yet *another* permanant victory of Light over Darkness...

The key, I think, is that the reader-identification characters in Eddings go around *being significant*. They *matter*. They have roles assigned to them through cosmic prophecies – the Eternal Man, the Bearer of the Orb, the Man With Two Lives, the Woman Who Watches (you will wait in vain, I feel, for the Woman Who Kicks Ass). The universe has waited for their arrival, it hangs on their efforts, it is saved, or at least perpetuated, by their not doing very much more than be themselves. Fate and happenstance bend themselves into granny knots to get the chosen guys to the right place at the right time. The universe is, quite literally, arranged for their convenience.

Now, in a world of anomie, accidie, and downright impersonal bloody-mindedness, who wouldn't want to identify with that particular wish-fulfilment? **(Mary Gentle)**

Outing the Elfs
Wendy Bradley

In these days of outing I have decided the time has come to "out" a few celebs of my own, but I feel in the interests of justice I ought first to come out myself and admit that I too am, in fact, a elf. Let's get that straight, short-ears, that's a glottal stop after the "a" and before the "elf": your filthy decadent (rats!) letter "n" has no place in the elfish alphabet. Also it's elfish, not "elven," elfs and not "elves," and the correct insult to apply to the rest of you is, obviously, "short-ears" rather than "round-ears." I wish these fantasy authors would get it right. Nor are we all fey milksops with cats-eyes and silver tights. I mean, a elf gotta paaartyy too, you know? There are more of us about than you would think: check the number of people whose hairstyles *do* reveal the tops of their ears – you think Knopfler wears that headband for fun? We get everywhere, from King Elfred and his cakes to Michael Elfick and Sir Relf Richardson, not to mention the greats like Elf Garnett and of course Elfis himself.

So now that we are Out, I have to tell you that we aren't going to put up any longer with this effete image you insist on foisting upon us. Take **The Elvenbane** by Andre Norton and Mercedes Lackey (Tor, $19.95). Well, at least it ends eventually, although there will be lots more since Tor are already plugging it as "destined for best-sellerdom." Ha! Not after my spell to inflict everyone who buys it with nasal warts, if I can only find the right amount of bat spittle (ever tried buying it in bulk?). The plot has sentient dragons, evil elfs, enslaved humans and feral halfblood wizards, each race with a separate kind of magic. The heroine is the accidental daughter of the strongest elf and a feisty human, raised by dragons to think she is one of them. Then comes the revolution and you can probably write the rest yourself. The horrifying thing is that this... object...is actually much *better* than your average short-ears effort.

As for **Street Magic** by Michael Reaves (Tor, $18.95), it is about faeries loose on the Streets of San Francisco. Well, I ask you dearie, who would notice? Juvenile fantasy with a rather satisfying end: well, the good end happily and the bad unhappily and it *does* end. Street kid is really a changeling elf and is therefore vitally important to the scatterlings who travelled between elf and human worlds before queen Maeve closed the gallitraps (gates) and thoughtfully informed the world via a schlock fantasy novel (quoted at not terribly amusing length). This novel within the novel is written by a Mr McTosh. Does tosh not mean "tosh" in the States?

Sometimes, mostly when you leave us out of it, you short-ears come up with something worth reading like a Barbara Hambly novel (although come to think of it have you ever seen the tops of *her* ears?). Her **The Rainbow Abyss** (Grafton, £14.99) is a book with a sequel, so don't get too excited when the plot starts to thicken in the last few pages as she isn't going for the "fastest plot resolution" award. However the tale of a wizard in a world where wizardry is both an inborn and so irresistible force and yet an unremunerative and unpopular activity that leaves its practicioners subject to persecution and occasional "fruging" by the inhabitants is satisfying in itself, especially the love-interest plot which doesn't wither away as it often does in this sort of tale. I like the lead characters and especially the quick-witted heroine and I'll look out for the sequel, but it's not vintage Hambly. However, that means it's still better than run-of-the-mill.

I did find I was intrigued by **Albion** by John Grant (Headline, £14.95) which begins promisingly and seems at first to be about the nature of memory and consciousness, making your brain hurt like *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*. A shipwrecked sailor lands on the mythical island of Albion where he discovers that the peasant inhabitants have memories no more effective than those of animals. They work, eat, sleep without motivation or desire except in the presence of their rulers, the Ellonia. However people from the outside world such as himself have the power, like the Ellonia, to fix their memories. Once the peasants remember they are alive they also know they are enslaved, and in time it is the outsider's son Lian who leads the inevitably doomed revolt and, even later, it is Lian's daughter Anya who wins. Several technical difficulties: we first meet Lian as he is being tortured to death when his rebellion fails and so it is difficult to get involved with the first half of the book when our foreknowledge makes the idea of becoming involved with him so rebarbative. Anya's revolt in the second half is hedged about with unmotivated elementals deux-ex-machining all over the place. A good idea poorly executed.

I haven't seen R.A. MacAvoy so I can't comment on the length of her ears but she writes as though she may be One of Us. In her **Lens of the World** (Headline, £14.95) the Triune God appears to the hero in a dream: God the Father, God the Mother and the God Who Is In Us All (a small baby who pisses on his shirt). It is a nice concept typical of what is basically a growing-up story where Nazhuret ("Zhurrie"), a boy with the usual mysterious origins, is taken in hand by the equally usual mysterious mentor, Powl, a kind of irascible anarchic Obi Wan, and taught lens grinding and arcane methods of meditation and combat. The third element of the character trinity, the mysterious companion Arlin, both appealed to me and surprised me, and overall I thoroughly enjoyed this slightly mannered but absorbing book. The sequel, however, **King of the Dead** (Morrow, $19) I found to be a bit less interesting and a bit too

"more of the same," particularly heavy on the old "and so everyone is a long lost relative of everyone else" trick. Powl pops up again, nearly as convincingly as Obi Wan does in *The Empire*. Roll on volume three (but can Arlin have a few more lines please?)

And finally **Dream Finder** by Roger Taylor (Headline, £14.95) is one that might actually be worth paying hardback prices for. Antyr is a young drunk but he is also a Dreamfinder – that is, he can go into people's dreams and recall them, accompanied by his Companion, the wolf Tarrian who guards his body while he is absent from it and whose spirit guards and guides his in the dream worlds, via some mechanism that is not fully understood by either or by the guild of which they are members. Antyr becomes involved in the politics of (vaguely Athenian) Serenstad and (vaguely Spartan) Bethlar when called on to read Serenstad's Duke Ibris' dreams. Riders from the northern plains, led by evil Ivaroth under the influence of a blind man who may be some kind of demon, are invading the whole territory and softening up Bethlar by creating a religious fanaticism fostered by Ivaroth meddling with its leaders' dreams. Antyr develops his talents in opposition to Ivaroth when Ivaroth tries the same trick on the Duke's dreams and those of his son Menedrion. There is also the Duke's bastard son Arwain and a whole raft of absorbingly done courtly politics, and I even managed to stay interested in the mysterious band of warriors in Arwain's bodyguard. My favourite character was the Companion of another Dreamfinder – the fierce bad rabbit Kany. I haven't met anyone but a elf who could get mileage out of a *rabbit*. This is good, grownup stuff; more please. I guess you short-ears *are* good for something, after all.

(Wendy Bradley)

Eco-Techno-Thriller

Andy Robertson

Collaborations have always been difficult. Sometimes the cross-fertilization leads to a happy event, but more often it produces a camel. The best books seem to be the product of more-or-less similar writers – Niven and Pournelle, Pohl and Kornbluth – but sometimes really different talents do yield good work.

It would be hard to find a more different pair of British sf writers than D.G. Compton and John Gribbin, and so I picked up **Ragnarok** (Gollancz, £14.99) with some trepidation. It's a variant of the scientist-holds-the-world-to-ransom-to-force-it-into-sanity plot, familiar from works like Bob Shaw's *Ground Zero Man*. The threat is a big nuclear weapon on the sea floor near Iceland, which could cause a volcanic eruption large enough to shroud the Northern hemisphere in a years-long winter; the sanity involves massive nuclear disarmament and a rather ill-defined dollop of do-something-to-fix-the-environment. Needless to say it all goes awry, with nasty Libyan terrorists avid to detonate the bomb, sexual attraction between the crew of the bomb ship and the locals, attacks from the American and Russian military, and general confusion and mayhem.

The book is not sf. It's a near-future techno-thriller (but with a small dollop of good sf at its core), squarely aimed at a mass market of readers of books like *The Seventh Winter* or *Down to a Sunless Sea*. As far as I can judge, it is a reasonably good example of the type. The plot is well handled, the background feels right, and the characterization is reasonable, though too many people are carefully built up through the book only to be tossed aside well before the end. But the *feel* is absolutely contemporary, and any attempt at conceptual revolution is subordinated to the need not to frighten off the potential audience. The D.G. Compton of *The Continuous Catherine Mortenhoe* and *Synthajoy*, the limner of desolate internal landscapes warped by inhuman technology, did not contribute much to this book. On the other hand I must admit that the basic idea about the volcanic eruption is excellently presented, well explained, original, and might even work, and I assume this is down to hard-sf Gribbin.

It's best to judge the book as an attempt to popularize and dramatize nuclear and ecological threats, and it is perhaps unfair that these have both become rather *passé*. The end of the Cold War has made people less afraid of nuclear destruction, while a wet cold summer has quite unfairly cost the Greenhouse Effect most of the popular credibility which it gained, equally unfairly, from a couple of hot dry ones. In fact the near-future setting of the book particularly weakens the eco-doom theme. There are a few pages, no more, debating the reasons for the protagonists' actions, but nothing that actually *shows* the awful changes that are supposed to be motivating them. Sea level rising and global warming are mentioned in an abstract sort of way, but there are no flooded cities, no deserts in Southern Europe or North Africa, no gigantic storms – because to put these things into a very-near-future story would draw far too much attention to the fact that they simply are not happening (not yet, anyway). There is some attempt to pretend that North African migrants to Europe are running away from desertification rather than depressed economies, but this does not convince: the nuclear bomb is supplied by an obviously wealthy Libya. The nuclear disarmament theme is more honestly and more cogently argued, I think, but it is even more skimpily treated.

To some extent all this is excusable. For instance, if you want to make the punters afraid of sea level rising, it doesn't do much good to tell them that it's going up by two millimetres a year and might, if we are really unlucky, rise by as much as eighteen inches in the next century. Eighteen inches doesn't sound like anything important, but eighteen inches actually means thousands and thousands of square miles of valuable land, so some circumlocution, and some exaggeration to a level that *does* seem important, is allowable. And anyway, you don't expect a totally balanced picture in an obviously and avowedly partisan book.

But the book also includes some wrong-headed ideas. It is implied that the economic destruction of the First World would help the Third: this is self-flagellating nonsense. The direct and indirect consequences would be terrible, since the USA and Western Europe are the grain-basket and factory of the world, the only large areas that can regularly export a sizeable surplus of food, and several hundred millions of the Third World's poorest would promptly die when they could no longer import food, medicine, and machinery.

There would be even more serious effects than this in the long term, and though this is a review, it's worth taking time to explain why. In the last thirty years alone, the average standard of living in the Third World has more than doubled, and the average life expectancy has gone up fifteen years. In parallel with the increase in living standards has come a fall in fertility: from a lifetime total of six children per woman in the 60s, down to four today. Far from the North *impoverishing* the Third World, this improvement is due to its trade and its technology. The improvement is continuing (and is the basis of the UN estimates that the world population will stabilize some time around the middle of the next century), but the economic destruction of the First World would reverse it. The effect on population growth rates would be disastrous. The world's population, currently set to stabilize at around ten billion, would spiral out of control: and real eco-devastation would follow.

Unfortunately these facts have no part in Green policies or Green propaganda. It seems to be a matter of faith that poverty is caused by industrial

development, but it's a faith which has nothing to do with reality. The truth is just the reverse – that the only hope of getting population growth down fast enough to avoid real problems lies in the most rapid economic expansion possible, even if that causes some ecological disruption.

Ragnarok left me just as sympathetic to CND as before, but rather confirmed me in my belief that the Greens are so badly misled by their own propaganda as to have become more of a problem than a solution. I have enjoyed the work of both these authors in the past, and I hope to do so again in the future. I really wish I could round this review off favourably, but I don't think I can.

(Andy Robertson)

Another Big Bang off Iceland

John Gribbin

First, let me declare a special interest. I know a lot about volcanoes and their effects on climate. After 20 years reporting this aspect of climate change in non-fiction terms, I recently put all my hard-won knowledge into a novel, *Ragnarok* (co-written with D.G. Compton) which describes (among other things) how a major Icelandic eruption could initiate a new Ice Age. So when *Interzone* sent me for review, with malice aforethought, a novel purporting to describe how a similar volcanic eruption triggers rapid global warming, my initial reaction was panic. Does Max Marlow know something I don't know? Do explosive volcanic eruptions actually make the world hotter, not cooler?

But my heartbeat soon returned to normal as I read **Melt Down** (NEL, £14.99). The answers to the above questions are, respectively, "no" and "no." Indeed, on this evidence Max Marlow doesn't know his neck from his elbow. He doesn't know anything about science or the way scientists work, he has scant idea of how to develop a plot, and to describe his characters as two-dimensional would be to overemphasize their resemblance to real people.

First, the science. Since it is well-established science fact that explosive eruptions cool the Earth because sulphuric acid droplets spread through the stratosphere and reflect away incoming solar energy, it would be an intriguing sf idea to develop the opposite scenario, with eruptions making the world warmer. I've half an idea how this could be dressed up plausibly to confound scientific opinion in a story with some intriguing twists and sidelights on scientists at work. But that isn't what Marlow provides. Through his characters (and the God-like voice of the author) he tells us, without justification, the opposite – that "ash" in the stratosphere traps heat and boosts the greenhouse effect. This is rather like having as a central part of the story, without justification, the "fact" that opposite magnetic poles repel (again, a neat idea for a real story!). He then tells us that the particular fictional ash cloud in question is trapping huge amounts of heat that would otherwise be radiated into space over the Arctic in winter. This bears thinking about. Where, after all, does the surface of the Earth get its heat from? The Sun. And what is it that is conspicuously not visible from the polar latitudes in winter? You guessed it.

Then, Marlow has his fantastical warming of the Arctic cause disruption to Europe and America by melting all the floating sea ice in a matter of weeks. Perhaps he has never watched an ice cube melting in a drink, nor heard of Archimedes. Floating ice displaces its own volume of water; melt all you like, and sea level stays the same. Of course, melting the Greenland ice might raise sea level. But ice is a good insulator, and even if the temperature in Greenland rose well above freezing and stayed there it would take a long time to melt the glaciers – the resulting sea-level rise would be about 20 centimetres, over several decades. Not *quite* enough to overwhelm the Thames Barrier in the way described here.

But who cares about the facts if the story is good and the action and characters hold our attention? Well, try this for size. The only contact we have with science in this story is through an American climatologist, Mark Payton, who is presented as a TV pundit. So much so, in fact, that he comes across as a TV pundit who happens to know a bit about science, rather than the other way round – an obvious, clumsy attempt to cover up Marlow's own ignorance of science and scientists by writing about something he has seen, TV. And yet, our first meeting with Payton is through the eyes of TV watchers observing "his feet stretched out towards the camera, the velcro-fastened sneakers looking hugely out of proportion." And *this* is supposed to be an experienced media manipulator? When was the last time you saw Carl Sagan sticking his feet up the camera lens?

The rest of the characters are less believable. A British merchant navy officer with a girl in every port suffering Adrian Mole-like pangs of angst as he falls in love for the first time. The object of his affection, a girl so dull I have already forgotten her, and a sister who just happens to become emotionally involved with the "scientist." I think that's right. One of them dies, but nobody who reads the book could possibly give a damn which one; pity they didn't all get the chop, as far as I'm concerned.

The best thing about *Melt Down* is the dialogue. Well worth reading aloud. It provides some of the most unintentionally funny paragraphs I've seen in a long time.

> "You have a son," she whispered.
>
> "A son?" he shouted. "But that's marvellous. Oh, my darling!" He held her close, felt her stiffness, slowly laid her back on the pillow. "He's not...all right?"
>
> "He's fine, Geoff. Just fine. So they say. But...he had a sister."
>
> "Twins?" His mouth hung open. "Liz, my darling. When did you know..."
>
> "About an hour before they were born."
>
> "Where are they? I want to see them."
>
> Her face twisted again. "Him."
>
> Geoffrey stared at her, and felt her fingers tighten on his.
>
> "Oh, my darling."

The twins, needless to say, were conceived the first time Geoff and Liz actually made love. Just like real life. On learning the news, of Liz's pregnancy, Geoff had responded with the delicacy and tact you'd expect of a sophisticated 1990s man: "Wow! Are we well matched! I touch you for the first ime and *bingo* you're ignited."

There's hope here for all readers of *IZ*. If rubbish like this can get into print, then surely there must be a chance for anyone who has ever wistfully wondered about trying to become a published writer. Dig out those half-finished stories you were too ashamed of to show your friends, make up an alliterative *nom de plume* to go on the front, and rush them off to NEL at once. If they paid good money for *Melt Down*, you *must* be in with a chance!

Note: If you want to know more about climate change, see my book *Hothouse Earth* (Black Swan); if you want a good story of ecodoom with interesting characters and plot, it's still hard to beat J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*.

(John Gribbin)

Simply the Year's Best

Jones & McIntosh

Another year – 1990 – and another best sf anthology from Gardner Dozois, **The Year's Best Science Fiction: Eighth Annual Collection** (St. Martin's Press, $27.95 hb; $15.95 pb; published in the UK by Robinson Books as *Best New SF* 5, £7.99 pb). And this time around it's the only one: the

death of Don Wollheim meant the end of his long-running best-of anthology, while David Garnett's excellent Yearbook was cancelled by its publishers, Orbit – a real shame as the field needs more than a single such collection. One consolation, at least, is that the Dozois volume is a *big* book, with 25 stories (and over 250,000 words) of imaginative fiction. Although British publications aren't neglected, the vast bulk of the stories come, not surprisingly, from American sources and a lot of *those* come from *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* – 10 out of the 25. Most of the other big-name magazines – *Analog, Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Amazing* – only score one apiece, along with original anthologies such as *Zenith 2*, although *Interzone* along with the glossies, *Omni* and *Playboy*, manage to clock up two each. Since Dozois is *IASFM*'s editor, this dominance could well make some people feel uneasy, especially now there's no rival volume around. Reading is the acid test, however, and the story quality ranges from good to superb. So, even if Dozois is buying many of these stories for the second time around, there's no doubt that he has put together an anthology that fully lives up to its title.

The book kicks off with "Mr Boy," by James Patrick Kelly, a dazzlingly inventive story, superbly realized, which centres around the idle rich of a future America who have the opportunity to be literally anyone – or anything – that they want. Few writers would dare cast their hero's mother as a three-quarters scale replica of the Statue of Liberty, let alone hope to carry it off. Kelly does it all with aplomb and leaves his readers hungry for more.

Although "Mr Boy" fully warrants its lead position in the book, there's plenty of stories here that could run it a close second. "We See Things Differently," Bruce Sterling's chilling story of an Iranian assassin in the alien culture of America, shone amidst the dross of *Semiotext(e)* and does so again in much stronger company. "Inertia" by Nancy Kress is a powerful and affecting story of human interaction that builds from simple ideas – a ghetto of disease-ridden mutants who eventually prove healthier than the society that has quarantined them. Very much stranger but just as effective is Dafydd ab Hughes' "The Coon Rolled Down and Ruptured his Larinks, A Squeezed Novel by Mr Skunk," where, as a by-product of an unspecified holocaust, animals have risen to a sentient half-grasp of the principles of civilization. Pat Murphy's "Love and Sex Amongst the Invertebrates," by contrast, is set in a much grimmer post-holocaust, one in which the only hope left is to introduce machines to the joys or otherwise of copulation. Alexander Jablokov's story of life and death by cloned proxy, "The Death Artist," is almost too complex for its own good, with layers of storyline splitting off from the central core, but the imaginative power of Jablokov's writing still keeps it up among the front runners. Also, there's John Kessel's "Invaders," which is an interwining of Incas and aliens known as the Krel – including one who calls himself Flash and dresses in a familiar red superhero suit – as well as a meditation on the mind-warping and addictive powers of sf.

Interzone's two entries are both up there among the best: there's Greg Egan's astonishing "Learning to Be Me," which topped last year's readers poll, and the fine "Past Magic" by Ian R. MacLeod, which came high on the same list. It's been a very good year for both these writers: Egan also wrote "The Caress," which makes imaginative and chilling use of the chimera concept and is also in this collection (as well as "Axiomatic" from *IZ* and the brilliant "The Safe-Deposit Box" from Dozois' own *IASFM* which should have been); and MacLeod is the only writer to get stories (and *different* stories at that) into the three best-of anthologies this year (that's the Dozois, the Datlow/Windling *Fantasy & Horror*, and the Jones/Campbell *Horror*).

Of course, with the Garnett Yearbook having been shot down on active service, there's much less danger of overlap with other best-of books. In fact, there's only a single story, "The All-Consuming" by Lucius Shepherd and Robert Frazier, which appears in another anthology – the Datlow and Windling companion volume that covers fantasy and horror. This details the coming of a mysterious Japanese to a poisoned mutant South American rain forest and his attempt to reach an understanding of the jungle – by eating it. Weird and wonderful and well worth reading in whatever collection you spend your money on.

There are also two Nebula award-winners here, and deserving ones: Terry Bisson's "Bears Discover Fire" is an apparently simple tale about – well, bears discovering fire, but underpinning the text are subtle, moving observations on human relationships and a fast disappearing way of life in rural America; and Ted Chiang's "Tower of Babylon," rich in detail but also smoothly readable, is all about a crew of miners who climb the tower of the title, built after generations of labour, to finally breach the vault of heaven.

Last and by no means least in the collection comes Joe Haldeman's "The Hemingway Hoax," an ingeniously plotted speculation upon the fate of a would-be literary fraudster, pursued through parallel universes by the temporal guardian who must prevent him from completing his work. It's the longest story in the book, and, although it does come apart rather unsatisfyingly towards the end, for most of its pages it's a very impressive and entertaining ride. Haldeman's pretty good on his Hemingway, too.

Most of the writers represented here are American, but, in addition to the Ian MacLeod already mentioned above, there are three more stories from Brits: John Brunner's "The First Since Ancient Persia," from *Amazing*, which is basically just a good yarn on the familiar lines of the strange-goings-on-at-the-remote-research-station; Ian McDonald's Bradbury-esque "Rainmaker Cometh," which went some way to redeeming an otherwise disappointing *Other Edens III* (but was, at least for us here in Britain, a 1989 rather than a 1990 story); and Michael Moorcock's "The Cairene Purse" from the excellent *Zenith 2*, a long leisurely tour of near-future Egypt which stands up very well to a second reading.

Weak points? Well, yes, but only in the relative sense, because even the less impressive stories here would stand out in the average anthology. For instance, there's Robert Silverberg's ocean-set "Hot Sky," an almost textbook evocation of an eco-ravaged Earth; Lewis Shiner's "White City," a stylish look at Nikolai Tesla and doings electrical near the turn of the last (alternate) century; Charles Sheffield's smoothly readable "A Braver Thing," which deals with the nature of genius, scientific discovery and morality; and Molly Gloss' "Personal Silence," potentially very powerful, which doesn't quite succeed in fusing together its two disparate themes – a solitary anti-war protester on a silent pilgrimage, and a child who sees other lives. Sandwiched between some of the stories already mentioned above, these clock in as merely very good.

Then there are some big names with stories that are, it almost goes without saying, very well written: Kate Wilhelm's "And the Angels Sing," whilst a well-crafted meeting-the-alien tale, is nevertheless one we've probably all read a time or two before; "Cibola" by Connie Willis is neat, wryly observed but also predictable and ultimately rather lightweight; and Ursula Le Guin's "The Shobies' Story," the latest addition to her Hainish series, is, as you'd expect, worthy, but also – dare we say it? – just a shade dull.

Still, any choice of stories for a "Year's Best" collection – as well as a *review* of the same – is going to be subjective, and while we wouldn't necessarily have included all the stories Dozois has selected (and might, in fact, have made a substitution or four), we wouldn't argue that the book richly deserves its best-of-the-year tag. Interestingly, comparing Dozois' choices with the annual *Locus* best-of-

year poll (which scores stories on the basis of readers' votes), almost all of them placed high on the novella, novelette or short story lists – the only exceptions appear to be Ian McDonald's 1989-vintage story, the Molly Gloss (somewhat surprisingly, in our view), and Jonathan Lethem's "Walking the Moons," a brief but telling look at virtual reality which Dozois found in the American small-press magazine *New Pathways*. Also, a look at the *Locus* poll also helps to show why there are so many *IASFM* stories in this book – an impressively large number of stories on the poll first appeared in that magazine, a lot more than Dozois has been able to include here.

Taken as a whole then, this book provides an excellent snapshot of sf for the year in question, suggesting that the field is in very good shape indeed. Also, it includes an introduction which gives a detailed survey of the sf world, circa 1990, plus an interesting, if occasionally wayward (there's that subjectivity again) honourable mentions list. Best of all, it delivers some marvellous reading, with several outright gems and absolutely no duds – as we said at the start of this review, this is a very big book but you finish it wishing that there was more, which has to be as good a recommendation as we can give. So, buy it. If you don't enjoy this, then you really shouldn't be reading sf.

Now for the hard bit – which of us two gets custody of the baby?

As *Interzone* approaches a decade of publication (on which, congratulations) **Interzone: The 5th Anthology** (New English Library, £5.99) is with us. And not before time by our calculations, since the previous anthology (reviewed in *IZ* 33) appeared almost two years ago. Now that the magazine has gone over to monthly publication, the editors (in this case John Clute, Lee Mongomerie and David Pringle) have a far greater range of work to choose from, and the thirteen reprint stories here span issues 28 to 38. As you'd expect from the track record established by the previous four volumes (and of course the magazine itself) it's a strong collection, with stories that (mostly) make good reading the second time around.

For instance, there's David Brin's "Piecework," an impressive speculation on the possible industrial applications of (modified) human sperm and ova; and Karen Joy Fowler's "Game Night at the Fox and Goose", a chilling piece of sexual subterfuge that stood out amongst the stories in the "Sex Wars" issue.

Coincidentally, several of the new writers discovered by *IZ* are represented here by their (very strong) *second* published stories: there's Richard Calder's "Mosquito" (which went onto further publication in *Omni*); Ian Lee's "Once Upon A Time in the Park" (every bit as weird and wonderful as his first, "Driving Through Korea"); and Ian R. MacLeod's moving "Well-Loved." And then there's "Visiting the Dead," which was William King's first (and so far only) *IZ* appearance to date, and strong enough to suggest that a second story from this man is long overdue.

Also on offer are Ian Watson's "The Eye of the Ayatollah" and Nicholas Royle's "The Sculptor's Hand," both of which remix some recent (well, not quite so recent now, perhaps, but still pertinent) events to form the basis of their tales. Plus there's Kim Newman's "Twitch Technicolor," Phillip Mann's "An Old Fashioned Story," Ian McDonald's "Listen," and the to us disappointing "One Way to Wap Wap" by Neil Ferguson and "A Life of Matter and Death" by Brian Aldiss.

Like its immediate predecessor, the fifth anthology also offers some all-new stories. "Looking Forward to the Harvest" by Cherry Wilder, set in a relatively upbeat post-holocaust world, centres around two brothers with the ability to see into both past and future, whilst "Light" by Barrington Bayley is a tightly written, claustrophobic exploration of alienation and sexual repression. Both stories score well on attention to character and detail, and both merit their place here. But – we said it about the fourth anthology and we'll say again about this one – combining reprints and originals does beg the question of exactly which readership this anthology is intended for. If it's meant for the reader who has somehow managed to pass *IZ* by, then why not an all-reprint collection? On the other hand, why should any *IZ* subscriber who wants to read these two stories (and surely many might) be expected to spend almost six pounds for the pleasure? It's a gripe which fell on deaf ears at the time of our review of the fourth *IZ* anthology and such is the power we sf reviewers wield that we confidently expect it to do so again.

(Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh)

UK Books Received

August 1991

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone *during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.*

Allen, Roger MacBride. **Orphan of Creation**. Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-4959-8, 345pp, paperback, £4.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) *22nd August.*

Allen, Roger MacBride. **The Ring of Charon: The First Book of the Hunted Earth**. Orbit, ISBN 0-356-20120-1, 500pp, hardcover, £14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) *22nd August.*

Anthony, Piers. **Virtual Mode**. "The first novel in a new series by the Creator of Xanth." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-246-13860-2, 335pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) *19th September.*

Attanasio, A.A. **The Last Legends of Earth**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-06914-3, 557pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1989.) *12th September.*

Aycliffe, Jonathan. **Naomi's Room**. Harper/Collins, ISBN 0-246-13892-0, 173pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; "Jonathan Aycliffe" is a pseudonym for Denis MacEoin, aka thriller writer Daniel Easterman [see his article under the latter name in *Interzone* 51].) *21st November.*

Barker, Clive. **Imajica**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-223559-5, 854pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) *17th October.*

Bear, Greg. **Queen of Angels**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-984770-1, 474pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 41.) *5th September.*

Cadigan, Pat, Karen Joy Fowler and Pat Murphy. **Letters from Home: Stories**. Introduction by Sarah Lefanu. Women's Press, ISBN 0-7043-4280-4, 233pp, paperback, £6.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; contains half a dozen reprinted stories by each of the three authors; one, Pat Murphy's "His Vegetable Wife," first appeared in *Interzone*.) *22nd August.*

Card, Orson Scott. **Xenocide**. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-4774-0, 463pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; sequel to *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead*; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 52.) *5th August.*

Casti, John L. **Paradigms Lost: Images of Man in the Mirror of Science**. Sphere/Cardinal, ISBN 0-7474-0967-6, 565pp, paperback, £6.99. (Popular science text, first published in the USA, 1989; deals with origins of life, social patterns, language, thought, intelligent life elsewhere, etc.) *19th September.*

Chalker, Jack L. **Songs of the Dancing Gods**. "Volume Four in the Dancing Gods Series." Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-4962-8, 322pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) *22nd August.*

Claremont, Chris. **Grounded**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31281-2, 352pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; sequel to *First Flight*.) *September?*

Clarke, Arthur C., and Gentry Lee. **Rama II**. Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-4826-5, 495pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1989; sequel to *Rendezvous with Rama*.) *22nd August.*

Clarke, Arthur C. **2001: A Space Odyssey**. Based on the screenplay by Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-4776-7, 301pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf novelization, first published in 1968; this edition has the same contents as the mass-market paperback which Legend issued about a year ago: a foreword by Clarke dated 1989, and the addition after the main text of the short stories "The Sentinel" [1951] and "Encounter in the Dawn" [1953].) *12th September.*

Collins, Nancy. **Tempter**. Futura, ISBN 0-7088-4968-7, 299pp, paperback, £4.50. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) *August?*

Dickson, Gordon R. **Wolf and Iron**. Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-4955-5, 468pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) *26th September.*

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **The Legend Book of Science Fiction**. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-5010-5, 672pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; contains reprint stories, ranging from classics by Damon Knight and L. Sprague de Camp in the 1950s to pieces by Michael Swanwick and Bruce Sterling in the 1980s; some of everybody's favourites are likely to be in here, including one, William Gibson's "The Winter Market," which appeared in *Interzone*.) *Late entry: 11th July publication, received in August.*

Eddings, David. **The Ruby Knight: The Elenium, Book Two**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20373-7, 444pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) *12th September.*

Fowler, Christopher. **Rune**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-972000-0, 368pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1990.) *5th August.*

Frakes, Randall. **Terminator 2: Judgment Day**. Based on a screenplay by James Cameron and William Wisher. Sphere, ISBN 0-7474-1032-1, 240pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novelization, first published in the USA, 1991.) *15th August.*

Garnett, David, ed. **New Worlds 1**. Consultant Editor: Michael Moorcock. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05134-5, 266pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; the relaunch of the famous magazine in paperback book form; on the back of the title page, it says in small "Vol. 62 No.217"; proof copy received; contains new stories by Brian Aldiss, Storm Constantine, Ian McDonald, Michael Moorcock, Kim Newman and others, plus an article by John Clute; recommended.) *26th September.*

Gay, Anne. **Mindsail**. Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8352-4, 378pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1990; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 41.) *12th September.*

Gemmell, David A. **Dark Prince**. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-3492-4, 451pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *The Lion of Macedon*; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) *12th September.*

Green, Simon. **Blue Moon Rising**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05136-1, 448pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) *12th September.*

Hartwell, David G., ed. **The Dark Descent: A Fabulous Formless Darkness**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-246-13753-3, 422pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Horror anthology, first published in the USA, 1987; contains distinguished stories by authors ranging from Turgenev to Disch; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; originally published in one huge volume, it's appearing in Britain in three parts [not two, as we mistakenly said in the "Books Received" of issue 52], of which this is the third.) *2nd September.*

Heinlein, Robert A. **Grumbles from the Grave**. Edited by Virginia Heinlein. Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-4960-1, 336pp, paperback, £4.99. (Collection of letters by the leading American sf writer; first published in the USA, 1989; contains a Foreword, "Short Biography" and interstitial material by the author's widow.) *22nd August.*

Holdstock, Robert. **The Fetch**. Orbit, ISBN 0-356-19699-2, 378pp, hardcover, £13.95. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received.) *5th December.*

Hubbard, L. Ron. **Fear**. "A novel of suspense." New Era, ISBN 1-870451-29-5, 188pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1951; it was originally serialized in *Unknown* magazine in 1940.) *15th August.*

Hutson, Sean. **Captives**. Macdonald, ISBN 0-356-19576-7, 478pp, hardcover, £13.95. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received.) *5th December.*

James, Peter. **Twilight**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05063-2, 316pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received.) *3rd October.*

Jefferies, Mike. **Shadows in the Watchgate**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-???, 366pp, trade paperback (?), £?. (Fantasy novel, first edition; third in the "Heirs to Gnarlsmyre" series; proof copy received; not only is much of the data missing from this set of proofs, but it's even unclear what the publisher's name is: it says "Grafton" on the book jacket and review slip, but it says "Fontana" on the title page; we thought HarperCollins were dropping both those names for anything other than mass-market paperbacks?) *7th November.*

Kershaw, Valerie. **Rockabye**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13676-X, 284pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1990.) *19th September.*

Knaak, Richard A. **Shadow Steed: The Dragonrealm**. Orbit, ISBN 0-7474-0815-7, 263pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) *26th September.*

Koontz, Dean R. **Shadowfires**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0427-6, 372pp, hardcover, £14.95. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1987; it originally appeared under the pseudonym "Leigh Nichols"; this hardcover follows hard on the heels of a mass-market paperback edition, listed here last month.) *12th September.*

Lloyd, A.R. **Dragon Pond: Vol III of the Kine Saga**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-969930-3, 201pp, paperback, £3.99. (Animal fantasy novel, first published in 1990.) *5th August.*

McCaffrey, Anne. **All the Weyrs of Pern**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02224-6, 494pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) *19th September.*

McCaffrey, Anne. **The Rowan**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13763-4, 320pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) *19th September.*

McCaffrey, Anne, and Jody Lynn Nye. **The Death of Sleep**. "Volume 2: The Planet Pirates." ISBN 0-356-20308-5, 380pp, hardcover, £13.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; proof copy received.) *14th November.*

Masterton, Graham. **The Hymn**. Macdonald, ISBN 0-356-19793-X, 346pp, hardcover, £12.95. (Horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 1991.) *12th September.*

Masterton, Graham. **The Walkers**. Sphere, ISBN 0-7474-0493-3, 345pp, paperback, £4.50. (Horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 1989.) *12th September.*

Meyrink, Gustav. **The Angel of the West Window**. Translated by Mike Mitchell. Dedalus, ISBN 0-946626-72-3, 421pp, hardcover, £18.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Germany, 1927; it concerns Dr John Dee, the Elizabethan magus; this appears to be the first English translation; there is a simultaneous paperback edition [not seen]; Meyrink was an Austrian best remembered as the author of *The Golem* [1915].) *12th September.*

Morrow, James. **Only Begotten Daughter**. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-4541-1, 312pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; see the interview with Morrow which appeared in *Interzone* 46.) *12th September.*

Peat, F. David. **Superstrings and the Search for the Theory of Everything**. Sphere/Cardinal, ISBN 0-7474-0583-2, 362pp, paperback, £5.99. (Popular science text, first published in the USA, 1988.) *19th September.*

Pratchett, Terry. **Wings**. "The final title in the nome trilogy." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-52649-5, 176pp, paperback, £2.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1990.) *19th September.*

Reeves-Stevens, Judith and Garfield. **Prime Directive**. "Star Trek." ISBN 0-330-31915-9, 406pp, paperback, £4.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) *September?*

Regis, Ed. **Great Mambo Chicken and the Transhuman Condition: Science Slightly Over the Edge**. Viking, ISBN 0-670-83855-1, 308pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Humorous popular science text, first published in the USA, 1990; it seems to deal with real science in a light-hearted way; the author is a frequent *Omni* contributor). *26th September.*

Silverberg, Robert. **Son of Man**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-04688-0, 192pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1971.) *12th September.*

Stephensen-Payne, Phil. **Clifford D. Simak: Pastoral Spacefarer – A Working Bibliography**. "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader Volume 39." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-28-9, 9+64pp, paperbound, £3. (Author bibliography, first edition.) *Late entry: June publication, received in August.*

Stephensen-Payne, Phil. **Roger Zelazny: Master of Amber – A Working Bibliography**. "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader Volume 38." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1- 871133-29-7, 9+65pp, paperbound, £3. (Author bibliography, first edition.) *August.*

Sterling, Bruce. **Crystal Express**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-972250-X, 317pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1989; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 33.) *5th August.*

Strieber, Whitley. **The Wild**. Macdonald, ISBN 0-356-20118-X, 315pp, hardcover, £12.95. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) *12th September.*

Sullivan, Thomas. **Born Burning**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31529-3, 262pp, paperback, £4.50. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1989.) *September?*

Thurston, Robert. **Way of the Clans: Legend of the Jade Phoenix, Volume 1**. "Battletech." Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-014892-2, 268pp, paperback, £3.99. (Shared-world sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) *5th September.*

Tolkien, J.R.R. **The Hobbit, or There and Back Again**. Illustrated by the author. Grafton, ISBN 0-261-10221-4, 285pp, paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1937; this first HarperCollins/Grafton imprint follows the text of the Allen & Unwin fourth edition of 1978.) *12th September.*

Tolkien, J.R.R. **The Lord of the Rings**. Illus-

trated by Alan Lee. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10230-3, 1193pp, hardcover, £30. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1954-55; this is the Tolkien centenary edition, which follows the text of the Allen & Unwin second edition of 1966; it contains 50 attractive full-colour illustrations by Lee ["a huge project – five years from conception to published work," according to the accompanying publicity]; to coincide, Grafton have also re-released the three constituent parts of the novel in mass-market paperback: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*, priced at £4.99 each, with revised maps but no illustrations.) *19th September.*

Wingrove, David. **Chung Kuo, Book Two: The Broken Wheel**. NEL, ISBN 0-450-55139-3, 620pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1990; reviewed by Gwyneth Jones in *Interzone* 45.) *5th September.*

Wingrove, David. **Chung Kuo, Book Three: The White Mountain**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-54992-5, 440pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) *5th September.*

Zelazny, Roger. **Knight of Shadows**. "The new Amber novel." Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-4957-1, 251pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989.) *22nd August.*

Overseas Books Received

Bennett, Mike. **A Cordwainer Smith Checklist**. "Drumm Booklet #37." Chris Drumm [PO Box 445, Polk City, IA 50226, USA], ISBN 0-936055-49-9, unpaginated (circa 40pp), paperbound, $3. (Author bibliography, first edition; "Cordwainer Smith" was, of course, a pseudonym for Paul M.A. Linebarger.) *No publication date indicated; received in August.*

Bova, Ben. **Orion in the Dying Time**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-51429-7, 356pp, paperback, $4.99. (Sf/fantasy novel; first published in the USA, 1990; sequel to *Orion* and *Vengeance of Orion*.) *August.*

Burgess, Scott Alan. **The Work of Dean Ing: An Annotated Bibliography & Guide**. "Bibliographies of Modern Authors, Number Eleven." Borgo Press [PO Box 2845, San Bernardino, CA 92406, ISBN 0-89370-495-4, 82pp, paperback, $12.95. Bibliography of an American sf writer, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) *December 1990 publication, received in August 1991.*

Card, Orson Scott. **Ender's Game**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-93208-1, 226pp, hardcover, $21.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1985; this edition contains a new introduction by the author.) *August.*

Card, Orson Scott. **Speaker for the Dead**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-93738-5, 280pp, hardcover, $21.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1986; sequel to *Ender's Game*; this edition contains a new introduction by the author.) *August.*

Gallun, Raymond Z., with Jeffrey M. Elliot. **Starclimber: The Literary Adventures and Autobiography of Raymond Z. Gallun**. "Borgo Bioviews Number One." Borgo Press [PO Box 2845, San Bernardino, CA 92406, USA], ISBN 0-89370-448-2, 168pp, paperback, $14.95. (Autobiography of a veteran American sf writer, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) *No publication date indicated; received in August.*

Kendall, Gordon. **White Wing**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-51770-9, 319pp, paperback, $3.99. (Sf novel; first published in the USA, 1985.) *August.*

Lafferty, R.A. **Mischief Malicious [...and Murder Most Strange]**. Illustrated by R. Ward Shipman. United Mythologies Press [Box 390, Station A, Weston, Ontario M9N 3N1, Canada], ISBN 0-921322-18-6, 70pp, trade paperback, $12.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; there is a simultaneous signed limited hardcover edition priced at $21 [not seen]; it consists of 11 stories, a couple of them previously unpublished anywhere.) *Late entry: April 1991 publication, received in August.*

Leiber, Fritz. **Conjure Wife and Our Lady of Darkness**. "Tor SF Double No 36. Two of this century's finest novels of dark fantasy!" Tor, ISBN 0-812-51296-0, 347pp, paperback, $4.99. (Horror omnibus; first edition; the two novels were first published in the USA, 1953 and 1978.) *August.*

McCaffery, Larry, ed. **Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction**. Duke University Press, ISBN 0-8223-1158-5, 387pp, hardcover, $49.95. (Anthology of sf stories and criticism, first edition; contains fiction by Acker, Ballard, Burroughs, Cadigan, Delany, DeLillo, Gibson, etc., and non-fiction by Baudrillard, Jameson, Leary, Lyotard, etc.; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at $17.95 [not seen].) *January 1992.*

Paxson, Diana L. **The Mistress of the Jewels**. "The First Book of Westria." Tor, ISBN 0-812-54866-3, 503pp, paperback, $4.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition; contains the novels *Lady of Light* and *Lady of Darkness*, both first published in the USA, 1982.) *August.*

Perry, Steve. **Conan the Formidable**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-51377-0, 274pp, paperback, $3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; a sequel by another hand to Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Conqueror* [1950], etc.) *August.*

Potts, Stephen W. **The Second Marxian Invasion: The Fiction of the Strugatsky Brothers**. "The Milford Series, Popular Writers of Today, Volume Fifty." Borgo Press [PO Box 2845, San Bernardino, CA 92406, ISBN 0-89370-279-X, 104pp, paperback, $12.95. (Critical study of the leading Soviet sf writers, Boris and Arkady Strugatsky; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) *No publication date indicated; received in August.*

Saberhagen, Fred. **The Mask of the Sun**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-51357-6, 234pp, paperback, $3.99. (Sf novel; first published in the USA, 1979.) *August.*

Smith, L. Neil. **Henry Martyn**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-50550-6, 437pp, paperback, $4.99. (Sf novel; first published in the USA, 1989; although this is a space opera, the author acknowledges "the works of Rafael Sabatini, Michael Curtiz, Errol Flynn and C.S. Forester.") *August.*

Tem, Steve Rasnic. **Celestial Inventory**. "Drumm Booklet #36." Chris Drumm [PO Box 445, Polk City, IA 50226, USA], ISBN 0-936055-47-2, 54pp, paperbound, $4. (Fantasy novella [?], first edition; there is a simultaneous signed limited edition priced at $7 [not seen].) *No publication date indicated; received in August.*

Wolfe, Gene. **Letters Home**. U.M. Press [Box 390, Station A, Weston, Ontario M9N 3N1, Canada], ISBN 0-921322-24-0, 185pp, trade paperback, $13.95. (Letter collection, first edition; there is a simultaneous signed limited hardcover edition priced at $45 [not seen]; it consists of letters written by sf writer Wolfe to his mother during his service in the Korean War.) *Late entry: June 1991 publication, received in August.*

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Note: *The Small Ads and "Coming Next Month" box are on page 60 of this issue*

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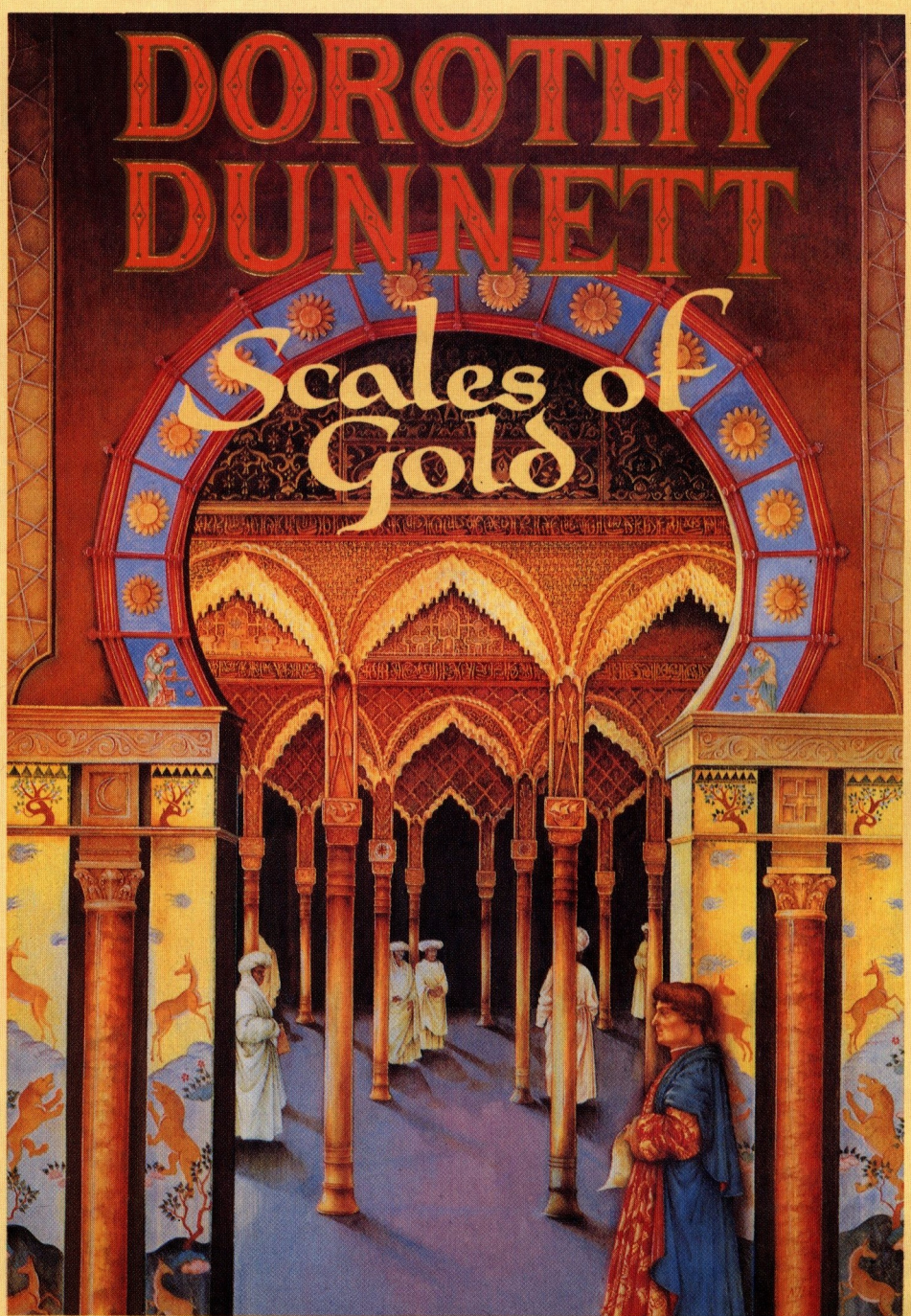

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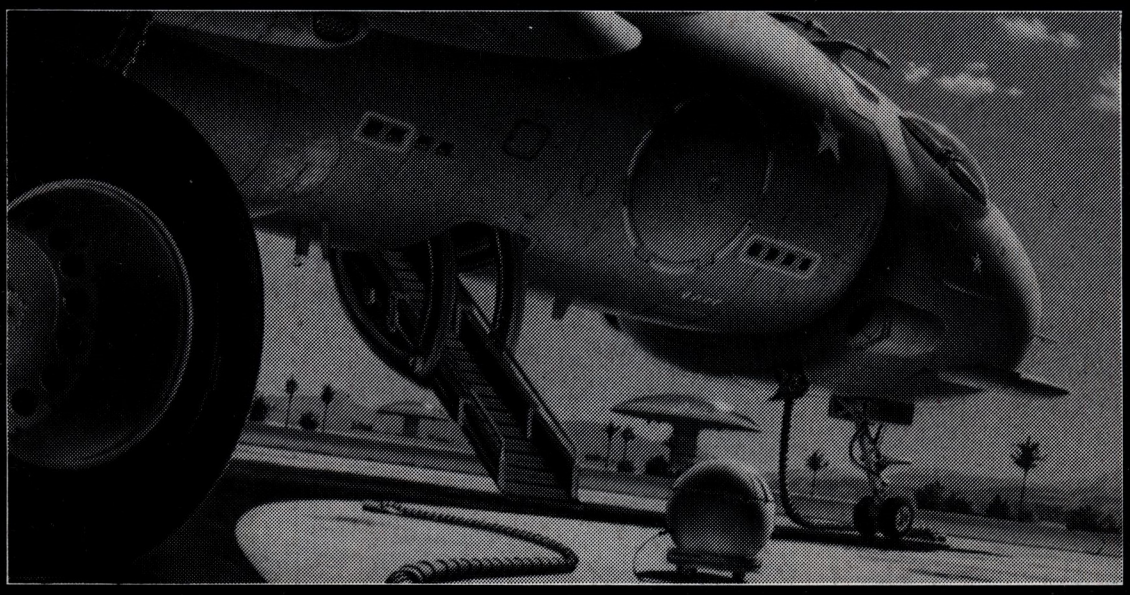

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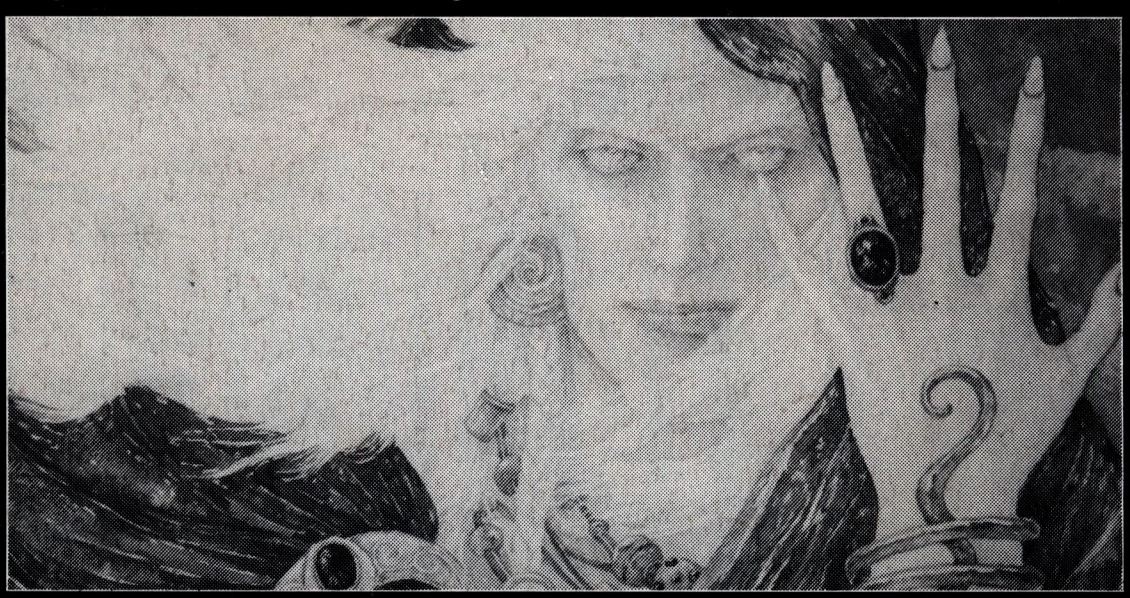

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