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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

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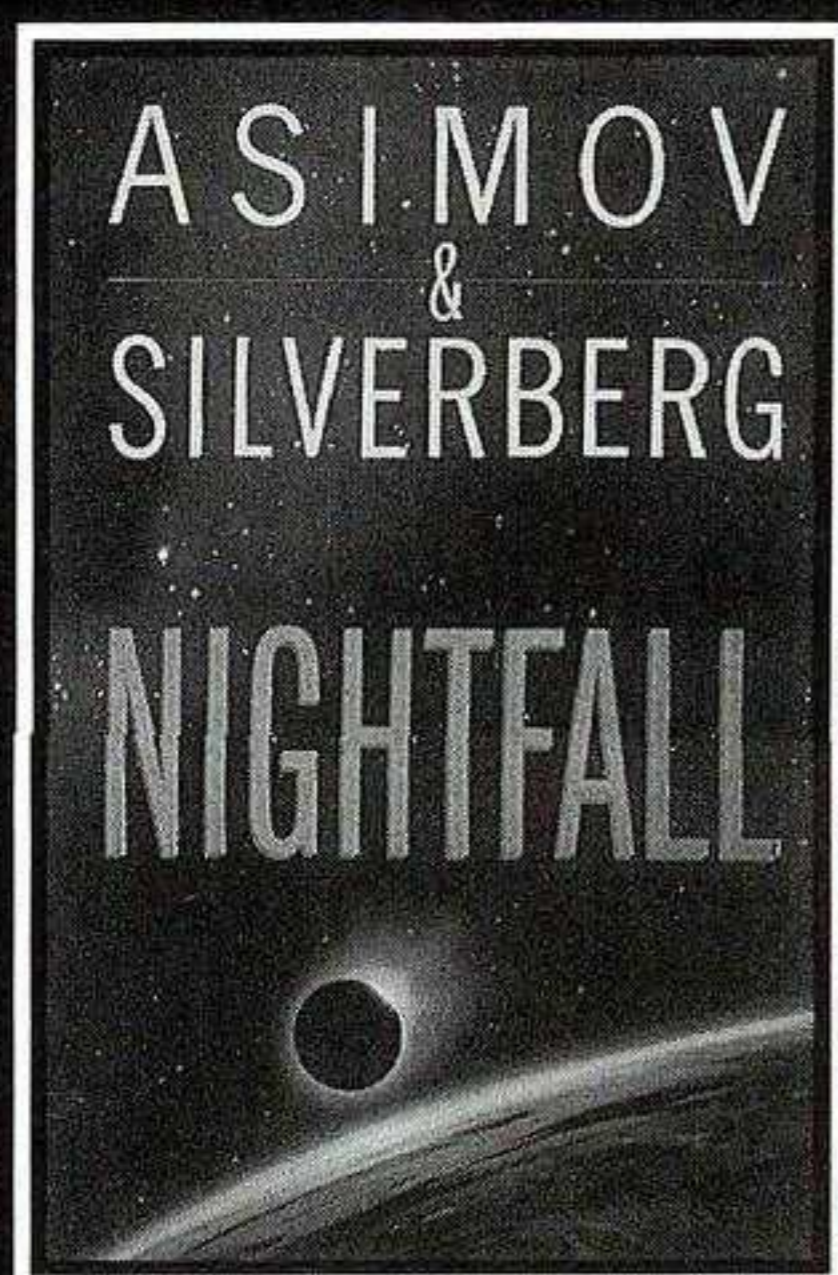
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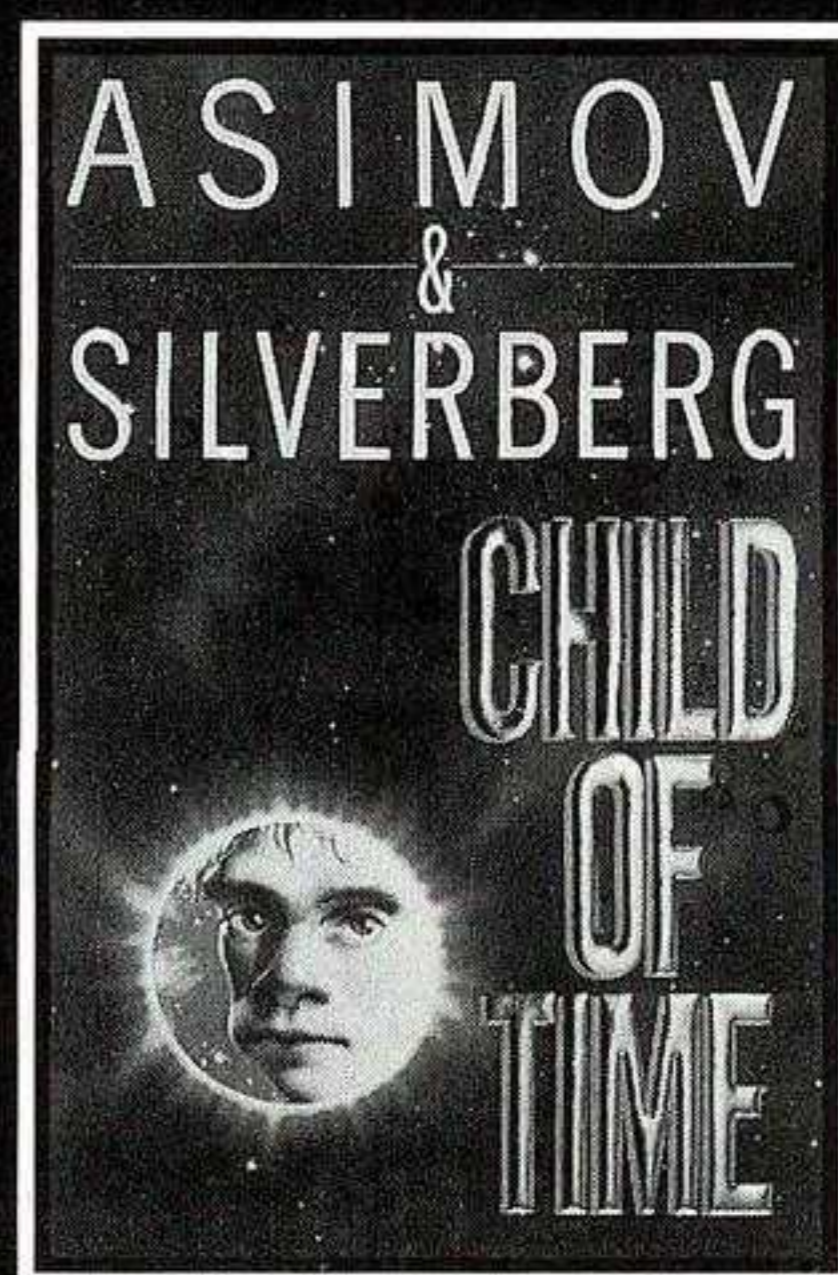


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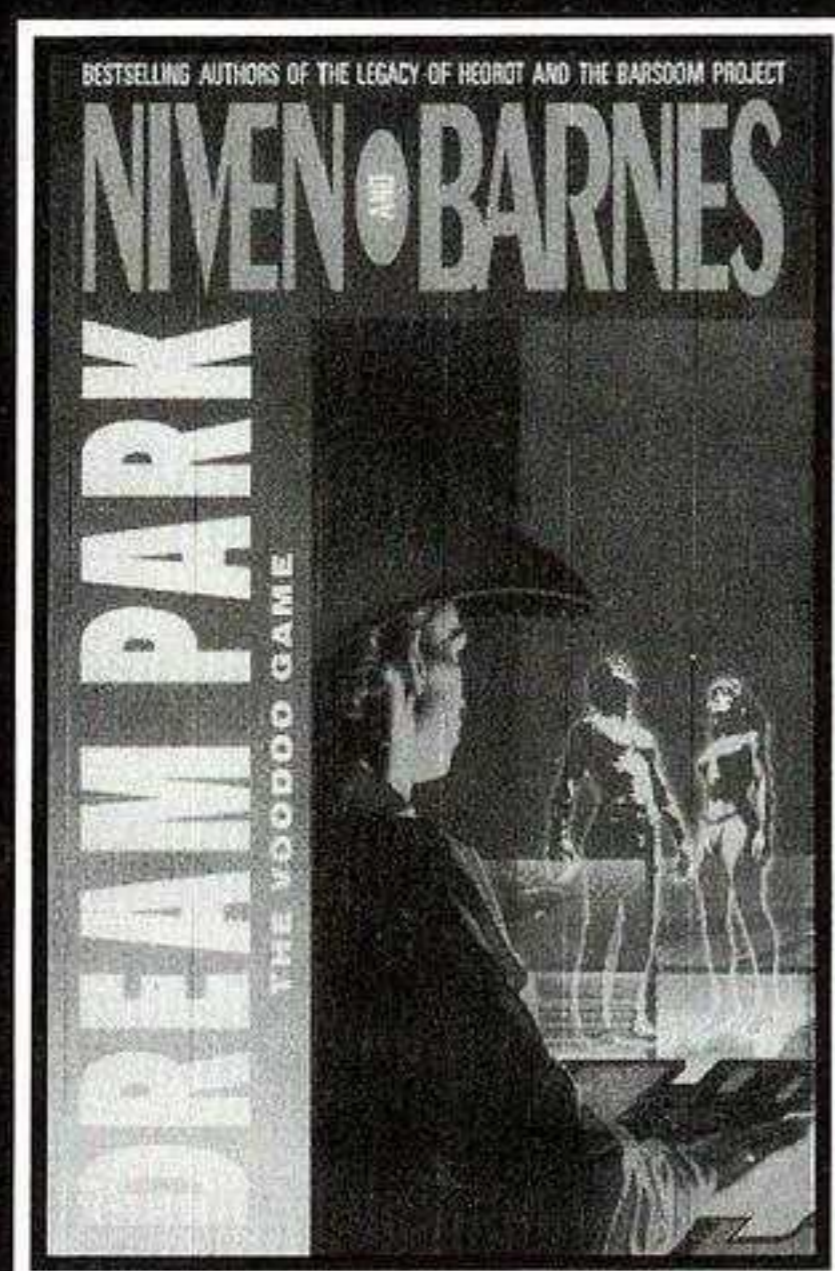
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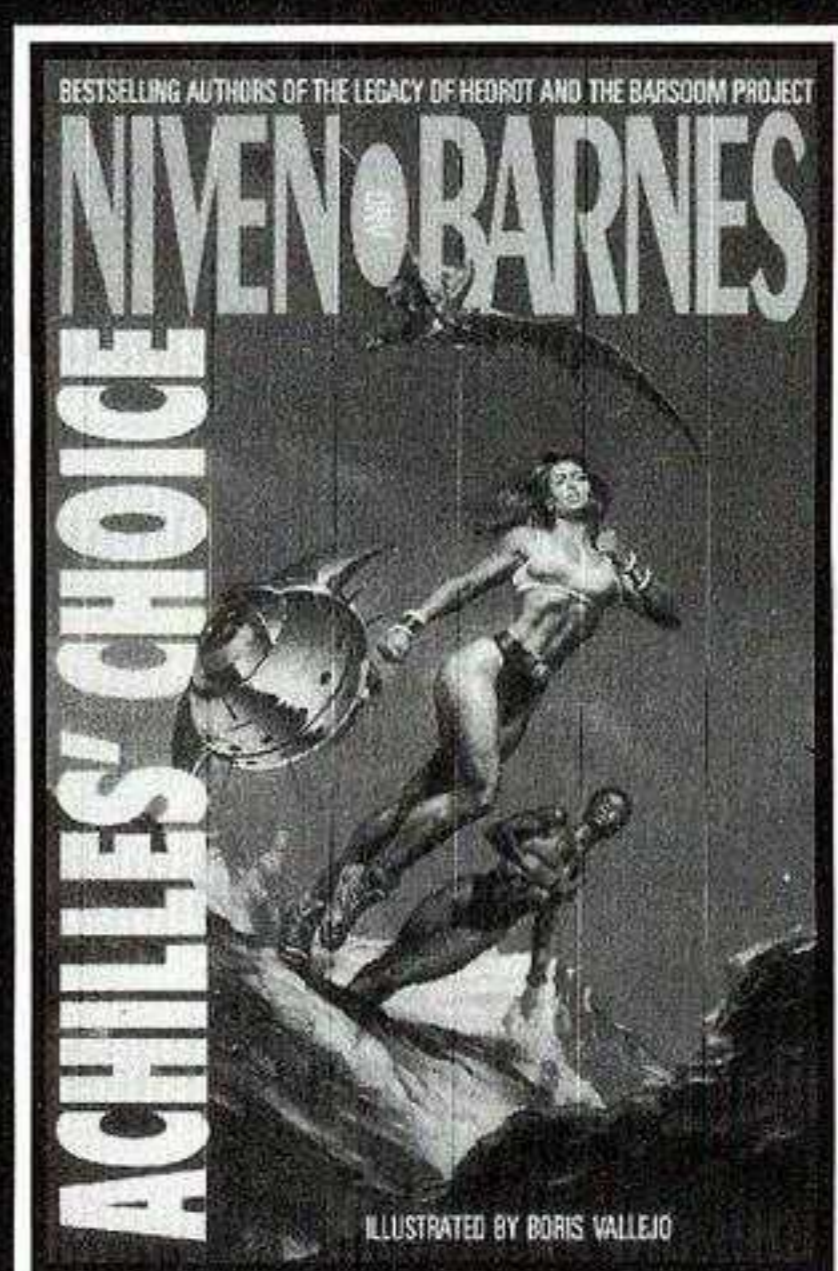


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# interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 67

January 1993

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### Cover by Jason Hurst

**This issue is dedicated to the memory of Sadie Shaw**

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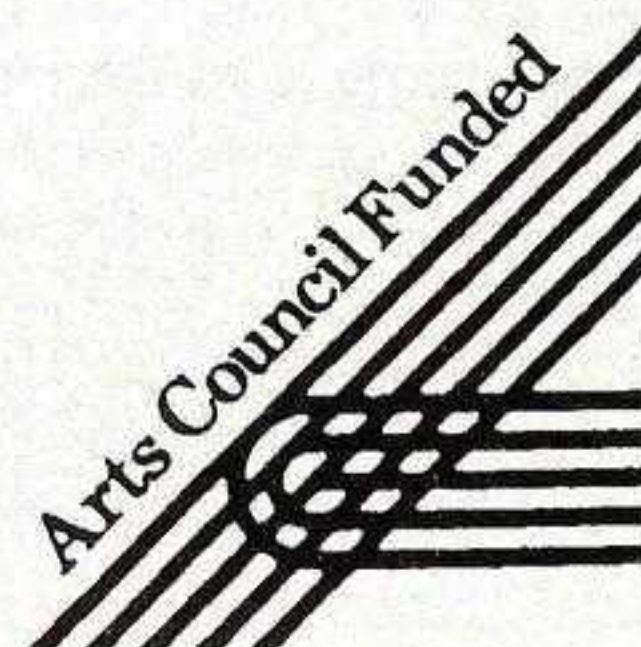
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# Interface

## David Pringle

**M**uch of this issue is devoted to material by and about one of Britain's best-loved science-fiction writers, Bob Shaw. He was born in Northern Ireland on 31st December 1931 and spent most of his life there, although he moved to the north of England in the 1970s. We had planned to publish this issue (or one very like it) a year ago, to mark his 60th birthday, but the sudden death of Bob's wife Sadie in 1991 delayed things.

Sadie Shaw knew of our plans and encouraged them, and so we dedicate this special issue to her memory. Now it's a 61st-birthday special, better late than never. Thanks also to Bob's friends and colleagues Pamela Buckmaster, Jason Hurst, Derek Pickles, Brian Stableford, Helen Wake – and others who have helped.

Bob Shaw began writing sf in the early 1950s, although his first book was not published until 1967. What follows is a brief bibliography of all his novels and collections to date. (Some of the comments and quotes first appeared in my book *The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction*, Grafton, 1990.)

## Bob Shaw

### An Annotated Bibliography

#### Night Walk (1967)

Novel. The hero is blinded, and condemned to prison on a far planet. He cleverly devises a new form of sight and makes his escape. A fine sf thriller, with a taut plot and good imagery.

#### The Two-Timers (1968)

Novel. A man travels into an alternative time-line in order to prevent his wife's murder. An ingenious, well-written *doppelgänger* tale, with excellent dialogue.

#### The Palace of Eternity (1969)

Novel. The protagonist leads a revolt against the military powers-that-be who are ruining an Edenic planet. He dies and is reborn as part of the planet's "world-mind." A far-fetched but seductive tale of transcendence, one of Shaw's finest.

#### The Shadow of Heaven (1969)

Novel. Shaw's first-written book (pre-dating *Night Walk*), it appeared as a paperback original in the USA (Avon) and the UK (NEL, 1970). Early editions contain an unsatisfactory, abridged text. Later British editions, including the first hardcover (Gollancz, 1991) have been revised.

#### One Million Tomorrows (1970)

Novel. Immortality becomes a possibility in the 22nd century – but only at the expense of losing one's sexuality. Another tartly written Shaw thriller.

#### Ground Zero Man (1971)

Novel. A man devises a means to detonate all the world's nuclear weapons, and threatens to do so (in the cause of peace). "Good enough to put Shaw up there with John Le Carré and Len Deighton for intelligent pungency" – Peter Nicholls, *Foundation*. Revised and retitled as *The Peace Machine* (1986).

#### Other Days, Other Eyes (1972)

Novel. About "slow glass," which retards the passage of light to such an extent that one can view scenes from the past, this book consists of three short stories embedded in a new framing text; one of them is Shaw's best known shorter work, the ingenious and touching "Light of Other Days" (1966).

#### Tomorrow Lies in Ambush (1973)

Collection. Varied sf yarns. "His prose is economical and neat, his images are graphic and instantly clear" – Christopher Priest, *Foundation*.

#### Orbitsville (1975)

Novel. Spacefarers discover a vast sphere, with 625 million times the surface area of the Earth, built by mysterious aliens. A continuously entertaining narrative. Belated sequels, *Orbitsville Departure* (1983) and *Orbitsville Judgement* (1990), have turned this fine novel into the first of a trilogy.

#### Cosmic Kaleidoscope (1976)

Collection. The longest piece, "Skirmish on a Summer Morning," is an sf western. Other good tales include "Waltz of the Bodysnatchers" and "The Gioconda Caper."

#### A Wreath of Stars (1976)

Novel. The near approach of a cosmic body shakes loose an "anti-neutrino planet" from within our Earth, a sort of shadow-world which no one knew existed. "What a splendid mind-gobbling read this is!" – Brian Aldiss, *Guardian*.

#### Medusa's Children (1977)

Novel. Survivors of shipwrecks live in a mysterious underwater environment, in this tall tale based on the Bermuda Triangle legend. "Create(s) a trance-like atmosphere in which the events of the narrative drift by like sleeping fish" – J.G. Ballard, *New Statesman*.

#### Who Goes Here? (1977)

Novel. A mind-wiped Warren Peace joins the Space Legion to forget – then spends the rest of the book

trying to remember whatever it was that he wished to forget. Time-twisting space-war comedy in a Shekleyesque vein.

**Ship of Strangers** (1978)

Novel. A "fix-up" of the short stories in Shaw's "Sarafand" series (from *Analog*), about the exploratory voyage of a starship. Trad sf, reminiscent of A.E. van Vogt's space operas – but done with greater skill.

**Vertigo** (1978)

Novel. Anti-gravity harnesses give everyone the power of personal flight. Logical extrapolation conveyed in an exciting plot with interesting characters. Since reissued as *Terminal Velocity* (1991) – see below.

**Dagger of the Mind** (1979)

Novel. Parapsychology experiments cause the hero to experience nasty visions. The book turns into a haunted-house story with a rather creaky sf rationale. Minor Shaw, but fun.

**The Ceres Solution** (1981)

Novel. A quarantined Earth can be liberated by a drastic solution involving the asteroid Ceres. This somewhat confusing novel suffered from extensive editorial cuts in its British edition. A new, improved version may be forthcoming.

**A Better Mantrap** (1982)

Collection. Nine sf and fantasy tales, with "Conversion," "Amphitheatre" and "Frost Animals" among the best. "A good and entertaining collection" – David Langford, *Foundation*.

**Orbitsville Departure** (1983)

Novel. Sequel to *Orbitsville* (1975) and second in the "Orbitsville" trilogy. Faintly disappointing, but followed by the better *Orbitsville Judgement* (see below).

**Fire Pattern** (1984)

Novel. A tall tale about the incidence of spontaneous combustion in human beings; the "rational" sf explanation for this phenomenon is wild and woolly and wholly delightful. Alas, the novel's ending seems rushed.

**The Peace Machine** (1985)

Novel. Revised and retitled version of the excellent sf thriller *Ground Zero Man* (1971).

**The Ragged Astronauts** (1986)

Novel. Two worlds are joined by a narrow funnel of air, and some inhabitants of one set out on a heroic balloon journey. "Shaw has returned to his grave and good best form as a teller of full-bodied sf tales" – John Clute, *Interzone*.

**The Wooden Spaceships** (1988)

Novel. Sequel to *The Ragged Astronauts*, followed by *The Fugitive Worlds* (see below).

**Dark Night in Toyland** (1989)

Collection. Contains two stories from *Interzone*

plus thirteen others from *Amazing*, *Asimov's*, *Galaxy*, *F&SF*, etc. Several very effective pieces, but the volume also has some barrel-scrapings from the last 30 years.

**Killer Planet** (1989)

Juvenile novel. Shaw's only attempt to write sf for younger readers. Creditable, but not quite in the Douglas Hill league.

**The Fugitive Worlds** (1989)

Novel. An exciting conclusion to the trilogy begun with *The Ragged Astronauts* and *The Wooden Spaceships*.

**Orbitsville Judgement** (1990)

Novel. Third in the "Orbitsville" trilogy, and perhaps the best: full of mind-bending ideas. On the whole, this series (which was not originally intended as such) is stronger than the "Ragged Astronauts" trilogy (which was pre-planned).

**Terminal Velocity** (1991)

Novel. Originally published as *Vertigo* (1978) – see above. This edition also contains the 1975 short story "Dark Icarus" as a prologue.

**Warren Peace** (forthcoming, 1993)

Novel. Humorous sequel to *Who Goes Here?* (1977). A pre-publication extract appears in this issue of *Interzone*.

(David Pringle)

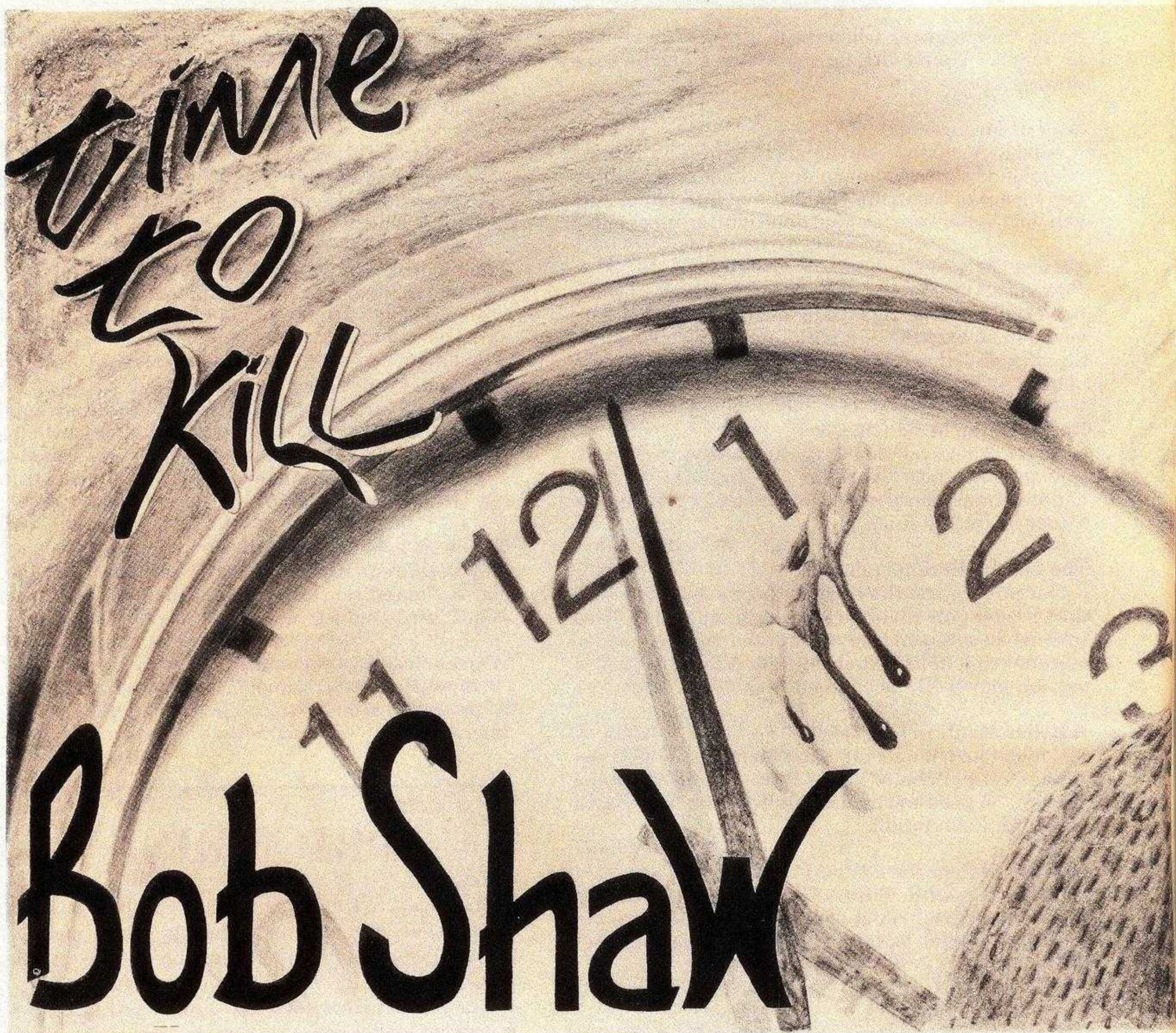
## PRICE RISE

The cover price of *Interzone* has increased to £2.50 with effect from this issue. We regret the necessity for this, but would like to remind readers that it is our first price increase in almost two years – and meanwhile postage costs and overheads have continued to rise despite the economic recession.

In relative terms, *Interzone* remains at the price level it has always been – approximately half the price of the average new sf paperback novel in Britain (currently the commonest book price is £4.99, though many paperbacks are now £5.99 or more).

For the moment, we are maintaining our old subscription rates, though they too will rise – by £2 per annum, inland – from next month. If you are not already a subscriber, now is a good time to become one in order to avoid the price increase for the coming year. We shall continue to accept subscriptions (and renewals) at the old rates of £26 inland, or £32 overseas, until **1st February 1993**.

Back-issues remain at £2.50 each, inland, for the time being – but see our special price-reduction offer on early back-issues, page 39. (See also our notice on "lifetime subscriptions," page 52.)



**“I** think there’s another paradox killer in the area.”

The words, coming from her closest friend, had an unexpectedly disturbing effect on Mo Warren – largely because of the weird incident which had occurred in the supermarket that morning.

“What do you mean, *another* paradox killer?” she said. “I still haven’t seen the slightest shred of evidence that there was a first one.”

“How *could* you have seen any evidence?” Daisy Olivant dipped a finger into her mug of tea and stirred it. “They’re not going to spread it all over the place, are they?”

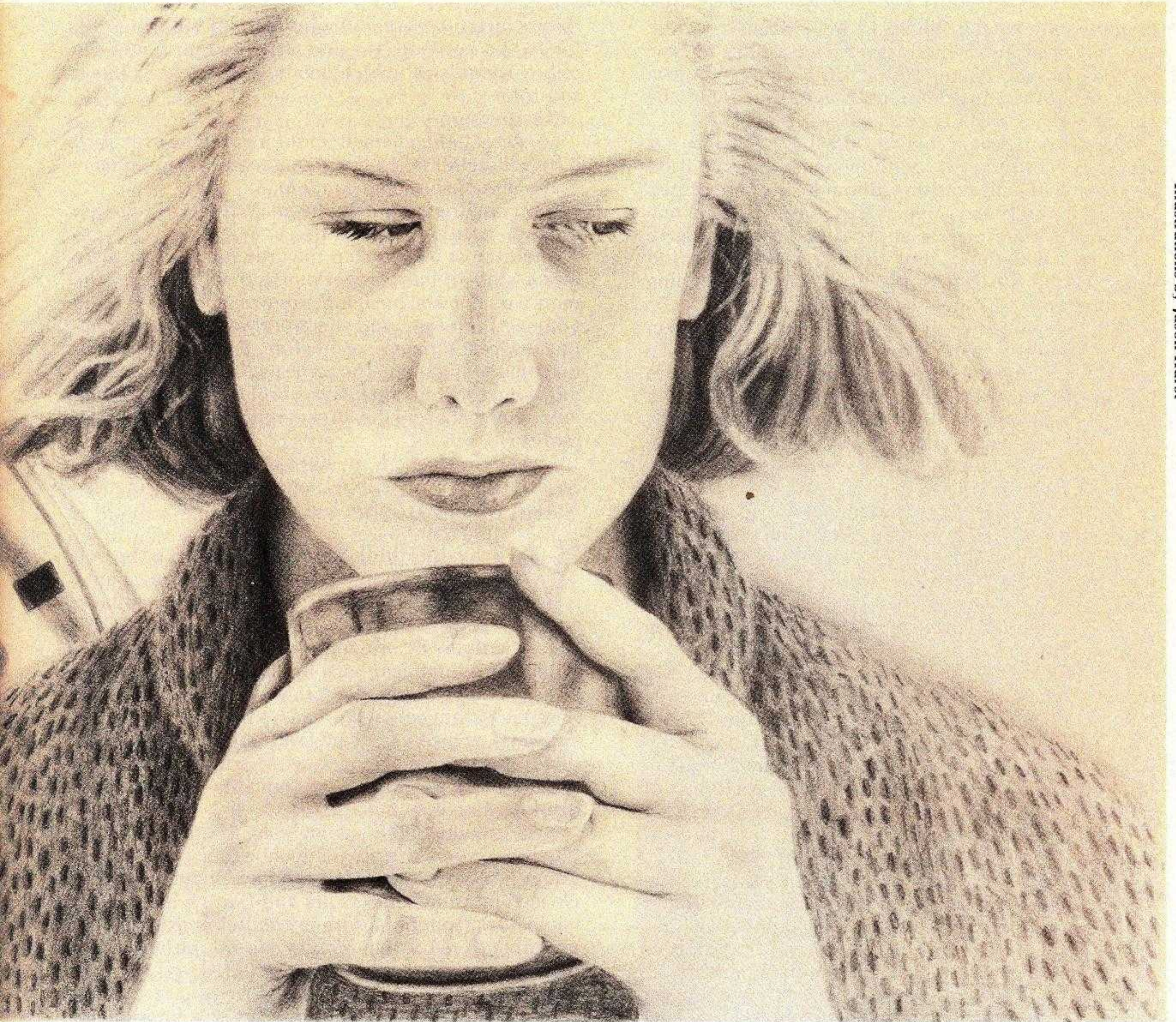
“Not the old conspiracy theory again,” Mo said, belatedly fetching two teaspoons from the cutlery drawer. She sat down opposite Daisy at the kitchen table. Autumn sunlight, mellow and precious, streamed in through the windows – a reminder that the days were growing short and winter was on the way. It occurred to her that – at 23, with a good marriage and a successful business – she should have been feeling wonderful. Neither had she any reason

to complain about her slim, blonde, neat-featured good looks, and yet she was tense and slightly depressed. Was it Seasonal Affective Disorder? In October? Or was it just some quirky after-effect of that business in the seven-eleven? She wished again that Dan was present, that he had not chosen today to go down to London.

“Governments *have* been known to be secretive,” Daisy said. “The neo-feudalists we have in power now would try to stop you knowing the time of day if they thought they could get away with it.”

“No politics today, please.” In spite of her own protest, Mo returned to the same subject. “You know, that’s always been one of the weaknesses in the UFO nuts’ argument – the notion that governments are suppressing information for fear of causing panic in the streets. But the fact is that there wouldn’t be any panic. Ordinary people everywhere would just love to find out that we were receiving visitors from another world.”

“That’s as may be,” Daisy replied mildly, not offended, “but would they feel the same way about



murderers from the future popping up in their midst?" She was a pretty brunette in her early forties who lived in one of the small bungalows which surrounded the Warrens' market garden.

"Why not? People love a nice juicy murder."

"Not when it's happening to them, they don't."

"It's impossible to win an argument with you," Mo said, sipping her strong, unsweetened tea.

"You could always try," Daisy said, deliberately sounding smug. She worked as chief maintenance electrician at the area police HQ in Peterborough – a job which gave her the run of the entire building. It allowed her access, mostly unauthorized, to all kinds of data stores, and she took full advantage of the facility to back up her personal status as an expert in the "unexplained."

"All right! Supposing I grant you the whole daft premise that some day time travel will become possible. When it does happen some psychopaths – probably driven crazy by brooding too long about the paradox – will use time machines to jaunt back into the past and murder their grandfathers to see if it

prevents themselves from being born. You realize how ridiculous this sounds? However, given that all of it is true, why have we only started seeing these characters within the last year or so?"

"The answer is in the question," Daisy said comfortably. "This is the year 1997. Right? Well, say that time machines don't come into use until the latter half of the 21st century. Anybody who's going to go back and kill his grandfather won't need to travel more than seventy or eighty years. That means we *wouldn't* see them until about now – the timings are working out just about right."

Mo laughed to hide her irritation. "Only if we accept your totally arbitrary and unjustified assumption about when the time machine will be invented. You're building your case on air, Daisy. Hot air!"

"I'm only being logical."

"Logical! All right, why haven't we seen time travelers who've come back farther for other reasons? Like wanting to meet the Beatles, or to see a coronation."

"You mean, why haven't we noticed them?" Daisy took a complacent sip of her tea. "Perhaps they disguise

themselves too well, blend in too skilfully. In any case, all machines which travel have a limit to how far they can go. Planes, ships, cars – why should a time machine be any different? Maybe they'll only be able to go back seventy or so years."

"Perhaps, perhaps, maybe, maybe!" Mo felt her annoyance turning into genuine anger, but she tried to continue the discussion without losing her temper, treating it purely as a game. "Okay, here's another one for you. If these people are masters at blending in with the background, how did the police ever find out about them in the first place? They're hardly going to ring up the cop shop and say, 'Hello, I'm here'."

"No, but a time machine might be detectable if you have the right instruments." Daisy's round face became solemn and she lowered her voice. "All I can tell you is that the Chief Constable has been at two hush-hush meetings in Leicester University this week. In the Department of Physics. That's where the story about the paradox killers leaked into the newspapers in the first place."

"It didn't leak into the newspapers," Mo snapped. "It got into the *Sunday Probe*. That's only for people to wipe their backsides with, providing they don't mind ending up with more shit than they had at the start."

"Do you mind?" Daisy said indignantly. "I always read the *Probe*."

"That's because you're feeble-minded, Daisy." Mo was now speaking earnestly, viciously – the game was over – and she wanted to cause pain and humiliation. "You're totally gullible, a simpleton, and that's why you swallow all this utter bull about Atlantis and ley lines and UFOs and telepathy and reincarnation and ... You name it! You cram any old crap at all into your head, and as if that isn't bad enough, you have to regurgitate it over other people."

"I hope you feel better after that," Daisy said, getting to her feet, face turning pale. She had gathered up her hand-bag and scarf and was out through the kitchen door before Mo could think of any words – short of an apology – which might have induced her to stay.

Alone in the sudden silence, Mo stared for a moment at the wallpaper, then at the clock. Ten past three. Far too early for a drink, but ... She went to the refrigerator, took out her bottle of Tio Pepe and found a glass. It was a blue tumbler with seagulls enamelled in white – hardly the thing for sherry, especially good stuff – but this was not Buck House. With the first sip, clean and pure and benign, came remorse. Why had she felt it necessary to attack poor harmless, good-hearted Daisy like that? Was she never going to acquire tolerance? The verbal assault had been unforgivable, no matter how jittery she felt after what had happened in the supermart ...

**T**he place was quite crowded, considering that it was only a little after ten on a Friday morning. Perhaps it was going to be closed on Monday – another of the unnatural new Bank Holidays which had been foisted on the population – and some people were stocking up for a long week-end. Mo was standing midway along one of the aisles, trying to make up her mind about cooking oils. Dan liked to use peanut oil because the arachidonic acid in it was said to be the most effective of all the polyunsaturates

for warding off arterial plaque. Mo preferred olive oil, for its flavour, but Dan had a theory that it was the only vegetable oil which behaved in the body like a saturate.

Big decision!

Mo was cursing herself for taking so long over such a trivial matter when the young man came into view at the end of the same gondola.

Dan! she thought, astonished. Why didn't you go down to London?

She almost took a step towards him – then there was a shift in her perceptions and she saw that the man was not her husband. He was about five years younger than Dan, and was wearing a pale grey one-piece she had never seen before. But her emotional response was exactly the same as if he had been Dan, and something inside her was protesting over the discrepancy between the inner and outer versions of reality.

The man looked at her. Overhead striplights reflected in his eyes, luminous threads, curling like worms. And then he backed out of sight ...

**W**hy did I think he was Dan? Mo asked herself as she drank too deeply of the sherry, swamping her taste buds. There had been a resemblance – the same Marlborough-cowboy ranginess, the fly-away brown hair, the large-lobed ears – but she felt there had been more to it than the man's physical appearance. Had there been an instant of near-telepathic contact, or was it merely that he had appeared to recognize her? Damn him! Who was this disturbing young stranger who, without even one word, could screw up her thoughts and start her drinking too early in the day?

You know perfectly well who he is, and that's why you're in such a state. The thoughts came to Mo unbidden, unwanted. He's the latest paradox killer. He is your grandson – yours and Dan's – and he has come back from the future to commit murder. He's a psychopath and the bloody stupid paradox has primed him up to kill his grandfather – and that's exactly what he intends to do!

She snorted in wry amusement at how far into fantasyland she had penetrated in such a short time. Another talk with Daisy was called for at this stage, something to remind her of how preposterous the whole paradox-killer thesis actually was. Especially as, perhaps due to the stimulation of the sherry, she had just thought of a major flaw in the "reasoning."

She went to the wall-mounted phone and used the memory key to feed in Daisy's number. The call signal droned on for what seemed a long time. Mo knew that Daisy would have reached her home by now; she was also aware that Daisy knew who was calling and was deliberately making her wait. That was fair enough – she deserved some kind of reprimand for having been so rude. At last there was an answering click.

"Daisy, I've rung to apologize," Mo said immediately.

There was a slight pause. "It doesn't matter."

"But it does matter. I had absolutely no right to speak to you like that – and I didn't mean any of it."

"You did leather into me a bit." Daisy was beginning to sound mollified.

"I was upset, you see. I didn't want to admit this,



but the idea of murderers popping up out of nowhere scares me," Mo said, deciding that a touch of flattery would complete the job of restoring Daisy to her usual talkative self. "I think it's great the way you can handle all these concepts and not get spooked by them."

"It's just the way my mind works, I guess."

"I wish mine could work that way," Mo said. "We've talked about this time-travel business more than once, but there is still something I don't understand."

"Perhaps I could help." Daisy's voice now sounded warm.

"I'm sure you could. A man goes back in time and kills his grandfather. But if he does that one of his own parents will never be born, therefore he will never be born – so how could he have killed his grandfather in the first place? Is that how the paradox goes?"

"That's it."

"And the answer is that, at the point where the grandson re-enters time, the time stream splits in two. In the first branch the grandfather goes on with his life as normal; in the second branch the grandfather is killed and the course of the world's future is altered to some extent. When the grandson returns to his own present he will be back in the first branch because that's the only one of the two in which it is possible for him to exist. Right?"

"Couldn't have put it better myself."

"I also remember you talking about alternate universes." Mo paused to take a sip of her drink. "I think it was on the night we went to that weird Indonesian restaurant. You said that time divides at every decision point, which means that there is a universe – co-existent with this one – in which Columbus turned back, or in which Lincoln's assassin missed, and so on."

"Did you by any chance have an ancestor name of Boswell?"

Mo permitted herself a little smile – Daisy trying to be witty was proof that all was forgiven between them. "And am I right in thinking, Dr Johnson, that you said it didn't matter how small or unimportant any decision point was? It could be something as trivial as a woman choosing between a blue shirt and a red one. Each and every decision point generates yet another universe, which means that there must be millions and billions and zillions of universes – each differing from all the others in just one respect."

"That's the way the theory goes." Daisy, perhaps sensing a trap, sounded slightly wary. "You said there was something you didn't understand..."

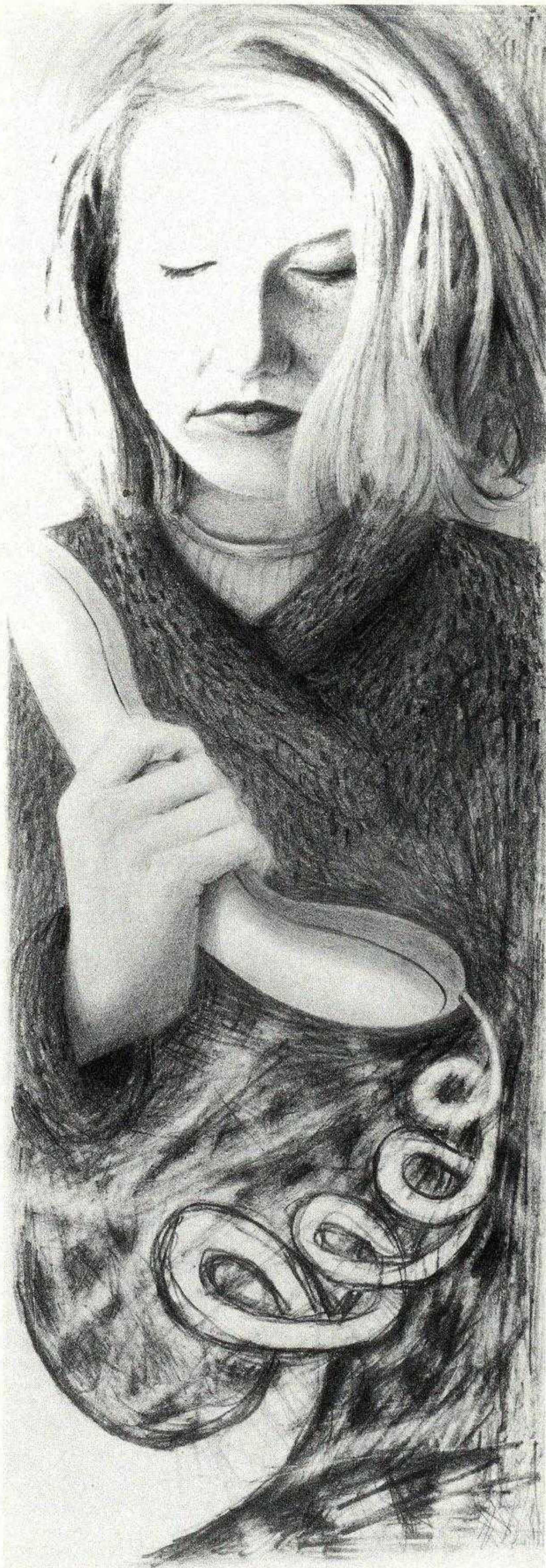
"It's this. If there really is an infinity of parallel universes – each differing from the others in just one detail – why is it that more than one paradox killer has appeared in *this* one?"

"I don't see what you're getting at."

Mo swallowed more sherry, her enjoyment of it increasing. "According to you, each killer generates a universe or a set of universes of his very own – so why are they all popping up in *this* one? It contradicts your theory, Daisy."

There was a prolonged silence. *Got you*, Mo thought with malicious glee. *Get out of that one, if you can.*

"I hadn't thought of that," Daisy said slowly, "but there must be an explanation."



"Let's hear it then."

"Well..." There was another silence. "Well, it could be a kind of conservation."

"Conservation," Mo said, feeling happy. "You mean God economizing on universes? A kind of divine damage-limitation exercise? Confining an evil to one time stream?"

"It could be that the act of going backwards in time has such a powerful effect on the space-time continuum that..."

"Go on," Mo encouraged. The fact that Daisy was resorting to her small stock of scientific terms proved that she was floundering.

"Well, a time traveller could warp his own time line so drastically that it would sort of fuse with other time lines which have similar distortions. I think that's your answer, Mo." Daisy's confidence, now that she had found a suitably woolly analogy, was returning – audibly. "The characteristic deformation of time lines with retrograde loops gives them an affinity with each other. It's like RNA... molecular receptors in the body... or one of those children's toys where only certain shapes fit into certain slots."

Mo felt a simultaneous pang of anger and relief. Anger at some people's ability to delude themselves that any mish-mash of buzz words constituted a meaningful sentence; relief that all Daisy's pronouncements about paradox killers were nothing more than vacuous sounds.

"That makes sense," she said. "Obviously, I just hadn't thought the thing through."

"Are you being sarcastic with me, Mo?"

"Not at all!"

"That's all right then," Daisy said, "but I'm afraid I haven't helped with your problem."

"What problem?"

"Being afraid, over there on your own."

"No need to fret," Mo said. "Dan should be home soon. I expect I'll see you tomorrow, Daisy."

She hung up the phone and turned back to the conspiratorial friendliness of the bottle. An hour later, when the sherry was finished, it was dark outside, even with a crescent moon, and it occurred to Mo that she should have switched on the security cameras. The harvester used to gather the high-protein magyar beetroot crop was a frequent target for young vandals from the surrounding estates. So much so that it had been necessary to protect the machine by putting up an impregnable brick shed, which Dan had christened the Last Redoubt – a reference to one of his favourite old fantasy novels.

She stood up, steadied herself by holding the edge of the table for a moment, and went to the small master panel on the wall by the phone. The four screens came alive as soon as she touched the key pad, and on one of them was movement. Caught for an instant by the system's infra-red light, the figure of a man was seen slipping into the cover of the hawthorn hedge which bounded the ginseng plot.

He had been visible for less than a second, but Mo was certain she had made out a pale-hued one-piece – just like the one worn by the young man in the supermarket.

She gave a long, quavering sigh as – for the first time in her life – she made the acquaintanceship of

genuine, cold-sweated, heart-crushing, honest-to-Christ fear. A murderer was outside her home, lying in wait for Dan, and she had no idea of what to do about it. Ring the police? What could she say to them? They had already made it clear they were tired of sending officers all the way out from Peterborough to hunt for juvenile delinquents who faded into the night at the first glimpse of a patrol car. And what would they say if she told them a paradox killer was on the property, and she knew he was a paradox killer because she had seen him in the seven-eleven and he resembled her husband?

Mo had no trouble predicting what they would say – the same things, with variations in the bad language, as she would have said if offered a similar story. It was unbelievable – so fantastic, came the comforting thought, that even she did not have to accept it. Overall suits were not uncommon among youngsters, therefore all she had been alarmed about was an ordinary trespasser, probably someone taking a short cut to the other side of the estate. The house was well secured, so there was nothing at all to worry over, and the most sensible thing she could do was have another drink. Excellent idea!

Mo went to a cupboard and took out her reserve bottle of Tio Pepe. It was warmish, nowhere near the right temperature for dry sherry, but this was no time to be fussy. Making a drink very cold numbed the taste buds, robbed it of flavour. She sat down again at the kitchen table and drank a tumblerful in a matter of seconds. Aware of going too fast, she made the next glass last several minutes. She was pouring the third when a stray thought intruded: *I'll bet you his name is Theodore. I've always loved that name. If I ever have a son I'm going to call him Theodore, and he could pass the name on.*

Suddenly the fear was back with her, striking with greater force than before. Why was she sitting around on her backside, doing nothing to safeguard her husband? She needed to confide in somebody, to get some help, and who could be better qualified to give it than wise, well-informed, unappreciated Daisy Olivant? She lurched to the telephone and put the call through. Daisy answered almost immediately.

"I'm very scared," Mo whispered. "There's somebody outside the house, Daisy."

"Are you sure?"

"I've seen him. On camera. Daisy, he's waiting for Dan. I'm sure he's one of those time travellers you were talking about this afternoon."

"Very funny," Daisy said in coldly hostile voice.

"I'm not joking," Mo pleaded. "There's a paradox killer outside the house."

"You're drunk," Daisy said. "You're drunk, and I'm fed up to the back teeth with all your sneers and snide bloody remarks. Call me back when you're sober. On second thoughts – never call me again. I don't want to know you." There was a click which showed that Daisy had spoken her piece.

"But..." Mo gazed in hurt bafflement at the phone. What had got into Daisy all of a sudden? Well, if she wasn't even going to listen the police would have to be called in. Dan and she were taxpayers and were entitled to protection, but the number of the Peterborough police station was not in the phone's memory. Mo was about to go for the directory when she

remembered she was in the middle of an emergency, and should be putting in a 999 call. She was reaching for the key pad when there was a blue-and-magenta flash somewhere outside the house, somewhere very near, and in that instant the phone and the four surveillance screens went dead.

She moaned aloud in panic, slammed the phone back on its rest and returned to her seat at the table. What was she supposed to do next – apart, of course, from having another drink? As she gulped the luke-warm sherry she tried to work out what had happened. The time traveller could have brought things with him, hi-tech things, designed for blanking out communications. It would be a sensible precaution for him to take, but – perversely – her thoughts tried to change their direction once again.

What real evidence was there that anything untoward had happened? Perhaps the coloured flash had been caused by a transformer (whatever a transformer was) accidentally blowing up. Daisy, being an electrician, might have something pertinent to say on the subject, but Daisy was now out of reach. Another mouthful of sherry triggered a fresh bout of pro-and-con analysis. A man goes back in time and murders his grandfather...How ridiculous! But the psychopathic personality was irrational by definition, and homicidal episodes could be precipitated by trivia. People had been murdered because of foot odour or a habit of sucking their dentures. Also, the paradox element might be quite incidental. Dan, now in his late twenties, was already inclined to be a little severe in his manner, a little dictatorial, a little intolerant. It was possible to visualize those traits becoming dominant in his later years, leading to a stressful relationship with a grandchild, inspiring a terrible and abiding hatred.

Pro and con, con and pro – where was it getting her?

**M**o checked on the sherry bottle and saw there was only a quarter or so left. It looked as though she would need her reserve reserve bottle, the one Dan did not know about, but she could not feel entitled to it until she had resolved the mental conflict and made some kind of decision. Bringing in the police still seemed the most positive step, even with the risk of making a fool of herself – and there was a phone box just a few hundred yards away, out on Mapletree Road.

Using it would involve leaving the security of the house and venturing along the overgrown lane which linked the farm to the road. But the odds were that there was nobody out there – was that not so? – and in any case she was obliged to do all she could to safeguard Dan.

Taking a bracing swig of the sherry, Mo went to the coat rack, put on her green duvet jacket and checked that her keys were in the pocket. She tried her own telephone again, making sure it was still dead, and then – feeling slightly selfconscious because this kind of thing was only done in movies – switched off the lights. The kitchen immediately became an alien place, scarcely illuminated by the moonglow and stray glimmers from the surrounding bungalows. She felt tense and excited, with an urge to giggle as she opened the door and stepped outside.

The night air was keen, purified by the coming frost.



Mo looked about her as she waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. The houses on the perimeter of the property looked safe and cosy, their windows rectangles of yellow and peachy radiance which seemed to intensify the blackness near at hand. She took several paces towards the lane, trying to move like a cat to minimize the crunching of the gravel underfoot, then she froze into immobility. Had there been a sound? She held her breath while listening intently. She was unable to hear anything to suggest danger, but now the night had come alive and was reaching for her with unseen tendrils. Suddenly all sense of playacting was gone. This was no fright movie, seen from the security of the stalls – this was real, and all she wanted was to be far away from it. Should she run towards the road, get out of there as quickly as possible? That was an idea, but the intruder might be waiting by the gateway...

*That's if there IS any intruder*, came the damned contrary inner voice once again.

"I can't stand any more of this," she whispered. "I'm going to walk slowly to the..."

Her voice was stilled by a swerving flash of light – a scything of brilliance – and a dull-throated roar. Unable even to scream, she clutched at her heart. The light and noise overwhelmed her senses for an instant then, resolved themselves into the headlamps of a car, the sound of its engine and grinding of gravel beneath its tyres. Dan had arrived home earlier than she had expected. And now everything was going to be all right again...

Except, except that the slewing radiance picked out – briefly, over by the ginseng plot – the lurking figure of a man. She saw him only for an instant before he vanished in the shadow of the hedge, but it was enough to let her register the pale one-piece suit and the fact that he was carrying something in his hand. Her heart jolted savagely and an icy spasm went through her gut, almost destroying her bladder control.

"Don't switch off, Dan!" she shouted after a moment of paralysis. She began running towards the car, just as its lights faded and the engine fell silent. Dan had opened the door and was out of the vehicle by the time she reached it.

"You can't stay here!" She deliberately collided with him, trying to bundle him back into the car. He withstood the impact easily and caught her by the shoulders.

"What's the matter?" he said, his fingers forcibly sinking through the soft material of her jacket.

"Can't explain it now... you have to get away from here!"

"Have you been drinking, Mo?" His features, tallowy in the wan glow of the car's courtesy light, were forbidding as he leaned closer to smell her breath. "You have! You've been at the bottle again, and you're pissed out of your skull!"

"That doesn't matter," she cried desperately, renewing her efforts to push him back into the car.

"Like hell it doesn't. Into the house, Mo!" He kicked the car door shut and began pushing her in the direction of the house, in the same direction as the waiting killer.

She fought against him, but found herself being borne along as if she had no weight or strength, and it came to her that neither physical nor mental resistance would do any good. Dan was far too strong for her; and even attempting to tell him what was going on would take time. Time he did not have. It was probable that only a handful of seconds remained to him, and anything she did would have to be accomplished in a handful of seconds. Suddenly, and against all her expectations, the alcoholic fug in her brain parted briefly and she knew what had to be done. It was a desperate scheme, far from foolproof, but it was Dan's only chance.

"I'm scared, Dan." The shrillness of her tone backed up the statement. "I left the door of the redoubt open and some-body went in there a while ago. I heard them doing things to the harvester."

"What?" Dan slackened his grip, and swung his gaze onto the dimly-seen rectangular building.

"I sneaked over and locked the door. I'm so afraid, Dan. I... I think they could still be in there."

"I hope they are," Dan said in a voice that was flat with the rage she had expected. "I hope to Christ they still are in there. Where's your key?"

"Here." She handed the ring to Dan and ran beside him as he sprinted towards the redoubt. Her eyes were searching the area ahead, seeking out a pale apparition, but – mercifully – the darkness was as yet unbroken.

Dan slid to a halt at the steel-clad door, already stabbing the key into the padlock. He got the lock off, slammed it into her hand, yanked the door open and without hesitation stepped into the redoubt's oil-smelling blackness. Mo hit the door with her shoulder, driving it shut, and in the same movement ramed the heavy bolt home. She heard Dan emit a startled bellow as she clamped the padlock into place.

"I'm sorry about this," she whispered. "It's the only thing I could think of."

She turned and threw the key away into the night – just as the young man from the supermarket materialized only a dozen paces from her. His overall suit glimmered in the weak moonlight. She was unable to see any details of the object in his hand, but his asymmetrical stance left no doubt that it was a weapon.

Marvelling at her ability even to form words, she said, "You left it too late, Theodore. Dan is safe now."

There was a moment of silence before he spoke in an oddly girlish, strained voice. "How did you know my name?"

"I made an educated guess."

"And you've guessed why I'm here?"

"It wasn't hard," Mo said, speaking firmly now, feeling a kind of elation well up within her. The terrors of the day had tested her to the limit, but she had stood up to the challenge and was actually beginning to assume control of the situation.

"But you guessed wrong, Grandma – you boozy, sarcastic, hard-faced old bitch." Theodore slowly raised the weapon. "You see, it was you I came back to kill..."

# Glad to Be of Use

## Helen Wake talks to Bob Shaw

*You've recently written a book about how to write. When does it come out?*

Next January.

*I actually finished writing a novel because of something you said in a Birmingham Science Fiction Group meeting.*

Really? What was that?

*You were asked how you structure your novels, and you said that you started at the beginning and kept going until you got to the end. Very simple, but it had eluded me until then. Before that, I always wrote the interesting bits and tried to patch them together.*

Well, I'm glad to have been of some use.

*How about writers' workshops? Do you find them useful?*

I have attended writers' workshops, but I don't make a practice of it. If you want to be a writer, you have to spend most of your time doing just that, and workshops can become a reason *not* to write. One of the things I don't like about them is that you get your audience reaction. When I'm working on a story, I don't tell the plot to anybody – when it gets into print, it has to burst upon an astonished world. That's what keeps me going on it. I found early on that if I told the plot to anybody, then the mainspring was unwound slightly, and in workshops you end up perhaps having to read something out six times before it is actually finished.

*Do you have that problem with second drafts and rewrites, that it starts to feel very stale?*

I never do any rewriting. The only time I've ever gone over part of a book or story it was at editorial request, and then with very bad

grace. I'm a slow writer, I only do about two or three pages a day, but that's finished copy. In the old days, before I got the word-processor, even though I was a reporter, and though I am a good typist, if I was writing anything I cared about, I'd write it in longhand because it was much more fluid and easy to change. When I'd done the manuscript, no one could read it except me. I liked to use A4 duplicating paper that had already been used on one side, so there was a little bit of show-through on the paper that kept my lines straight. I used to get about seven or eight hundred words on one page, using a very fine Bic ball pen. As I say, no one could read it: it looked very like a wiring diagram, with sentences going round to the back of the page. But when I typed it out finally, in the whole novel there might only be half a dozen words changed from that first draft.

*If you were starting to write now, do you think you'd write cyberpunk?*

No. I know it's strange for a science-fiction writer, but I really don't like computers. Mine came with two discs, one for word-processing, and one for everything else, and I've never even opened the other one.

*You never got seduced by computer games?*

No. I know people who did, and I finally worked out the difference between us. I was already playing a game, where the object was to put one word next to another word using a set of very subtle and complex rules, until you'd filled three or four hundred sheets of paper, and then you tried to get as much money as possible for the end result. It's very interesting, and it

completely used up my interest in all sorts of game playing.

*Drinking figures a lot in your work.*

It figured quite a lot in my life. I was quite a hard drinker for most of my adult life, and then I realized recently that I'd drunk the barrel dry, so I just packed it up. I've never been very good at doing things in moderation – I'd as soon have no drinks as one drink. So I just quit, and I'm feeling a lot better.

*Are you still going to stand at conventions with a beer glass in your hand and just let it evaporate?*

Yes, I think that's going to be the truth from now on. I experimented with those alcohol-free beers, but decided that was just keeping alive my taste for beer, so I stopped that. But everything I do I have to overdo, so I'm now a tea addict. I checked up, and tea is just as bad for you as coffee, so I bought in some Sainsbury's decaffeinated, which is all right. But the knowledge that the ordinary tea is bad for you has somehow made it attractive, so I'm still drinking that and the decaff is just sitting there.

*Have you considered trying hot water as a drink?*

No.

*I know someone else who tried giving up beer, and said what they really missed was the taste. Nothing else has quite as complex a taste.*

Mm. I was a bit of a real ale fan – not a snob, you understand, I just loved the stuff, for the taste. There was this one beer I liked, and if I could get that, I wouldn't drink anything else. I bumped into my local publican in the street the other day, and he said that since I

stopped drinking it, he had to stop stocking that beer. In an odd sort of way, I think that was a compliment.

*So are your characters going to drink tea now, or take strange futuristic drugs?*

I don't think of that as being particularly important, you know. It's all just props.

*So you're as well using something the readers are familiar with?*

Or what I'm familiar with. I usually justify it by talking about cycles of fashion. A thousand years ago you could walk into a pub and drink beer, and eat bread and cheese. Why not in another thousand?

*The primary relationships in your novels seem to be based around serial monogamy. Is that convenience, or do you think that genuinely will last?*

When I started writing, I used to get annoyed by books where someone could zip half way across the universe and be unaffected by it. In reality, I knew that something as small as a job relocation twenty miles away could be a major upheaval in someone's life, especially if they were married. So almost as policy my first novels all featured main characters who were married, and with some kind of problem. It went on for so long, some people were starting to worry about me. They thought I must be trying to get something out of my system.

*Writing as therapy.*

Yes. But I was just trying to inject some realism. I think I may have gone too far. Most science-fiction readers want the idea to be the main character. You know, if they want characterization, there's the rest of Dostoevsky for them to get through, they don't want that from science fiction. I'm guilty of it myself. *Tau Zero*, by Poul Anderson, is an excellent book about a spaceship headed for infinity. When I read it, I spotted that he would do a chapter of action, followed by a chapter about relationships and problems people were having with them, and I found myself skipping to the action.

*I did the opposite – I'd find myself*

*skipping the technical stuff to get back to the people.*

And you call yourself a science-fiction reader?

I'm afraid so. What's more, you're partly responsible for indoctrinating me. *Night Walk* was the first book I remember reading and thinking, "I must find more of this science fiction stuff." I already loved Alan Garner, Sylvia Engdahl, Madeleine L'Engle, but the boundaries are more shadowy in children's writing, and I never thought of that as sf. But my Dad would bring home equal quantities of westerns, detective fiction and science fiction, so I quickly figured out that I could read anything calling itself science fiction, some of the detective fiction and none of the westerns. And that actually became conscious with *Night Walk*. What do you read for pleasure these days?

I hardly read science fiction these days. After a long day writing, the last thing I want to do is sit down and read a science-fiction book. And because I know a lot of writers, if I'm reading one of their books and I come across something that trips a memory, it all dissolves and I'm just sitting there listening to my old drinking buddy.

*I quite like that, when I'm reading an author I've heard talk, and I start being able to hear their voice in my mind's ear, telling me the story. I suppose it might be different with someone I knew very well.*

I'll still read anything by Robert Sheckley, because I love his sense of humour, and if I notice people are going on about some book, I'll read it to find out what I've been missing. But that often doesn't turn out very well. I don't know whether my expectations are too high, or what it is, but I'm very often disappointed with things people have raved about. Elmore Leonard is supposed to be one of the best crime writers, if not the best, and I heard so much about him that I thought I'd finally have to try him. I wasn't that impressed.

*Are you reading anything at the moment?*

I'm reading a book called *Time, Space and Medicine*, which is quite heavy going. It's plugging the

idea that everything, past, present and future, all coexist. It's an idea I've dabbled with in the past, but I've never really given it serious consideration.

*It feels about right to me, but I've no justification for that. I don't think you could ever prove it, one way or another, because I think some things aren't cut out to be studied scientifically. Telepathy's one, and I think sex is another. You can't really quantify feelings, and that's what both are based on.*

Did you test yourself for wild talents when you were an adolescent?

There were five or six of us at school who tried it. The only positive result we got was between me and Kerry Watson. I think I could transmit, and she could receive, but not vice versa. It was sort of positive, but it was also disappointing. Since then, I've tried to cultivate psychic powers, but with a total lack of success. But I have met serious psychics, who told me things that hadn't happened, that actually surprised me when they did happen, so I couldn't really dismiss it all as rubbish the way Rog Peyton does.

I think I'm on Rog Peyton's side.

*So, what's your sign? Are you into astrology?*

No, I'm very anti-astrology, I think it's medieval nonsense. Total bunk.

*I think even if it is, it's still useful.*

You think so?

Yes. It's a way of getting away from where someone was born and where they went to school and finding out what's important to them.

I've never seen it that way.

Well, if you told me you were Aquarius, I'd say your primary goal was to learn, and you would either say yes, and carry on talking, or no, and carry on talking to justify that.

You don't think people would agree if it was flattering, and disagree if it wasn't?

*I don't think so. What is your sign?*

Capricorn, but I refuse to describe myself as that. I was born



**Bob Shaw** (photo courtesy of Jason Hurst)

on the last day of 1931 – I’m probably the youngest person you know who was born that year.

*So if you’re Capricorn, your primary goal is to be successful.*

Well, there you go. I’m not all that interested in material success, I don’t even want to be rich really. I’d like to have enough to do what I want, but after that I think it’s more of a burden than anything. I find those American films very amusing, where a wife suddenly becomes more successful than her husband, and he’s all cut up about it. I think that’s stupid.

*You think he should sit back and enjoy it.*

Yes. It wouldn’t bother me if my partner was more successful at what she did than I was.

*Even if she was working in your sphere? If she was more successful as a science-fiction writer than you?*

I don’t think it would bother me, but I can’t actually imagine it. My wife wasn’t at all interested in science fiction.

*What about your children? Do they read sf?*

No. Not even my work.

*Does that bother you?*

It would be nice if they did, just for something else to talk with them about. But if I was a plumber, I wouldn’t expect them to get worked up about how to do a perfect wiped joint. So, no, it doesn’t bother me.

*It used to bother me. I was always trying to indoctrinate my mother.*

My parents hated sf. My father came from a small, very remote village in the south of Ireland, and he always referred to science fiction as “that black magic stuff.” I think he judged it by the covers of magazines, which were always pretty lurid. He never realized that what was in there was as pure as the driven snow. He always used to say that it would warp my mind completely in the end. Actually, looking at it in retrospect, he might have had something there. My mother was more pragmatic. She hated science fiction because she sensed in some way that it would

interfere with her ambitions for me. She wanted me to be a draughtsman, which in the area I grew up in was the summit of all ambition.

*What did you want to be?*

I always wanted to be an artist.

*Not a writer?*

No. Although I did start writing quite early. When I should have been working up to my University entrance exams, I was actually publishing a carbon-copy fanzine at the back of the class. It never occurred to me to actually listen to a teacher. Somehow my mother sensed that science fiction was a threat to her plans for me, realized this, and she used to search out my earliest manuscripts and write things in the margins. “Juvenile rubbish,” “you’ll never make a writer” and so on, all over them, trying to put me off. It actually had the opposite effect. Later, when my books began to appear, she went around telling people how she had discovered and nurtured my talent.

*I suppose after that, nothing an*

editor might write about your work would be particularly daunting.

No, not really. So, when it came time for the exam, I realized I was likely to get into the *Guinness Book of Records* for the lowest ever mark, so I sort of slid out of it. It upset my father. He had a great respect for education, and he always wanted me to have what he hadn't. I did get a job, as an apprentice draughtsman, but really I was unemployable. I used to keep a stack of British reprint *Astoundings* under the desk. At that time they only came out every two months, so I almost knew them by heart. The trouble was, I thought that just by reading science fiction, I was part of a star-begotten elite. I didn't think I should have to be bothered with this mundane work business.

So how did you go from there to being a structural engineer?

The firm I worked for was a firm of structural engineers, so it was fairly natural.

You worked in Canada for a while, I believe?

Yes, drawing steel-framed buildings, some for the Arctic. There was no checking system, so if something had been wrong the fault would have been discovered near the North Pole. The responsibility was crushing. One chap had a nervous breakdown, and was carried out of his digs screaming. The company paid for him to have a three-month holiday in the Rockies, basically so they could then have him back working the same way again.

You wanted to be an artist – what artists do you like yourself?

I like all the French Impressionists, but especially Pissarro. I also love Canaletto. People say his work was very photographic – and I wish I hadn't found out that his real name was Canal – but I still love him. In general, I lose interest in a painting if I can tell that it was easy for the artist to do. It has to look like it was difficult to win my approval.

Typically Capricorn.

Oh, really?

Yes. So what are you going to write now? Are you working on anything?

I've contracted to do three books for Gollancz, based on Warren Peace from *Who Goes Here?*, my only humorous novel. The first one will be called *Warren Peace*, which I suppose should have been the title for *Who Goes Here?* I would like to establish him as a series character.

And after that? Any plans?

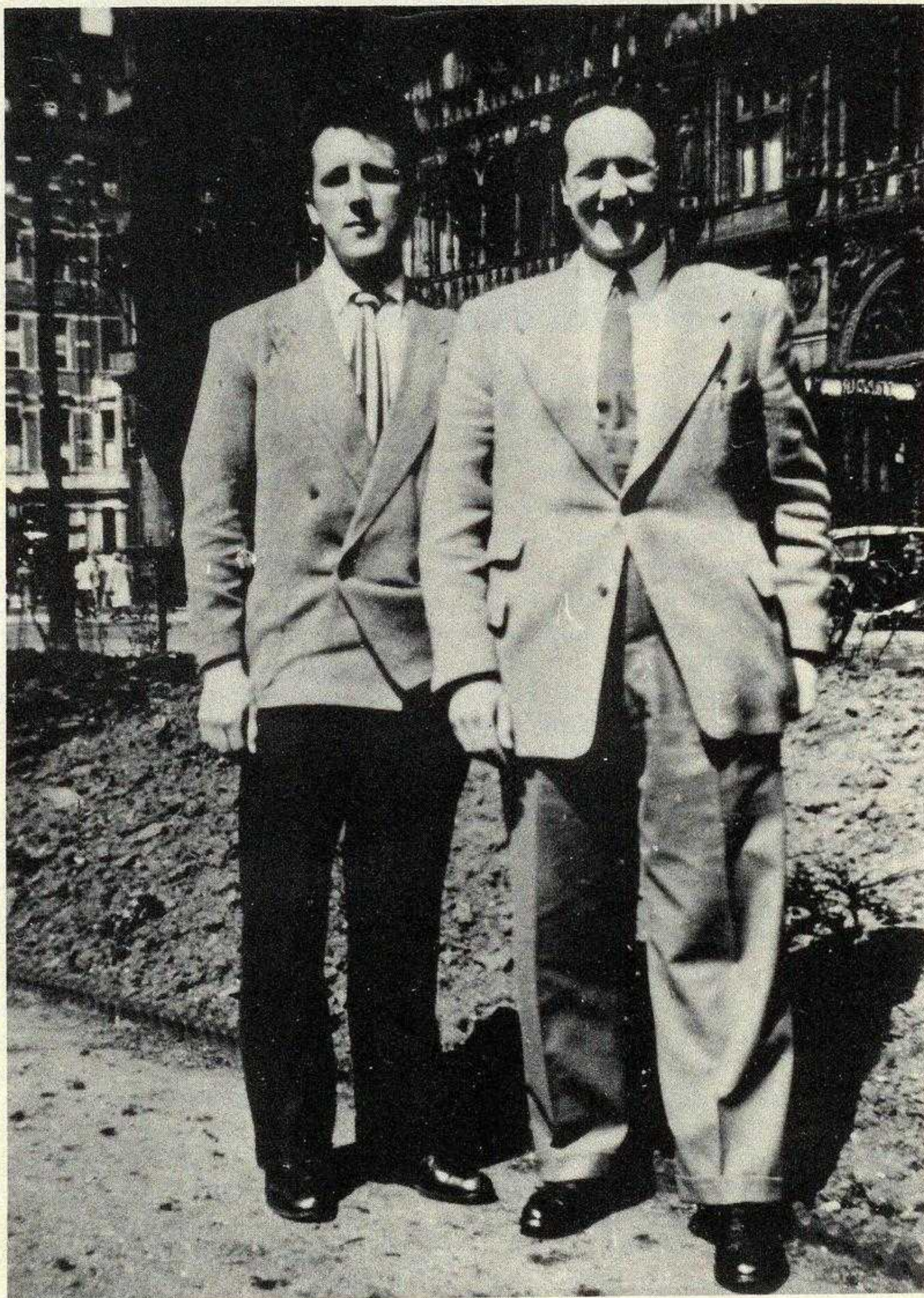
I think I'd like to write a fantasy novel. Although perhaps I should read more fantasy before I start on it. I've always stuck pretty much to science fiction.

I'll do you a list if you like. You could wade knee-deep through the bad stuff, you know. A good rule

of thumb is that if it's a female author whose name starts Mc or Mac, it's probably good. R.A. MacAvoy, Patricia McKillip, Robin McKinley. Some of C.J. Cherryh's work is fantasy, and Joan D. Vinge's work is science fiction, but feels like fantasy. Same with Geta, by Donald Kingsbury. And John Crowley is widely agreed to be brilliant. My favourite of his is *Little, Big*, but *Engine Summer's* shorter and probably easier to get into. That should keep you going for several years.

Well thank-you. That's very kind of you.

Glad to have been of some use.



Bob Shaw, aged 19, with fellow sf fan Derek Pickles, at the Easter SF Convention, London, in 1951 (photo courtesy of Derek Pickles)



# How to Write Science Fiction

Bob Shaw

## Characterization

One of the charges often laid against science fiction is that it has no characterization worthy of the name.

There is no point in denying the charge. Thousands upon thousands of sf stories have been peopled by nothing more than the proverbial "cardboard cut-outs"; and even greater numbers have featured what might be described as "tissue paper cut-outs." In these yarns the characterization is so nominal as to be practically nonexistent.

"Great!" you may cry. "I will fill my stories with genuine, rounded, fully realized, flesh-and-blood characters. My characterization will be as good as in any mainstream fiction. It will be something to which sf readers are unaccustomed, and I will be able to take the field by storm."

That is a perfectly natural, and laudable, reaction – but at this point a word of warning! As is so often the case in the writing of sf, things are not as simple and as cut-and-dried as they may seem.

## Knowing Where To Stop

One thing you have to consider is the likelihood that most science-fiction devotees have previously been exposed to good characterization – during their reading of mainstream books and magazines. (The sf field is noted for its high proportion of fanatical followers, but they also tend to have read widely in other categories.) It is even possible that many of them deserted the mainstream precisely because they became impatient with penetrating character studies and wanted to enjoy, say, puzzle stories in which the fictional problems were laid out for them as succinctly as possible.

Science fiction, by its very nature, is suited to puzzle stories. They are an integral and respected part of the field, and the reader would probably be justified in complaining about an example which was plumped up with a lot of characterization. It would get in the way of the story's legitimate aims. Boiling the matter down to the absurd, the old joke about the man who dreamed he was eating peppermints, and woke

up to find the buttons gone from his pyjamas, would not be improved by the addition of 5,000 words detailing the traumas of his past life.

We are, despite jokey references, touching on serious issues here.

Many writers deplore the categorization of fiction – claiming it is an artificial device forced on them by booksellers – but it is a fact of life and there is no use pretending that it isn't. In some respects I would prefer a literary climate such as existed at the turn of the century, in which even the most eminent writers would occasionally turn their hands to what we now classify as science fiction, and the stories were published in mainstream journals without a word of discriminatory editorial comment. On the other hand, the mustard-keen fan of sf (or any other category) appreciates not having to spend time in searching through irrelevant material.

The point is that, when you are sitting down to write a science-fiction story, it is worth bearing in mind that readers – and editors! – may not want a great deal of wordage devoted to characterization. This is not pure philistinism. Rather, it is a recognition of the fact that a piece of sf usually has to accommodate a range of "characters" which are rare in the mainstream. The idea can assume the role of a character – as can other elements such as an alien environment or an alien society. There is a limit to how much even the most skilled writer can cram into a few hundred pages, which is one of the reasons the sf field abounds in trilogies and series. (A popular in-joke among authors is the reference to working on "the sixth book of my trilogy".)

It's all part of what we have already referred to as the "distinctiveness" of science fiction – the necessity for an sf story to provide something which is not available in any other branch of literature.

## Trying To Fight City Hall

Early in my career I fell into the trap of deciding to write a novel in which the action, settings and – above all – characters would be handled exactly as in a decent mainstream book. I set

to with great enthusiasm and produced *Ground Zero Man* – a novel, set in near-future England, about the awful trouble a scientist gets into when he creates a machine which can explode every nuclear bomb in the world simultaneously. When the manuscript was duly mailed off to my usual publisher, via my literary agent, I sat back with a self-satisfied smirk and waited for the adjudication.

What actually happened was that my agent got a rather terse letter turning the book down. Adding what I saw as insult to injury, the letter concluded by saying: "We have an option on Bob Shaw's next science-fiction novel – and as *Ground Zero Man* can by no stretch of the imagination be described as science fiction – that option is unaffected and remains in force."

The book was eventually brought out by that selfsame publisher, quite a few years later and under a different editor, but the episode poses an intriguing question. How could a story which is set in the future and concerns a fictional scientist and a fictional scientific device fail to be classed as sf? The answer is that it didn't have the *feel* of sf. I had failed to give the idea its due prominence as a character. I stoutly maintain that my treatment of the story was superior to the accepted sf treatment of the day. It has recently been reprinted with some up-dating as *The Peace Machine*, and – significantly – has led to many people asking me why I never became a thriller writer.

But, and it is a big but, although I personally saw the book as an artistic success, it came near to being a total failure in terms of my main objective – which was to make sure that everything I wrote reached the maximum possible audience, with a commensurate financial reward. The moral is that if you want to succeed in sf it is advisable to pay attention to the genre's ground rules.

A friend of mine once summed the matter up by saying, "Why should I turn to sf for character studies while I still haven't read all of Dostoevsky?"

I'm not trying to give the impression that characterization has no place in a science-fiction story. Far from it! A science-fiction story should have the

exact amount and type of characterization that it needs – and the author has to be able to make an informed judgment.

All right, how do you go about it?

## Characters In Context

The obvious method is that of compression, the telling detail which conveys a wealth of information. The snag is this method usually does not travel well from the mainstream to the specialized world of science fiction. A mundane author may write: "Forsythe-Williams adjusted his monocle." Or: "Joe Bloggs splashed tomato ketchup on his chips." In each case the author, by expending only a few words, has drawn upon the equivalent of millions of words represented by the reader's familiarity with his own society. Even the characters' names speak volumes!

By contrast, look at what happens when a science-fiction writer tries the same trick, the same shorthand. He may write: "Nargle ordered a glass of glymm juice." The sentence looks much the same as the two previous examples, but how much background information does it convey? None! The reader doesn't know if "Nargle" is a patrician or a plebeian name. He doesn't know if glymm juice is on a par with champagne or brown ale. For all he knows, a member of the imaginary society only orders a drink in a glass – in preference to a ceramic mug – when he wants to be safe against poisoning, or to celebrate the shedding of his third skin, or to challenge his neighbour to a duel.

The possibilities multiply endlessly, and the closer they get to infinity the more work the sf writer is called upon to do to bring the unruly herd of variables under his personal control.

This book deals with the special concerns of sf writers, so I am not going to devote a lot of space to the general principles and techniques of characterization which can readily be gleaned from other sources. The main thing is for the beginning sf writer to go into the arena with his eyes wide open; to be fully aware of the unique problems; and – on the positive side – to be stimulated by the difficulties so that, instead of perhaps handling characterization in a perfunctory manner, he is inspired to draw upon unknown creative reserves.

So far in this chapter I have been emphasizing the difficulties of characterization in sf, but there are also many favourable winds and tides.

## Human Characters

When it comes to characterization one of the most basic and influential things an author can do is describe the appearance of his fictional personalities.

I would imagine – though I might be challenged on this – that even a blind person reading in Braille would value these summaries of visual characteristics, if only as a means of keeping tabs on the various players as they step out of the narrative limelight and reappear perhaps many pages later.

In science fiction, because of its limitless possibilities, the author has the opportunity to go on descriptive binges. But beware of the temptation to over-indulge at the banquet. In particular, be careful about the allure of characterization by quirk. In sf it is easy to create a seven-foot-tall albino Eskimo who has lost one eye and in its place wears an egg-sized opal; who is minus one of his hands and instead has been provided with a cluster of multi-connectors which enable him to plug into and control any machine in the universe; and who flits around in an antigravity sled which emits purple smoke.

Such exterior adornments are all very well, but the reader will not become involved with your character unless he is induced to sympathize with him and pray for his success; or – something equally effective – to be persuaded to hate the character and pray for him to get his come-uppance.

It is generally inadvisable, therefore, to spend a lot of wordage on the physical description of any character. A paragraph is enough for most purposes the first time a character appears, and it should be done as clearly as possible. Try to see your invented person – if necessary going as far as making a sketch – and then try to make the reader see as well.

In that introductory paragraph you will possibly mention as many as six or eight graphic details, depending on your own style and inclinations. The character may go off stage for quite long periods, and each time he comes back into the focus of the narrative it is worth reminding the reader who he is. (The name alone is not enough, even for major characters. How many times have you been reading a novel, and a third of the way into it had a name spring off the page at you, forcing you turn back to the beginning to find out if this is the hero or some auxiliary?)

Obviously, you don't want to repeat the character's physical description in its entirety, so it is a good idea – while penning that initial paragraph – to select one salient feature and earmark it for use as the character's motif. Every time he pops up again you should sound that key note in a few words, with variations of course. In this way it is possible to reinforce the reader's memory – and greatly increase his involvement in and enjoyment of your story – with a highly satisfying economy of words.

In sf there is the chance to strengthen the fabric of a story by linking charac-

ters' personal appearance to their environment. A human settler who has grown up on a low-gravity world can be expected to be much taller than a person from Earth; similarly, one who comes from a planet with a sparse atmosphere will have a very large chest capacity. If you bring these characters to Earth they will suffer various kinds of discomfort, unless special provisions have been made in a reception centre or the Galactic Hilton. Conversely, if you send ordinary humans into the settlers' environment, the fictional tables will be turned.

## Alien Characters

Possibly the most constructive thing you can do when it comes to characterizing an alien being is to admit – right from the outset – that the task is impossible!

This is being realistic rather than defeatist, and there is no need to feel guilty about it. Consider, for example, the situation you would be in if you had only two characters in a story – a man, and a cobra.

You could no doubt acquit yourself well if you were required to produce an archetypal *Wide World* adventure in which the intrepid adventurer has to get past the snake and out of the cave before he faints from the pain in his broken leg. But, what if the imposition was to produce a story in which the explorer and the cobra become friends, have long conversations, and go off together to overthrow a local tyrant?

Obviously, such a fiction could not be created on any kind of realistic level, even though – compared to an interstellar alien – the cobra has to be as familiar and as endearing to us as Aunt Mabel's pet spaniel. The cobra was spawned from the common ancestral ocean-soup, it has shared the planet with us for millions of years, and yet as far as we are concerned it is an alien creature. What does that imply about a life form which originated on a different kind of planet orbiting a different kind of sun in a distant galaxy? Logically, such a creature is bound to be far more alien than our dear old cousin, the homely cobra. It is bound to be alien to the nth degree – totally beyond human comprehension. It could be argued that the gulf between man and snake is largely created by the fact that one is intelligent and one isn't; but it is likely that – were the snake to be given some tens of millions of years to develop its IQ – it would become even more 'snaky', even more alien, even more incomprehensible.

Where does that leave you, after having rashly committed yourself to populating part of a manuscript with "aliens"? Oddly enough, if you keep a level head you can do rather well out of the situation. You can even capitalize on the difficulties – which is part

of the sheer enjoyment and challenge of writing science fiction.

## How Alien Can You Get?

The first step is to slot your alien into one of two basic categories – “opaque” or “translucent.”

The labels should be self-explanatory, but just to sum up: an opaque alien is akin to the cobra; a translucent alien is more akin to Aunt Mabel’s spaniel, or perhaps to Aunt Mabel herself.

When you create an opaque alien you are being a realist and admitting that nobody can have insight with regard to such a creature. Its very impenetrability can then be turned to your advantage, because you are required to deal only with its externals, to report on its appearance and actions. This distancing of the subject is in accord with the situation which would prevail if you really did see a spaceship disgorging large beings with the wrong number of legs. (This is something of an aside, but there is nothing like giving a creature a multiplicity of legs to make the reader highly wary of it and uncomfortable in its presence. The fear of spiders is so strong and universal – I have dubbed it the arachnid reaction – that there are some grounds for believing they did not originate on this planet. We all know that two is the right number of legs to have; we can accept four quite well, largely because of adorable ponies and Aunt Mabel’s pet spaniel; six is definitely getting beyond the joke, even though the humble bluebottle has been around for ever; but when it gets to eight...!)

Opaque aliens cannot be characterized, but they can be individualized by the trick mentioned earlier in this chapter – relating appearance to home environment. One of my first novels, *The Palace of Eternity*, featured some highly satisfactory nasties called Syccans. They came to Earth from a planet of endless rain...therefore they needed water continually falling on their skins...therefore when on Earth, like humans needing oxygen tanks on Mars, they wore devices which showered them with water.

That worked out pretty well – nice bit of exotic detail – but the Syccans had to be really loathsome, so I went a bit further into their environmental background and came up with the notion that, as they would never need to wash, their outlook on personal hygiene could be a lot different from ours. Where did that get me? Well, here are three of them in action...

The mist from the overhead nozzles attached to the tanks on their backs billowed over everything in the room, filling it with a foetid humidity, condensing on and lubricating the exposed, palpitating lungs and other organs of the aliens. Mewing and clicking sounds came



“Did the Earth move for you, darling?”

from their shoulder-mouths...A valve in the central alien’s lower gut popped loudly, spattering the other two with grey-and-white excrement which was gradually washed away by their sprays, and the silence resumed...

Fairly disgusting, I admit, but it made for damned good aliens. I have been complimented many times on my Syccans, and accept the praise with glee because – and I make no apology for reiterating this – writing sf has to be approached with zest. Address yourself to humanity’s weightiest problems, by all means, but at the same time make use of all the recreational possibilities. Designing a really good monster can be fun!

Moving on to translucent aliens, you should accept that as soon as you presume to see some distance into them they will cease to be aliens. Any character you give them will be a reflection of some part of your own human character – even when you deliberately invert the reflection. Again, this is not an occasion for despair. One of the quickest roads to success in any branch of the arts or crafts is to learn the best methods of cheating – and successfully portraying the translucent alien is a subdivision of sf which demands sophisticated and knowledgeable cheating. Your aliens may be humans in disguise, but if you use imagination and ingenuity to make

it a clever disguise you will have fulfilled your contract with the reader. After all, the object of writing science fiction is not to design “real” extraterrestrials any more than the object of writing fairy stories is to anatomize Tinker Bell.

## You’re Just Being Contrary

Inversion, mentioned above, is an effective technique. It involves taking basic human attitudes or attributes and standing them on their head. For example, no man or woman in good mental and physical health wants to die. The prospect is so abhorrent that for the most part we avoid even thinking about it – therefore an alien character who didn’t mind dying, and perhaps even looked forward to it, would be alien in the extreme.

One of the best treatments of this idea was in Hal Clement’s novel, *Cycle of Fire*. The baffled anguish of the human protagonist – as he fails in all his attempts to talk his alien friend into seeing “reason” and going on living – has lingered in my memory for decades. Another early example cropped up in Stanley G. Weinbaum’s 1934 short story, “The Lotus Eaters,” in which a human explorer on Mars discovers an intelligent vegetable. He is having philosophical chat with the vegetable when, to his horror, he notices that it is being devoured by an

animal and will soon be all gone. The point of the story, which was well ahead of its time, was that the vegetable – not being prey to human emotions – was not at all bothered about being eaten and calmly went on philosophizing until the last possible moment. I read that story about forty years ago, and today I sometimes become irritated with myself for letting such a naive, immature and obvious example of inversion stick in my mind. But it worked, dammit.

Just about anything is possible in sf, so another highly successful way of dealing with alien characters is cheerfully to abandon the attempt to portray them as anything other than humans in disguise. That approach, which lends itself to lightweight stories, was pioneered by Eric Frank Russell, the Cheshire-based writer who invented the cute, lovable alien almost single-handed. Lines such as, "Captain Grekle twitched his third pseudopod – the Arcturian equivalent of looking embarrassed," were EFR's trademark and have been made good use of by later generations of writers.

One of the nagging problems in dealing with translucent aliens is that of communication. Opaque aliens are no bother in this respect – they don't talk to us, and we don't talk to them – but once you start to characterize aliens there pretty well has to be some kind of dialogue. The writer's options are limited here, and none of them is entirely satisfactory – so it is a good idea to weigh up the various drawbacks before you sit down at the keyboard.

We have already admitted that our aliens will be humans in disguise, but it is a flimsy disguise indeed if they speak fluent English and can handle the subjunctive like an Oxbridge don. Perhaps the most naturalistic and sensible thing to do is have both parties get together and conduct language courses. The snag, as far as drama is concerned, is that the process could take years and would not readily be accommodated in most plots. Anyway, an alien who agreed to do that would be behaving in a more human-like manner than most humans.

Another old standby is: "We learned your language and customs by studying television transmissions which leaked into space." I suppose that is a kind of rationalization, but the distorted impression an alien would get of our language(s) and culture(s) by studying a jumble of TV programmes from afar is a fit subject for satire.

Then there is the universal translator – a wonderfully versatile device, quite often worn near the throat, which enables space travellers to engage in immediate conversation, no matter how disparate their backgrounds. In spite of its sheer impossibility, both in theory and practice, the universal

translator keeps popping up in one form or another because writers find it so useful. However, the incredible pace of development in microcomputers permits us to look at the idea of a smart universal translator. The SUT might deduce what an alien is saying from circumstance and context, starting off with an understanding of only two or three sounds and rapidly building a useful vocabulary. There are opportunities here for some clever writing, especially for those with the relevant technical or scientific qualifications, but don't try it unless you have definitely made up your mind to write hard science fiction.

Finally in this section there is our old friend – telepathy.

I don't know what science fiction, science fantasy, fantasy, supernatural, horror, and imaginative writing in general would have done if the human race had not clutched the notion of telepathy to its collective bosom a long time ago. There is not a shred of scientific evidence to suggest that the faculty exists, even in the most rudimentary form, but somehow the idea of unassisted mind-to-mind communication at a distance is so beguiling that we refuse to give it up.

Logically, if telepathy between humans is impossible, then telepathy between humans and aliens should be even more of a non-starter. Many times when doing the initial plotting for a story I have sworn a mighty vow not to fall back on such a hoary and unlikely device when my humans meet up with my translucent aliens. Hah! After a few hours of torturing my brain, I have always undergone an almost religious conversion, becoming more liberal and tolerant in my outlook.

Who am I to decide what fantastic mental powers an advanced creature from another planet might have? – is the way my thinking usually goes on such occasions.

Telepathy is destined to remain as a major avenue of communication between humans and aliens in sf, simply because the authors can hardly do without it. As is so often the case in this kind of writing, an intelligent appreciation of the difficulties should

stimulate you to devise ingenious ways around them. And by making the reader aware of unanticipated problems, and then ostentatiously solving them, you can give your writing an extra air of authority.

## Exotic Names

Names are an important part of characterization in any branch of fiction – and their role is enhanced in sf – but beware of going over the top.

When one is deciding what an extraterrestrial should be called there is a powerful temptation to suggest its alien origins by, for instance, giving it a name which contains no vowels. That trick has been worked close to death over the decades, and there is the risk of producing something which is unintentionally ridiculous or which irritates the reader. Although we don't move our lips when reading we expect words to be pronounceable. It is also advisable to avoid names which end in "s" – otherwise there can be awkwardness with the possessive.

Another pitfall to be wary of is the use of typographical quirks. They may feel clever, they may look clever, but the result is a distraction from the narrative. One of the first science-fiction short stories I ever read featured an alien which introduced itself to some humans as "iGlann."

"Gosh, that's really alien!" I exclaimed, my adolescent mind deeply impressed. It was not until days later that I began to have niggling worries about how the humans knew the first letter in the alien's name was in lower case and the second in upper.

That objection to "iGlann" may seem pernicky in the extreme, but nevertheless it had lodged itself in my subconscious and was surreptitiously undermining the foundations of the story. The lesson is that you should never be perfunctory or superficial about any aspect of a story, especially characterization. By enjoying the challenge and getting everything as right as possible, down to the last microscopic detail, you can go a long way towards one of the science-fiction writer's principal goals – persuading the reader to suspend disbelief.

## The Three Rs – Rocketships, Rayguns and Robots

The dear old rocketship, in the pattern favoured by Flash Gordon, used to be an indispensable part of science fiction. There was a time when practically all one needed to set up in business as an sf writer was a facility for describing rocket exhausts – a flair for flares, if you like. In these Model Ts of

the astronautics world, "sky jockeys" used to blast, blaze, torch, burn or otherwise incinerate their way up from the Earth's surface to our neighbouring planets, and even to the stars.

It is possible to become quite nostalgic about those old stories, even though they provide yet another example of

how sf failed to get its predictions anywhere near the mark. All right, we forecast interplanetary travel, but people have been doing that for centuries as a kind of kneejerk of the imagination, ever since the notion of other worlds entered the general consciousness. It would have been gratifying if sf writers had managed to get even one detail right before real-life space technologists rubbed their noses in it.

The 1950 film, *Destination Moon*, scripted by Robert Heinlein, was regarded as a very good approximation of how things would actually be – but in retrospect it is laughable. In the following year George Pal made *When Worlds Collide*, in which a handful of people escape by spaceship from a doomed Earth. The only successful working example of a rocket that had been seen until then was the German V2, and sf artists of the day were enamoured of its mathematically pure lines, so Pal's escape ship was a silvery, tarted-up V2. The fact that the V2 was designed to crash nose-first into the ground at supersonic speed – hardly compatible with the idea of escaping from peril – was not really given much consideration.

The purpose of all the above is not to denigrate the sf practitioners of old, but to give reassurance to newcomers who may fear that the subject of space flight, so central to sf, will be too much for them.

## You Can't Get There From Here

Science-fiction writers are finding life progressively more difficult on all the worlds and moons of the Solar System. Many stories have yet to be written with those settings, but the going is getting tough for authors whose inclination is not towards really hard sf. At the heart of the problem is the fact that rockets – vessels which progress by shooting matter out of their rear ends at high speed – are not much use for getting around the galaxy.

The built-in snag with conventional rockets is that they have to carry their own propellants. The weight of the fuel is a major limiting factor in today's long-range jets, but with a rocket that was intended to reach distant stars we would be talking in millions of tons, which is obviously not a sensible proposition. A step further on from ordinary rockets we reach the interstellar ram-jet. These vessels use huge electro-

magnetic fields to scoop up the micro-dust that floats through all of space. This material is then used as reaction mass, discharged out the back at very high velocity, thus avoiding the need to carry all those megatons of fuel. An interstellar ram-jet would probably be of convenient dimensions – possibly about the size of a present-day car ferry – but it would never be able to reach C (the speed of light) and the journey to

would take a lot of expertise and talent.

Another way of dealing with slow ships is to put the crew into suspended animation for the duration of the voyage. That idea has a certain amount of sense to it, and can still be made good use of, though generally speaking the voyage has to be completed without incident, and the events of the story confined to planetary settings at either end. Not a great deal can be done with a row of frozen bodies, and the limited avenues of action have been pretty well explored.

## Stand Aside, Mr Einstein – You're Blocking The Way

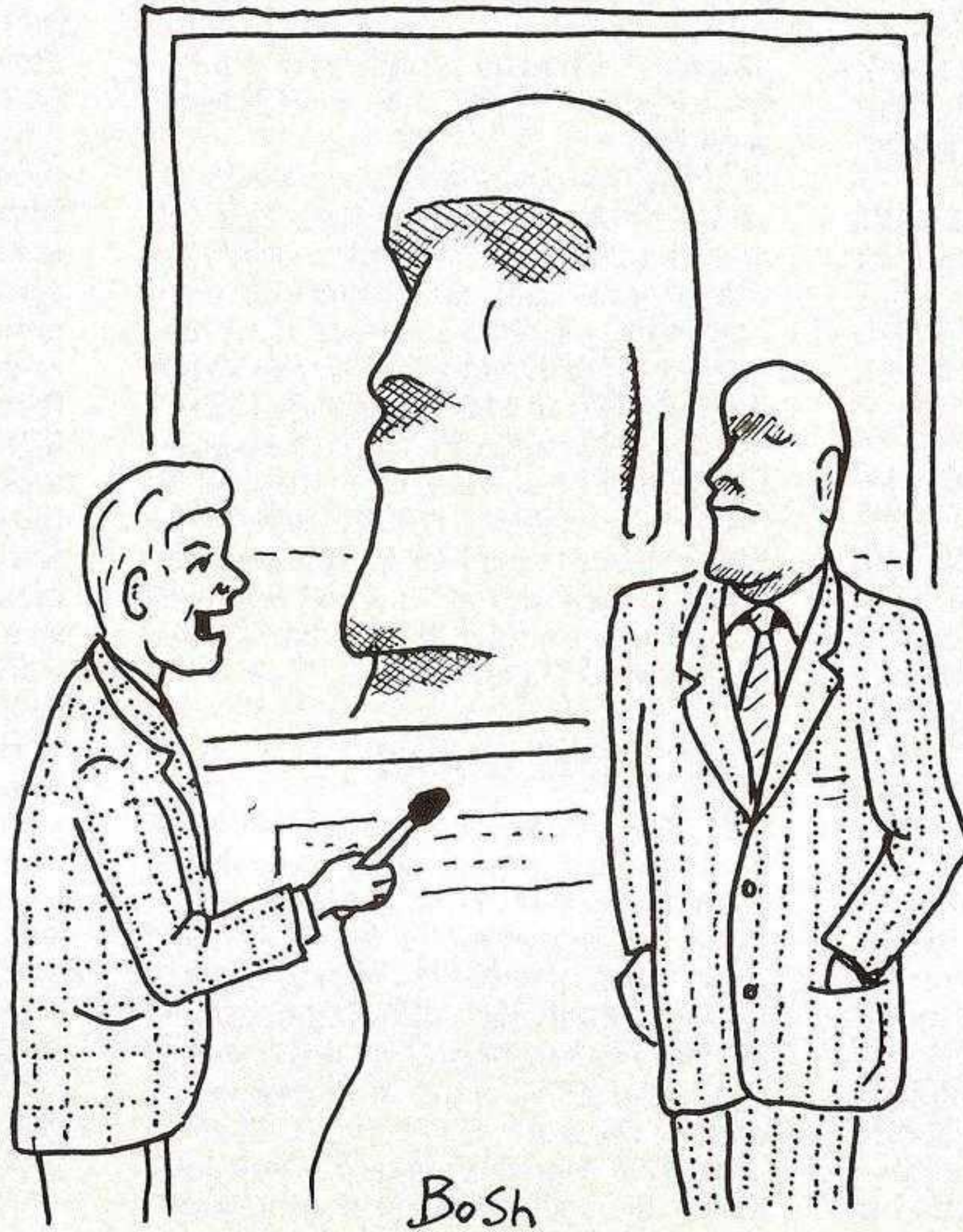
What I'm getting around to saying is that when NASA gradually drove sf writers off our neighbouring worlds, we put up with it, because you can't argue with cameras and scientific measuring instruments. With some grumbling, it must be said, we agreed to pack up and move to planets orbiting other stars – and then Albert Einstein chipped in, with his famous equation, and told us we couldn't even do that.

If we had meekly accepted the dictate that nothing can go faster than light, much good sf would have been reduced to the status of fairy stories, or would never have been written at all. It is essential to the genre that we have the ability to transport

people among the stars with journey times that can conveniently be measured in days, or hours, or seconds. In extreme cases, the trip should take no time at all.

That is why, over the years, sf writers have exercised much ingenuity in finding ways around the Einstein Barrier. It is all part of the Secret Game. Everybody involved knows that FTL (faster than light) travel is impossible, but as long as the writer puts in a few lines to acknowledge that the problem exists the reader will be satisfied and will play along. Most of the wordage will be gobbledegook, but it is nice when one can produce good gobbledegook. The following are some of the methods which have given excellent service, have become standard sf currency and are available to the beginning writer.

First and foremost is the warp drive, which at first was mainly used as a method of instantaneous travel. The idea was as this: imagine that a tiny



"Professor, what led to your lifelong interest in the Easter Island statues?"

a star would still be measured in decades, even under the most favourable circumstances.

One way around this difficulty is to accept the limitations and meet them head-on. This leads you to what is known as the "generation ship" story, in which the ship puts on a quick burst of speed at the start of the journey and then coasts to its target world, just as today's space probes do. It will take many centuries to reach a star by this method, so those on board must resign themselves to the fact that only their descendants of many generations later will see the destination. To me this has always seemed a rather sombre idea, and I have never written about generation ships, but there is nothing to stop new authors injecting freshness into it. A word of warning here! Do not attempt a story in which the travellers gradually forget about their origins and start believing that the ship is their home planet. I'm not saying it is impossible to revive that plot, but to do so

snail is on one corner of a big piece of paper and is determined to reach the opposite corner.

In normal circumstances the journey would take quite a long time, but you could help the snail by folding the paper over, corner to corner, and waiting until the little fellow has crossed from one to the other. When you straighten the paper out again the snail will find himself at his destination without having crossed the intervening space. To you it was a simple piece of manipulation, but to the snail it will have seemed like a miracle and he will probably puzzle over it for the rest of his life.

Warp drives operated in the same way. The pilot energized some kind of "geometry distorter matrix" – thus bending space like our piece of paper – made a few adjustments, switched off again and, voila!, the ship was at its destination.

That kind of drive is really good for getting around the universe, but it has a drawback in that nothing can happen during the voyage. It is over as soon as it has started. One of the best known pseudo-laws of sf is that pilots can never go into warp drive in the vicinity of a planet. The official explanation is either that the drive wouldn't work properly, or that it would do terrible damage to the planet. But the real reason is that it forces ships to proceed conventionally for a while, during which they can be chased, shot at, struck by meteors, sabotaged, intercepted, etc.

Science fiction depends so much on control bridge scenes, meetings with other ships, and so on, that the original warp drive was very soon modified to one with which the journeys take an appreciable and convenient length of time. When Captain Kirk's *Enterprise* goes into "warp factor eight" we know that something is being warped, even if there is some dispute about what it actually is, and the ship is enabled to fly at many times the speed of light.

One explanation is that such a ship "rotates" itself into another "dimension" or "frame of reference" where the speed of light is very much greater than it is in our continuum. There the ship can exceed  $C$  without contravening Einstein's laws. The names for this region are various – subspace, the fourth or fifth dimension, hyperspace, null space are popular – and the reader is accustomed to them. A line such as "the star cruiser emerged in normal space" speaks volumes.

Chief pioneer of the interstellar epic was Dr E.E. Smith, who was at his creative peak in the second quarter of this century. Although he qualified as a food chemist, and specialized in doughnut mixtures, "Doc" Smith's scientific turn of mind led him to the beautiful invention of the "inertialess drive." The inertia of a body is what

makes it difficult for you to move it from rest, or to stop it once it gets properly going, and Smith got great mileage from his idea.

Depriving a body of its inertia would entail depriving it of its mass, in which case it would cease to exist altogether, but Smith did not worry about trivia – instead he concentrated on giving his audience maximum enjoyment. A spaceship with no mass could travel at thousands of times the speed of light unimpeded by Einstein, but it was the absence of inertia which gave Smith the greatest chance to stir our sense of wonder.

If the commanders of two spaceships, going in opposite directions at a million miles a second, wanted to rendezvous with each other, all they had to do was to crash head on! With no inertia to contend with, the ships simply came to a halt on the spot without even a pencil or a coffee mug sliding off a table. In spite of an interval of forty long years, I vividly remember that priceless, cool tingling along the spine which the sf buff experiences when an intellectual crowbar forces his mind to expand.

## Full Speed Ahead

As I hope you are beginning to see, the business of getting your characters from star to star in a short time is wide open. Anybody can have a go. American writer Lester del Rey used to boast that he thought up a different rationale for faster-than-light travel in every space story he wrote – and there were a lot of them.

To give a further example, imagine that you have a time machine large enough to accommodate a spaceship. The stars are in constant motion, the galaxy rotates, the myriad galaxies of the observable universe are flying apart. So, if you activate your machine and step outside of normal time for a hundred or a thousand years, when you re-enter time you might be a long way in space from where you started.

That would undoubtedly be a risky way of getting from A to B, but to my mind not half as dangerous as the modern fad for diving one's ship into a black hole. Theorists have come up with the notion that black holes could be entrances to "worm holes" in space, and that a ship dropping into one of them could pop up in another part of the universe. Somehow, I have my doubts. It lingers in my mind that black holes were only given that label because they appear like holes in space. In fact, they are the opposite of holes – balls of matter so condensed that a piece the size of a tennis ball could weigh as much as the Earth. I have this sneaking suspicion that anybody naive enough to dive into a black hole would simply go splat!, but when reading sf or watching a movie I go

along with the rules of the Secret Game.

As a final instance of what can be done with FTL, let's use the true and tried sf technique of standing a concept on its head. The difficulty with interstellar travel is that the distances are so great – but what if the distances were very small? Only a few inches? The way to achieve that is to make the ship and its crew very large. Instead of switching on a warp drive they activate the "exponential dimension modifier," and instantly the ship and its crew are as big as the galaxy. They can see millions of stars floating all around them inside the ship like dust motes in sunlight. In the control room there is a set of cross-hairs. The commander, using the ship's micro-jets, delicately moves his vessel only a few inches, until the cross-hairs intersect close to the target star. He then switches off the EDM and the ship snaps back to its normal size. All is as before – except that the ship is now hundreds of light years from its starting point, and the sun that blazes in the view screens is an alien star...

In one book, *Ship of Strangers*, I carried that system to extremes and had a ship which inadvertently became bigger than the entire universe. If you're going to feature an accident you might as well pick a good one. The ship began shrinking slowly, which gave rise to scenes like the following:

A continuous rain of galaxies was spraying up through the floor, passing through the table and chairs and human beings, and out through the ceiling into the vessel's upper levels. The galaxies looked like slightly fuzzy stars to the naked eye, but when examined with a magnifying glass they were seen to be perfect little lens-shapes or spirals, miniature jewels being squandered into space by an insane creator.

Surgenor sat at the long table, bemused, watching the motes of light passing through his own arms and hands, and tried to comprehend that each one contained a hundred billion suns or more...

The point of all the above is that if you really need to go to the stars, all you have to do is go. The reader will be happy to go with you.

## Futuristic Weaponry

The heading of this section is probably something of a misnomer as far as sf on the screen is concerned. Anybody who watches the violent pantomimes which Hollywood passes off as science fiction must have noticed that the guns have become bigger and heavier – something which is contrary to the general run of technology. It appears that bulky machine guns, which at the beginning of this century were sensibly mounted on tripods, will in the

future be supported by bulging muscles alone. The same biceps-and-blasters trend is evident in the comics, which are now starting to be known – slightly defensively – as graphic novels.

When designing spaceships the author is always striving for improvements, but that is not the case with military equipment. The sf writer has a vested interest in keeping his imagined weaponry at a comparatively primitive level. If the handgun had been allowed to progress at the speed allowed for other science fictional hardware, the familiar six-shooter would soon have become a lightweight, pocket-sized object. It would probably be silent in operation, and totally effective. When someone points it at a soldier and presses the button that soldier will die for sure; when the focus is widened and the button pressed again a whole platoon or even a regiment will die for sure. Instantly, quietly and neatly.

I hope that by now you have gleaned enough about plotting in sf to foresee the problems posed by these perfect weapons. If they were brought into everyday science-fictional use – as are computers, robots, matter transmitters, etc – quite a lot of stories would never get written. Filmed sf, in particular, would suffer – most of today's offerings depending on the use of weapons which look impressive and make a lot of noise, but hardly ever achieve the desired result.

The above considerations make life difficult for the sf writer, but the situation is not hopeless, especially if you are prepared to take up the challenge to your imagination and go all out to

find something new. It is important to remember that, generally speaking, the primary purpose of a weapon is not to kill another person – but to force him to go along with your plans. I hate people who commit robbery with violence, but am prepared to grant them the benefit of the doubt and assume that, given a free choice, they would give up firearms for neat, silent instruments which would cause people to fall into a harmless unconsciousness for thirty minutes.

Even if a criminal was worried about witnesses, a gun which erased the day's memory would be all that was necessary – and the penalty would be less than that for murder. Science fiction offers possibilities in this general line of imaginative weaponry which are well worth exploring. American writer A.E. van Vogt, who was a leading figure in the genre in the 40s and 50s, came up with the idea of guns which would only fire in self-defence. Eric Frank Russell, for one of his early books, invented a truly nasty and effective handgun. It was silent, and occasioned the victim no immediate pain or obvious injury, but it caused some of his blood to clot. He would die of coronary thrombosis, but that would be some time later – by which time the assassin was long departed from the scene.

The point is that there is no need to give up the sheer nastiness and fiendishness and blood-thirstiness which adds spice to many narratives, especially those in which you want a really evil character to tax the hero's wits and make him look good. What I'm saying is that for the honour of our craft you should put the imagination to work

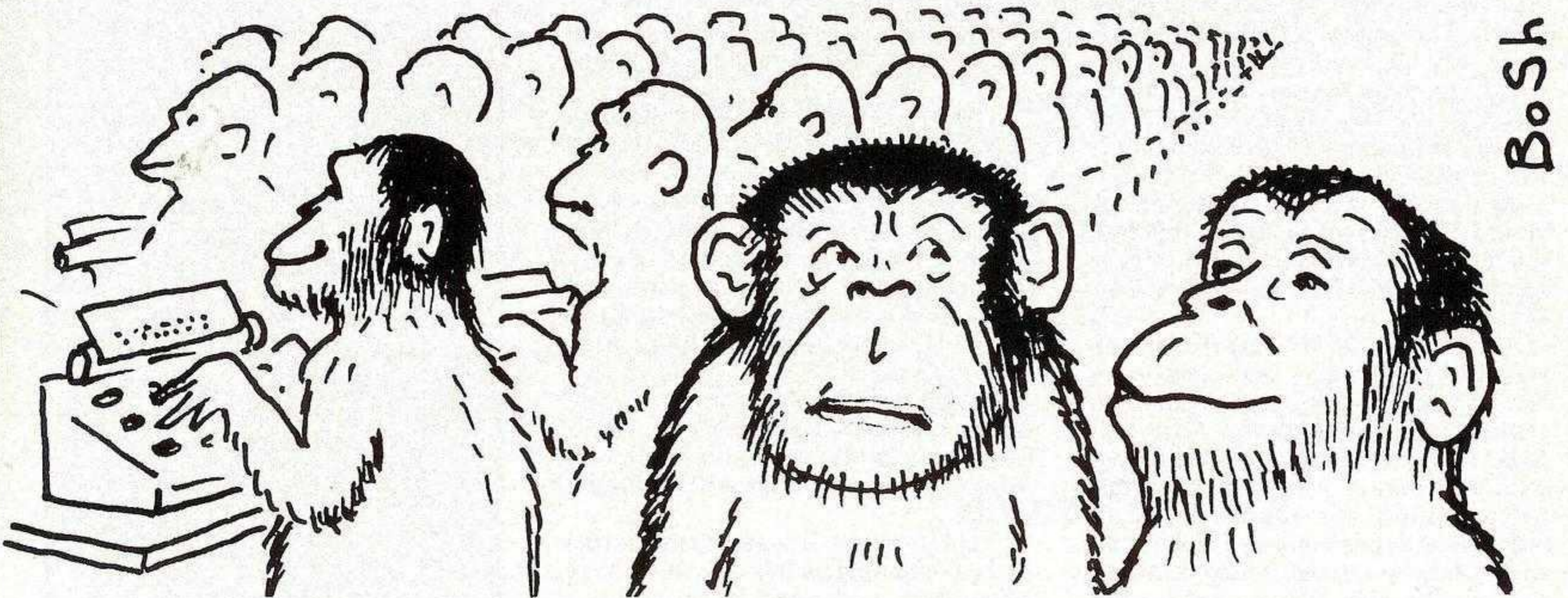
and equip your characters with more interesting hardware than was available to Buffalo Bill or Al Capone. And, as a bonus, there is the chance of getting a better story out of it.

## Metal Manservants?

In sf the word "robot" tends to refer to an intelligent machine which can get around by itself, preferably on two legs. A robot which progressed by employing wheels or caterpillar treads would somehow be unsatisfactory. It is the robot's attempt to walk like a man which betrays its ambition to be a man, or at least supplant him. The emotions aroused by that ungodly yearning were what made the robot a mainstay of printed sf for many years. We either felt smugly secure and a little sympathetic – "Fancy a poor assemblage of gears and transistors aspiring to our near-divine status!"; or we began to feel threatened and said, "My God, what if that soulless mannikin – incapable of feeling pain or pity – actually got the upper hand?"

Sf writers seized on the double-edged theme and produced thousands of stories, some of them among the best that have appeared in the genre. Asimov's laws of robotics are known to people who would not regard themselves as sf readers. Clifford D. Simak's wonderful "City" series succeeded in bringing tears to my young eyes with its poignant depiction of men, dogs and robots forming a partnership to face a future which was increasingly inimical to the most cherished human values.

The snag as far as the beginning sf writer is concerned is that the familiar



"If that guy doesn't learn how to spell Rosencrantz and Guildenstern we'll never get out of this place."

old robot has just about been done to death. Much of the difficulty springs from the growing realization that designing and manufacturing an effective man-like robot is just about impossible. Automation and the science of artificial intelligence have come a long way since Karel Capek introduced the robot idea, in a play first produced in Prague in 1921, but even now we are incapable of making a machine – no matter how large – which could go out on its own and perform a simple task like sweeping a town's gutters.

It should be noted that man-like robots are divided into two classes – humanoids, which in spite of having the general configuration of humans are still obviously machines; and androids, which cannot readily be distinguished from humans. If the android robot is ever to become a reality it will be in the far-distant future, but a question remains: What on earth would be the point in its existence? After all, when we want our clothes washed we entrust them to a primitive robot – one which is white, rectangular and has a round window in front. We don't expect a mechanical servant, perhaps wearing a frilly apron, to gather our undies into its arms and then wash them at a tub.

The whole notion of androids is a left-over from the early 19th century when the technology of the day first made it possible to manufacture clockwork dummies as showpieces which could excite the wonder of the crowd by raising their arms or turning their heads. To the naive mind (I have to be a little condescending here, although I'm sure I would have gladly been suckered in at the time), the next step was a fully functional artificial human being.

To any thinking writer of today that idea is, not to put too fine a point on it, daft. The only place where it is still given any kind of credence is Hollywood, which for the most part is creeping towards the stage occupied by printed sf in about 1940. The homicidal, near-indestructible android robot is ideal for the futuristic pantomime of violence, but I would advise the new science-fiction writer to try employing his imagination and talent to better effect.

A basic counter to fearsome robots was the cute, lovable, accident-prone and otherwise quirky type. That reaction was what provided *Star Wars* with R2D2 and C3PO – the Abbott and Costello of robotics. Again, film was far behind print, the comic aspect of robots having been targeted since 1950 by writers such as Henry Kuttner, Robert Sheckley, Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison. The vein has been mined pretty thoroughly by this time, but there is gold in it yet for the inventive writer with a talent for humour.

## The Ubiquitous Computer

When one tries in the imagination to jump ahead of actual technological development, it often turns out that it is the most difficult-seeming part of a problem which those pesky scientists and engineers – who obviously don't read enough sf – succeed in solving first. Forty years ago, when such computers as existed were about the size of a small bungalow, I would have predicted that the tricky bit in building a roughly man-like robot would have been the brain. Having seen what has happened in the meantime, I am becoming reconciled to the idea of a robotic computer-brain someday fitting into a small container. (Robots have the advantage over humans in this respect – it might be more logical, and safer, for the brain to be tucked away in the chest cavity.)

Recent achievements in computer development have been truly stupendous, and are continuing at an accelerating pace. Many sf writers and readers are fascinated by computers, and today – especially in shorter work – it is possible to sell stories which seem to consist of little but computer terminology. If your inclinations are in that direction this is the time to dive in and make as big a splash as you can.

It is worth remembering, however, that many people don't care about how computers work and find the whole subject quite dull. That being the case, keep in mind the fact that for most technological products the trend is that year by year they become easier to use. Early in this century the humble radio set was so complicated and full of mystery that hotels employed experts to stand in the lobby and conjure music from the air for the benefit of guests. It isn't so long ago that making a video recording was an operation that required a gang of BBC engineers and a room full of expensive equipment.

The way things are going in the electronics world it will fairly soon be possible to have computers the size of postage stamps, which will adhere to the wrist; or like small beads which can be worn in the ear. Operating them will not require a course of study and long sessions at the keyboard. If you need to find out how many Lithuanian nationals are working in Iceland, you will simply say, "Computer, how many Lithuanian nationals are working in Iceland?" The computer will reply, "Seven," and that will be the end of it.

That prospect, it seems to me, is one to be welcomed by the sf writer. I have often been impressed by an author's display of computer know-how, but there is a limit to how long one can stand in awe of such things. I quite like the thought of computers being shoved into the background a bit more, thus

clearing the stage for the really interesting characters in any drama – the human beings.

The above article consists of two chapters from Bob Shaw's book *How to Write Science Fiction*, to be published by Allison & Busby on 21st January 1993, priced at £6.99.

All cartoons by Bob Shaw.

## Interzone 1992 Popularity Poll

This is the January 1993 issue, mailed in early December 1992. Over the Christmas period, we'd be grateful if readers could bend their minds to rating the past year's stories, articles and illustrations. Let us know your thoughts on the contents of issues 55 to 66 inclusive (no need to wait until you've read the present issue, as it will count towards next year's poll).

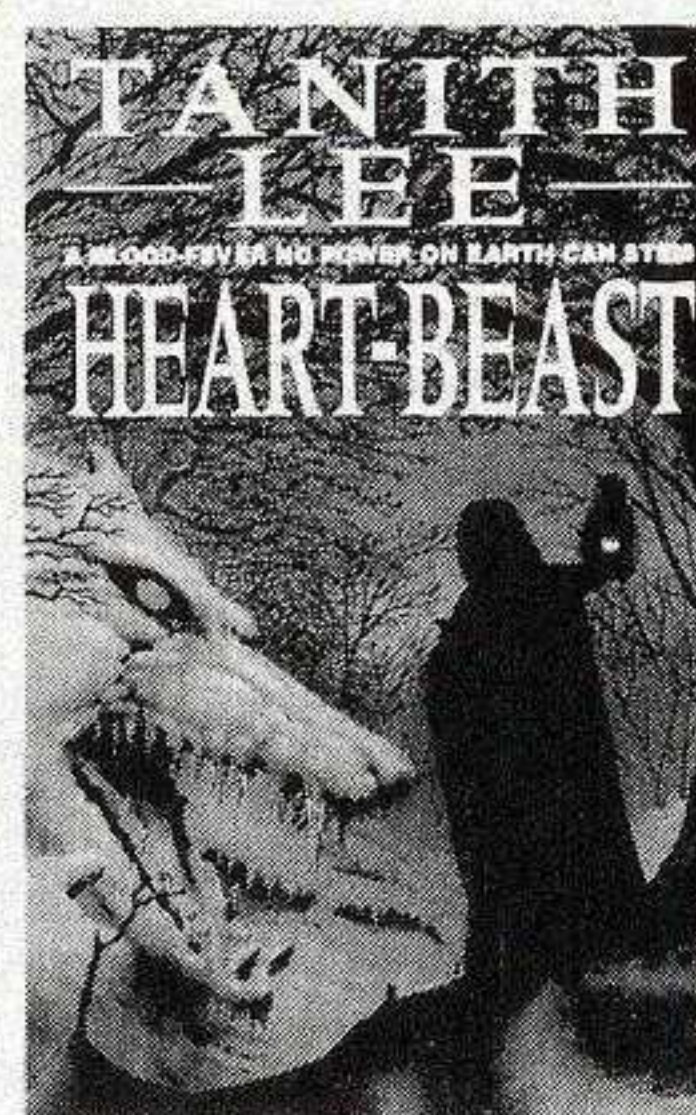
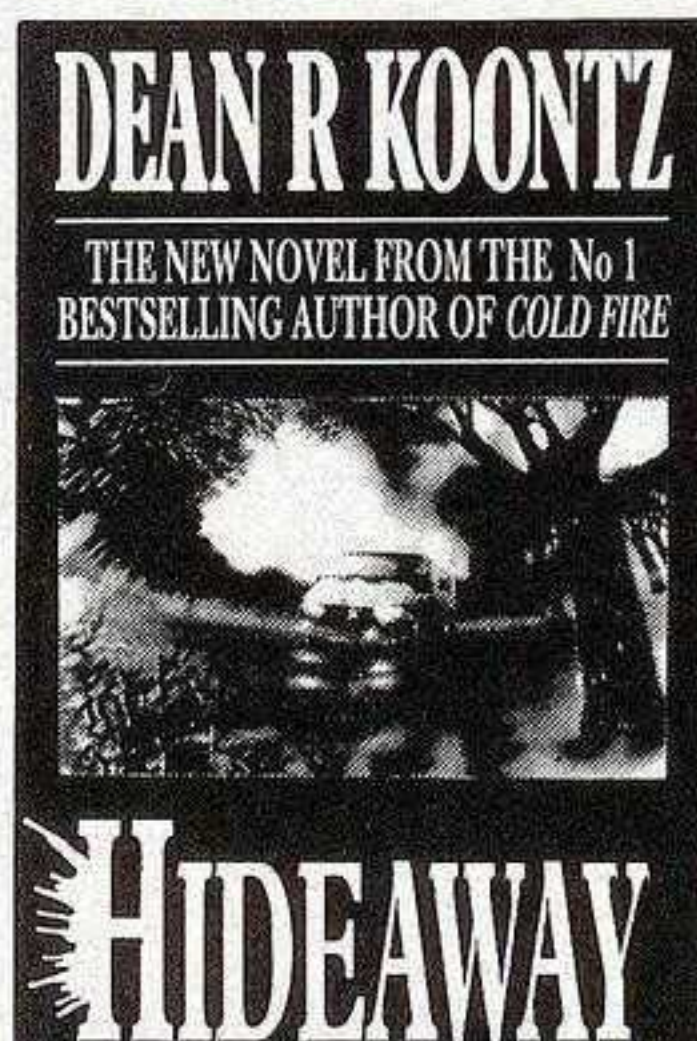
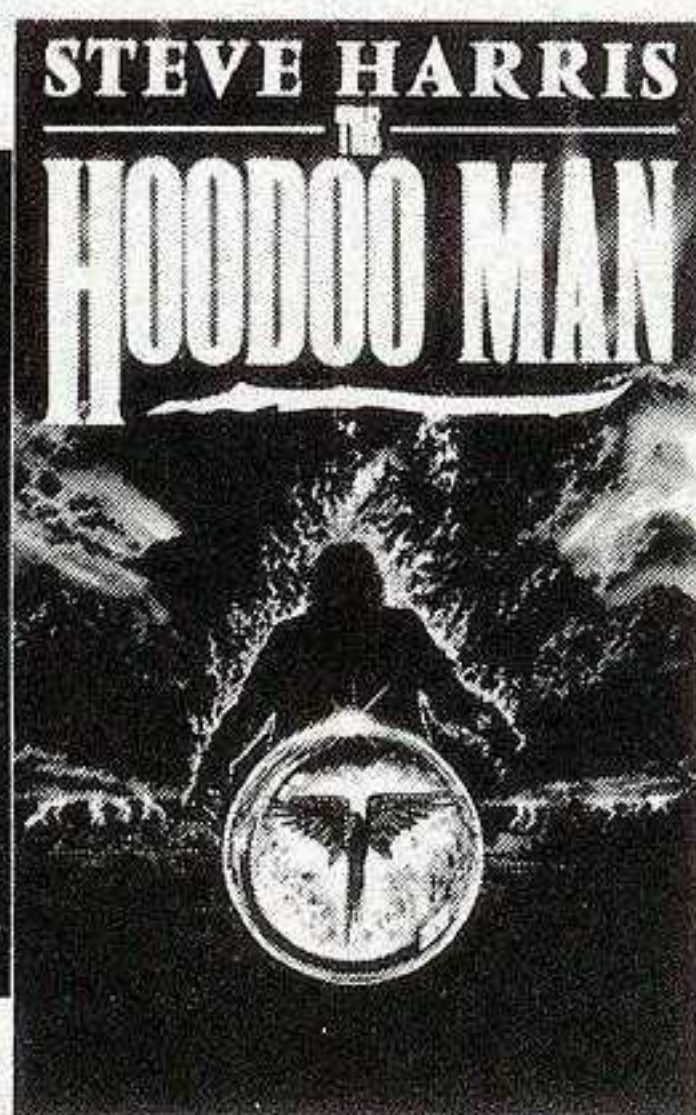
We'd appreciate it if readers (especially those who are renewing their subscriptions) could send us answers to the following questions. Just write or type your replies on any piece of paper and send them to us before the deadline of **1st February 1993**. We'll report the results in the spring. Any further comments about the magazine would also be most welcome.

- 1) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 55-66 inclusive (i.e. those with a 1992 cover date) did you particularly like?
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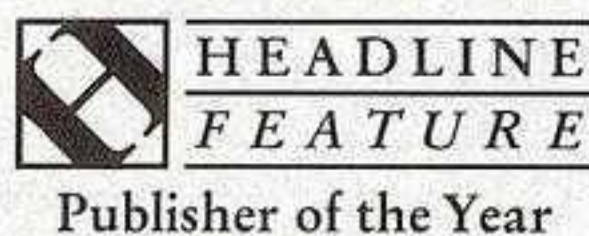


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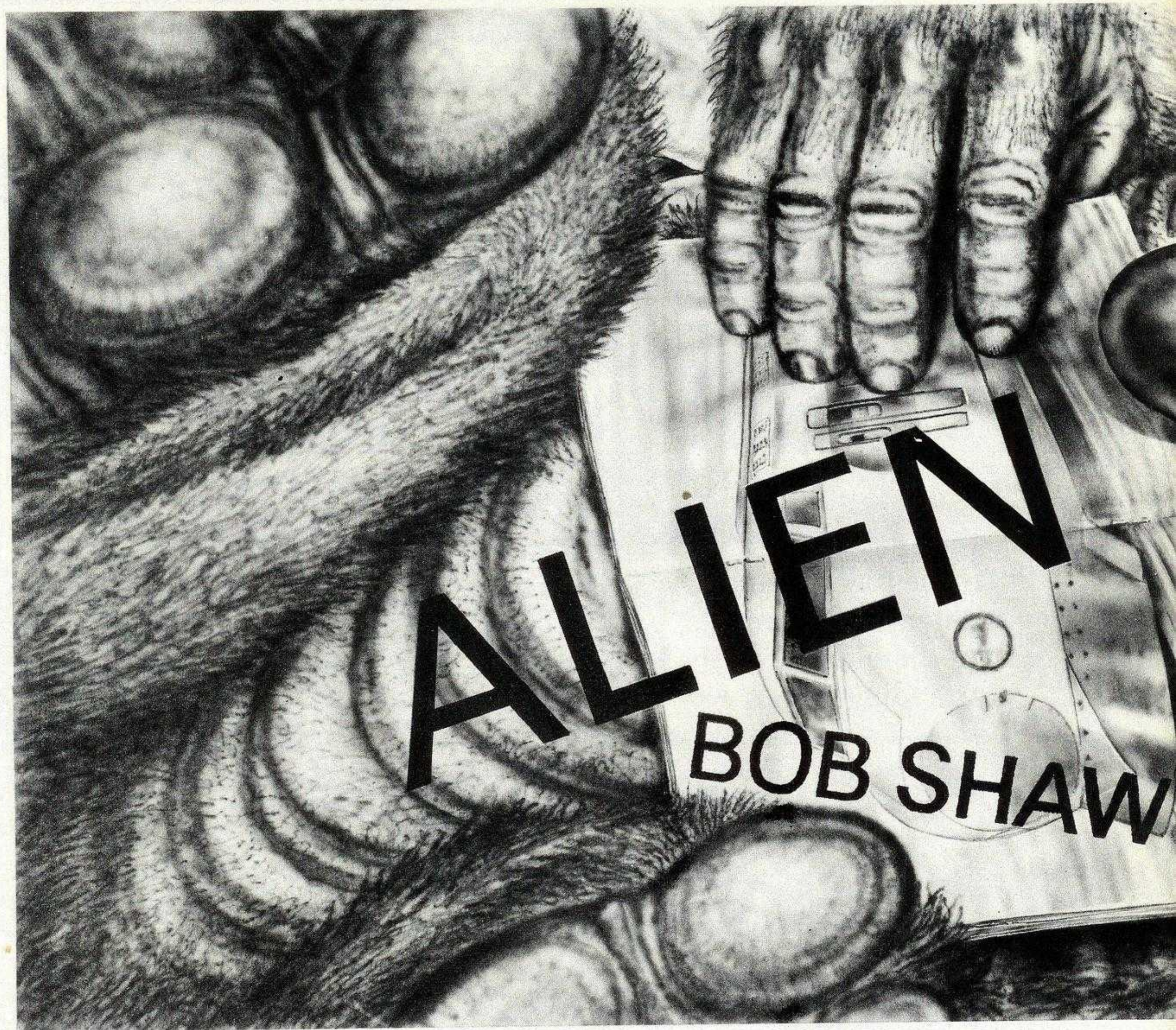
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“**A**lien porn,” Superintendent Glauber said, apparently deriving so much gloomy relish from the phrase that he felt compelled to repeat it. “Alien porn. Who would have thought it could cause so much trouble?”

“What exactly is the problem?” Warren Peace said, glancing about him with some curiosity. The Cosmic Pharmaceuticals office was octagonal in shape, and was on the highest point – about ten metres above sea level – of one of the few islands on the planet Golborne. Transparent walls revealed that the island was less than a kilometre across, and was surrounded by an ocean of yellowish muddy water or perhaps watery mud. The surface was speckled with a pattern of broad-leaved blue-green plants, like small rafts, which began at the constricted shore and stretched out to the limits of vision. Above the somewhat uninspiring vistas, the sun was represented by a circular patch of brightness in the continuous cover of leaden cloud.

“I thought you would have been fully briefed before you came here,” Glauber said, a look of suspicion

appearing on his peppery red countenance. “You don’t look like an Oscar to me.”

“Glad to hear it,” Peace replied. “Any human being who looked like an Oscar would be in need of urgent medical care.”

“But you look so... ordinary. Have you any credentials?”

“Here’s my badge.” Peace groped in a pocket of his vastly expensive and conservative denim suit and brought out the badge the Oscars had prepared for him. It was of solid platinum nearly a centimetre thick, inlaid with gold and heavily encrusted with the finest diamonds. The fortune it must have cost was evidence of the high regard in which he was held by the Oscars, but – because of the impractical streak in their nature – it had not been provided with any means of attaching it to his lapel. He had tried using a piece of surgical tape and a safety pin, but the badge had kept falling off and he had decided to keep it in his pocket. He handed the glittering emblem across the superintendent’s desk.

“That will do nicely,” Glauber said in reverential



Illustrations by Gerry Grace

tones as he fondled the badge. "Are you a very senior officer with the Oscars?"

"Let's just say I'm a special agent. Now, what's the problem here?"

"Well, as you know, this planet is the only source of the drug melancholin, commonly known as glum." In contrast to his previous attitude, Glauber was becoming effusive. "It is extracted from the petals of *Nuphar melancholium*, or the suicide lily. There is only one tiny flower to about ten square metres of floating pads, and it has to be gathered just before it sheds its petals. That is an incredibly difficult operation, because at that stage the flowers are so sensitive that the slightest vibration of the plant causes the petals to drop off and immediately lose their potency."

"I can see why power boats and helicopters are no use," Peace said. "How do you harvest the drug?"

"Golborne was uninhabited when we found it, so we bring in workers from other watery and swampy worlds. Mostly we bring in squelchers. Have you ever seen a squelcher?"

Peace thought back over myriads of alien beings he

had seen while in service with the Space Legion. "I don't think I've had that pleasure."

"It's no pleasure," Glauber said as he touched a control panel on his desk. One of the office walls became opaque and there appeared on it the image of one of the most unprepossessing creatures Peace had ever seen. It was orange-brown in colour and resembled an inflatable gorilla, one which had developed a slow puncture, making it a mass of sags, bags and wrinkles. It had at least three yellowish, rheumy eyes, but others could have been concealed in the hairy flaps and folds which encircled the domed head. Two red hemispheres – like halved tomatoes – which appeared to be nipples adorned the torso, one above the other. The squelcher had feet which were enormous in proportion to its body – great, flat, spreading things, the size and shape of well-used pillows.

"Jehovah's jockstrap," Peace breathed, reflexively shrinking back into his chair. "Can you train a thing like that?"

"They don't need any training. They're intelligent, and they're also very light for their size. Evolution

has given them bodies which are packed with hundreds of air sacs. They can move around on the lily pads without disturbing the glum flowers."

"And you say they're intelligent?"

Glauber nodded. "Many of them can speak quite good English when they feel like it, which isn't very often because they're a surly lot. They are supposed to have quite well developed cultures on a dozen or so worlds. We don't know too much about them, because the only landing rights they grant on their home worlds are solely for trade purposes. They're good customers for quite a few Earth products – canned fruit and vegetables, musical instruments, non-ferrous metal extrusions, bug sprays, and printing machinery..."

**G**lauber's flow of words slackened off and a haunted look appeared in his eyes. "Printing machinery! That's the cause of all the trouble. The one aspect of human culture that the squelchers seized on... was magazines. Not books so much, but for some reason they absolutely love glossy magazines. They just can't get enough of them – and you know what that has led to."

Peace frowned. "Big sales of Swiss watches and Victorian conservatories?"

"No!" Glauber, a hefty 50-year-old whose sleeveless shirt displayed impressively knotted musculature, leaned forward across his desk and his already florid complexion deepened in colour. "Warren, is there something wrong with your memory?"

Peace grinned, deciding to ease the tension in the atmosphere with a little humour. "I don't know – I can't remember having forgotten anything."

The sally evidently failed to achieve its objective, for Glauber's crimson countenance slowly developed purple patches, and Peace's startled gaze even detected traces of magenta here and there. He gaped at Glauber, fearful that the superintendent's head might be about to explode.

"I'm sorry about that," he said quickly. "My memory is a bit dodgy. I had total amnesia for a while, due to no fault of my own, and I'm not sure if I'll ever fully recover."

Glauber took a deep breath. "All right, Warren – we were talking about alien porn. When the squelchers are returning from leave they bring loads of magazines back with them. Magazines with dirty pictures! The magazines get circulated around the work force, and they have a terrible effect on production." A look of distaste appeared on Glauber's choleric features. "They're a randy, sex-crazed lot, these bloody squelchers."

Peace smiled tolerantly. "But if they're away from their wives or mates or whatever for a long time it's only to be expected that they'll take an interest in sexy magazines."

"They don't just take an interest, as you put it," Glauber snapped, his expression changing to one of outright disgust. "Just staring at the pictures gives them..." He paused and glanced around his office as though fearful of being overheard. "...orgasms!"

Peace resisted an urge to laugh aloud. "What harm does that do?"

"What harm?" Glauber bellowed. "Would you like to see a squelcher having a climax?"

Peace thought the matter over. "No."

"Well, you're going to," Glauber said grimly. He again touched the control panel on his desk and the frozen image of the squelcher on the wall changed to a moving sequence which depicted one of the gorilla-like beings standing on a green raft of lily pads. The squelcher was holding an open magazine in both hands. Peace could not see the illustration which was under scrutiny, but he could tell that it was having a powerful effect. The squelcher began by emitting loud sniffing and snuffling noises. Soon its eyes were bulging and its tongue, which resembled a very old blue-and-green sock, was hanging out. Mesmerized against his will, Peace saw that the alien's vertically arranged nipples were swelling like red balloons.

"The squelchers really hate anybody spying on them. They have an incredible sense of smell – usually they can scent you before they see you – but I managed to tape this with a hidden camera," Glauber whispered. "Just watch what happens next."

Still unable to avert his eyes, Peace watched as the squelcher gave a convulsive shudder, dropped the magazine and sprang into the air. The floppy orange body rotated while it was aloft, causing the creature to land on its back with an impact which rocked everything in sight. The alien's stubby arms and legs were rigidly sticking upwards, and its whole ungainly form was quivering violently in what Peace deduced to be paroxysms of ecstasy. The vibrations quickly spread into the underlying quagmire, causing ripples to spread outwards, and the image began to bounce as the camera was affected.

"That goes on for about twenty minutes," Glauber said as he switched off the picture and returned the wall to its former transparent state. "And by the time it's over every bloody glum blossom within 200 metres will have been shaken off its stem and destroyed. Now do you see why we have to stamp out this filthy porn trade?"

"Yes, but it doesn't seem much of a problem," Peace said. "All you have to do is ban the importation of all magazines."

"Do you think we didn't try that?" Glauber looked indignant. "Nooglenorker – that's the barstool lawyer representing the squelchers' union – soon put a stop to it. Under galactic law it's illegal to interfere with the free flow of goods and information."

Peace thought for a moment. "But that doesn't cover zee feelthy peectures, does it? Why not just prohibit the bringing in of pornography?"

"Hah!" Glauber exclaimed. "There's the rub! How do you tell what is alien porn and what isn't?"

"Once you've seen one member of a species, it should be easy enough to decide what gets their old gonads in a tizzy."

"You think so?" Glauber pointed at a table on which, previously unnoticed by Peace, were dozens of magazines, all of them open at the centrefold. "Take a look at those and find me the squelcher equivalent of Lola Grabdick."

"Who's Lola Grabdick?" Peace said as he stood up.

The superintendent looked embarrassed. "Oh. I think that's what one of current porno queens back on Earth is called. I'm not sure, of course. I don't know why that name came into my..." He broke off and gave Peace a ferocious glare. "Why are you interrogating

me? Take a look at the magazines, man! If you're such a goddam expert on ET erotica you shouldn't have any trouble spotting the porn."

**P**ease went to the table and examined the magazines, all of which were in grubby condition and were giving off a choking papery smell. He had fully expected to see pictures of some creature that was recognizably a squelcher, or close-ups of some parts of the nauseating squelcher anatomy, but the centrefold illustrations seemed to have no coherence or relevance to anything. One portrayed the most revolting ten-legged crustacean Peace had ever seen; another had a kind of warty caterpillar with sets of carnivorous jaws at each end; another looked like a robot which had been designed by an insane marmoset; another resembled nothing so much as a hippo which had been run over by a tank. Most of the pictures were of unprepossessing life forms, some adorned with bizarre clothing, but not one of the subjects looked anything like a squelcher. Other pictures seemed to be straightforward representations of flowers, rock formations, trees, clouds, heaps of varicoloured berries and beans.

"Well?" Glauber said maliciously.

"I have to admit," Peace replied slowly, "that I don't see any likely candidates for the female of the species."

"We don't even know if there is a female of the species. The bolshie buggers will tell us nothing." Glauber clenched his fists. "If they weren't the only ones who can harvest glum I'd fire the whole bloody lot."

"Are you sure these are pornographic pictures? Has the text ever been deciphered? For all we know, what you have here are cookery and fashion zines."

"The text is indecipherable," Glauber said. "These might be general magazines, but it's obvious that the publishers always include a dirty picture just to pander to the depraved tastes of my so-called workers. It's a filthy racket! They're making money at my expense!"

"Isn't that mostly conjecture?" Peace said, hoping to introduce a note of reason to the conversation.

"Conjecture my ass," Glauber shouted. "I know these are dirty books. I personally gathered up every one of them while their owners were busy going through their disgusting orgasms, generating tidal bloody waves, destroying thousands of monits' worth of good flowers. I tell you, there is something obscene and immoral and perverted in those pictures. If I could figure out what it is I could ban them. The damned squelchers are laughing at me...and wanking me into the poorhouse...and I want to know what you're going to do about it."

"Me!" Peace was about to protest at the unfairness of the superintendent's demand when he recalled that he had begged for this assignment, and that it was vital for him to make a success of it. Unless he proved himself capable of dealing with the case the Oscars were likely to fret about his welfare and put him under closer guard than before. He studied the strewn magazines again, with what he hoped was an air of professionalism, and an idea began to flicker in the deeper recesses of his mind.

"These magazines are all open at the centrefold," he pointed out.

Glauber nodded without showing much interest. "What of it? That's the best place for a sexy picture." He paused and again looked embarrassed. "At least, I suppose that would be the best place..."

"I've decided what I'm going to do," Peace said triumphantly. "I'm going to set up a checkpoint at the space field, and I'm going to inspect the incoming squelchers' baggage, and when I find any magazines I'm going to rip out the centrefolds and incinerate them."

Glauber's expression brightened, but only momentarily. "They won't like it, you know. They're sure to cause trouble. I know the squelchers are a pretty scrawny lot, but there are hundreds of them – and only a dozen or so humans on the whole island, including you."

"Don't worry about that." Peace gave a nonchalant wave of his hand. "I have my methods."

"I wish you luck."

Peace made for the door, then realized that a familiar comforting weight was missing from his side. He turned and said, "I'd like to have my badge back, please."

"Badge?" Glauber looked puzzled. "What badge?"

Peace sighed. "The one made of platinum and gold and diamonds. The one that's dragging your right-hand pants pocket down to the floor."

Glauber reached far into his pocket and brought out the gleaming disc. "This bauble? Anybody can make a mistake."

"You've said it," Peace replied sternly, removing the badge from the clasp of fingers which – while offering no real resistance – showed a strange reluctance to be separated from the massy object. It was as though the very molecules of Glauber's hands had an affinity for precious metals.

As Peace walked away from the office it occurred to him that he had little sympathy for Glauber, and that he could have been pressed onto the wrong side in what was scarcely more than a domestic squabble. He had to ignore all qualms of conscience, however, for if he failed in his mission he was likely to find himself back on Mirador IV, trapped in an iron box and restricted to a diet of lettuce leaves and carrot juice.

**T**he spaceport on Golborne consisted of little more than a long, narrow prefabricated shed. It had a low barrier and gate near the "inner" end. Peace had set up his checkpoint close to the gate, and he was facing a crowd of perhaps 200 squelchers who had just returned from home leave on the weekly local flight. The ungainly, simian-looking aliens were a colourful lot, with their holiday hats and bandanas and bright-hued shoulder bags.

Peace, having noted that glossy magazines were projecting from many of the bags, turned to Ozzy Drabble and Hec Magill, who were standing just behind him. The two Oscars, his own personal bodyguard, had been waiting in reserve in an orbiting ship since his arrival on Golborne.

"Here we go," Peace said to them. "Are you ready to do your stuff?"

Drabble and Magill nodded, highlights flowing on their golden features. Each took a thick steel reinforcing bar from a heap on the floor and began destroying

it by pinching bits off the end with his fingers. The process created hard snapping sounds which were painful to the ear. Peace nodded his approval, and turned to address the crowd of squelchers.

"My name is Warren Peace," he called out, "and I have been empowered by the Company to take whatever steps I deem necessary to prevent the importation of printed matter of a distasteful nature." *That was too wordy*, he thought, as the squelchers gazed at him in silence. *Better keep it direct and simple...*

"Accordingly, every worker who is carrying printed matter will bring it to this table for inspection. Anything I even suspect of being offensive will be confiscated. You may now approach the checkpoint in single file."

There was little doubt that Peace's message had been well understood because the squelchers began shuffling their huge feet and muttering to each other in angry tones. Even though they were speaking in perhaps a dozen alien tongues, there was a note of resentment in the composite sound which transcended all language barriers. Peace sat upright in his chair and tried to assume the kind of stern and fearless expression that a Lawrence of Arabia or a Sanders of the River might have used to quell a rebellious mob. His principal worry was that the squelchers would have as much trouble interpreting those subtleties of countenance as he had in trying to read the flabby horizontal folds which fate had obliged the aliens to accept as faces.

The first alien to reach the desk was clutching a glossy magazine close to his chest and was obviously displeased about the new immigration controls. "I don't think it's legal for you to confiscate our magazines," he said in a surprisingly thin, high voice. "What if I refuse to hand mine over for inspection?" Other squelchers pressing forwards behind him whinnied their interest in and approval of the question.

"Then you'll have to deal with my two friends," Peace replied, indicating Drabble and Magill with his thumb. Aware of having become the focus of interest, the two Oscars stepped up their act. Drabble struck himself on the forearm with a steel rod so forcibly that the metal coiled itself like snake, while Magill began tying another rod in dainty bows. The uncooperative alien watched the performance for a moment, seeming to deflate a little with each passing second, then slapped his magazine down on the desk.

Peace was pleased that a good precedent had been created. He too had doubts about the legality of what he was doing, and he was glad that the Oscars had been able to intimidate the alien without any actual threats being uttered. He opened the magazine at the centrefold and was slightly taken aback on seeing a picture of a large woolly marsupial with a head like that of a hippopotamus. The creature was leaning against a counter and was eating from what looked like a pile of living eels. Peace gave a shudder of distaste as he took in the extent of the being's ugliness. He was beginning to suspect that the squelchers were members of one of those complex multi-sexual species in which reproduction was achieved by many kinds of unlikely pairings. If that were the case, he felt sorry for the squelchers. Fate had dealt them a lousy hand when it came to looks, then had compounded the

joke by forcing them to couple with some of the most revolting biological specimens the worst planets of the galaxy had ever spawned.

Feeling guilty but yet determined to do his duty, Peace brandished the open magazine in front of the squelcher's face. "What do you think of that?"

The alien rearranged the folds of its face to uncover two extra eyes and focus them on the centrefold. At once it began to emit loud sniffing sounds and its whole sagging body began to ripple. Its striped tongue began to quiver, puffs of vapour came out of its ears, and the half-tomatoes of its vertically arranged nipples started to swell alarmingly.

"Well?" Peace demanded.

"Doesn't mean a thing to me," the squelcher said, speaking with some difficulty because its tongue had begun to coil and uncoil rapidly, hurling drops of saliva in all directions.

"I've got a word of advice for you," Peace said sternly. "Never try to play poker."

He grasped the centre pages of the magazine, ripped them out and dropped them into the molecular disintegrator he had positioned beside his desk. The box-like machine emitted a greenish flare, showing that the offending pages had been converted to dust. He checked the new set of middle pages and saw that they contained nothing but advertisements for refrigerators and washing machines, all of Terran design. Even the most cunning purveyor of alien porn would have been unable to conceal objectionable material therein.

"Let that be a lesson to you," Peace said, closing the magazine and handing it back to its owner. He had expected a fresh outburst of complaints, but the squelcher – after taking a few seconds to recover from its state of sexual agitation – quickly returned to normal, with no apparent signs of resentment.

"Will that be all?" the squelcher said in polite tones, thrusting its orange-haired abdomen forward invitingly. "Or would you like to conduct a body search?"

The thought was enough to make Peace feel queasy. "Pass on through," he said, repressing the idea that the alien was making fun of him in some way. "Let that be a lesson to you," he repeated, unable to think of any original comment. "Think yourself lucky! You've got off lightly this time."

**H**e kept muttering the same forms of words, with only slight variations, as the rest of the incoming alien workers began filing past his desk. To his relief the entire batch submitted without complaint to having their magazines stripped of the centre pages. His concern had been less with his own safety than with the prospect of what would have happened had Drabble and Magill had to exert force against the squelchers. It was central to the Oscars' creed that they should always try to act as gentle giants, but he had seen the golden supermen – momentarily forgetful of their physical power – run straight through masonry walls in their eagerness to catch offenders. He had a feeling that the squelchers' low-density, squishy bodies would have been reduced to something spectacularly unpleasant had the Oscars even tried to twist their arms or slap their wrists.

In less than an hour, having destroyed perhaps a

hundred centrefolds, he had cleared all the arrivals and the hall was standing empty.

"Thanks for your help, fellows," he said to Drabble and Magill. "You can take your ship back up into orbit now. In fact, if you want to take some time off at HQ you could shoot back to Mildor IV and tell them how well I've done."

"If you've got the problem licked you could come back with us and report in person," Magill said.

"Mustn't be too hasty," Peace stalled. "It would only be fair to the superintendent if I stayed on for a couple of days just to make sure my plan is working all right. Why don't you fellas go off on your own for a while? Take a little break? You could play a few rounds of hide-the-asteroid. You'd enjoy that, wouldn't you?"

Magill shook his head. "We couldn't leave you on your own here, Warren.

We'll be up there – keeping a close eye on you."

That's what I was afraid of, Peace thought as he watched the two gleaming giants stride away in the direction of their ship. He turned and went into the octagonal structure which served as the only administrative building on the island.

"That's it," he said as he walked into Superintendent Glauber's office. "The first stage of Operation Centrefold has been completed. I think I can safely say that you won't have any more production problems with glum."

Glauber's face brightened. "So you'll be leaving right away!"

"No, no," Peace said hastily. "I've got to hang around for a while. Just to make sure everything is okay."

Glauber's face darkened. "I see."

"Don't look so... if you'll pardon the pun... glum," Peace said with forced cheerfulness.

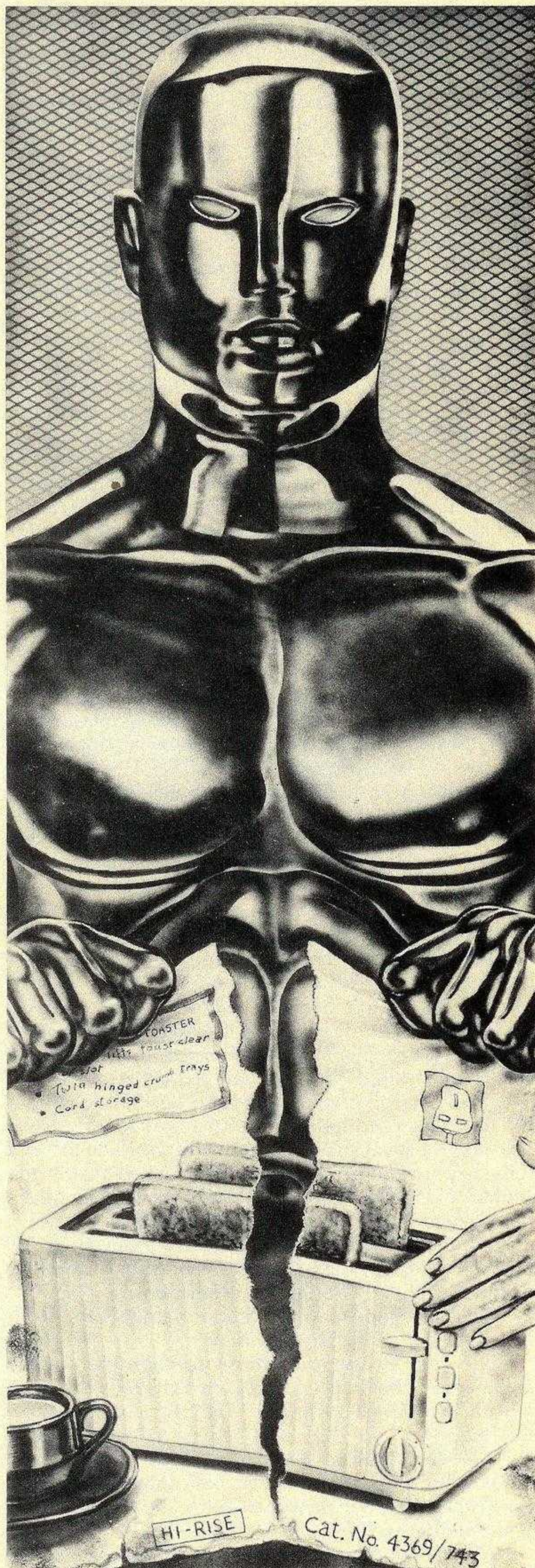
Glauber gave him a baleful stare. "That wasn't a pun. You used the word in its correct sense in both cases. A pun is when you give two different meanings to one word, or when you attach two different homonyms to one meaning."

"Thank you, professor," Peace said as he turned on his heel and left the office. *What's the forking universe coming to, he thought, if you can't make a little joke without getting a forking lecture in English grammar? I've got to get out of this place as soon as possible – but without my two brass buddies tagging along.*

**T**he only thing Peace liked about his quarters was that the bathroom, instead of being equipped with a sonic shower cubicle, featured an old-fashioned tub. He had never approved of sonics, partly because they lacked the sybaritic luxury of a good soak in hot water, partly because they were too complicated – and he knew himself to be prone to accidents.

After the nervous tension of facing 200 squelchers at the spaceport, he had decided to have a relaxing bath. He had drawn a goodly quantity of water at exactly the right temperature and now he was lying in it, gently poaching his cares away. Only his face projected above the water at one end of the tub, while at the other his large toes peeked up like two tiny pink islands in a vapouring sea.

This will do me a lot of good, he thought. A period



of meditation and pure relaxation. Just what the doctor would have ordered! Accident-prone though I am, even I can't get into trouble here. Tranquillity, blessed tranquillity...

He lay without moving for a couple of minutes, then came the realization that he was getting a surfeit of peace and tranquillity. In fact he was becoming pretty bored, but it seemed a shame to quit the bath so soon after taking all the trouble to prepare it. He tried to do some constructive meditation, but his mind was annoyingly blank.

Another minute dragged by, and Peace was beginning to wonder if ennui could be terminal when his gaze fastened on the two faucets at the other end of the tub. They were two very ordinary plumbing fittings, and heretofore he had paid them no attention, but all at once they had become the only items of potential interest in the uneventful microcosm of the tub. They loomed on the horizon like strange silvery towers on a mist-shrouded shore.

*I know what I'll do!* he thought, suddenly inspired. *I know how to generate a bit of excitement – I'll stick my big toe into one of the faucets! That'll be good for a giggle!*

Raising his right leg very gently, because the slightest movement caused water to slop into his near-submerged mouth and nostrils, he brought his big toe up to the nearest faucet and then slid it into the metal orifice. There was a moment of vaguely Freudian pleasure as he felt the coldness of the metal encircle his toe. A second later the same chill penetrated to the muscles of his foot, and – taken by surprise – the muscles went into spasm.

The pain was enough to make Peace howl with anguish, but the sound failed to escape his lips because the powerful cramp in his instep caused a reflexive arching of his body and his face was abruptly plunged below the water. In one instant he was a lordly Neptune placidly surveying his private little sea kingdom; in the next he was back to being plain old Warren Peace – half-drowning at the bottom of a bathtub. He heaved his head and shoulders up into the air, his mouth horribly contorted as it spewed soapy water, and dragged his toe out of the faucet.

Emitting raucous choking sounds, he forced himself to an upright position and struggled out of the bath. On coming into contact with the cool plastic of the floor, his right foot went into a new set of violent spasms, a paroxysm of cramps which made all five toes snap up and down like the flippers on an antique pinball machine. Appalled at the sheer treacherousness of his foot, Peace hopped towards the warmly carpeted sanctuary of the apartment's main room. He reached it just as the burly figure of Superintendent Glauber came in through the other door.

"What are you up to?" Glauber demanded. "Who have you got in the bathroom?"

"Nobody." Peace summoned up as much dignity as he could considering that he was naked, dripping wet and standing on one foot. "I got stuck in the faucet, that's all."

"You got stuck in the...!" A look of revulsion appeared on Glauber's florid countenance. "Listen here, Peace – other people have to use that tub after you, you know."

"What are you implying?" Peace grabbed a cushion

from the nearest chair and clasped it to his groin. "And what makes you think you can just barge into my rooms, anyway?"

"I'll tell you what," Glauber bellowed. "Your smart-ass idea about ripping out the centrefolds isn't working."

"You're joking!"

"Joking! *Joking!* The new magazines have spread through the plantation like wildfire. Things are worse than ever! Half of my workforce have orgasmed themselves into a coma. The filthy, oversexed perverts... setting up tidal waves...wiping out my bonus..." Temporarily lapsing into incoherence, Glauber resorted to shaking his massive fist under Peace's nose.

Peace gaped at him in consternation. "But I checked the pictures underneath the original centre spreads. There was nothing but fridges and sun loungers and the like."

"You must have missed something!"

"I can't have done," Peace said firmly. "This calls for a bit of first-hand investigation. I'm going to go out there and see things for myself!"

**T**he Sea-Boots resembled two pneumatic bolsters with centrally-located straps which looped around the operator's feet. Peace had noticed a couple of men scooting about the inshore waters on them with nonchalant ease, and he anticipated no difficulty in learning to do the same. Water sloshing about his ankles, he stepped gingerly on to the boots – which were being steadied for him by a Cosmic Pharmaceuticals employee – and squirmed his feet into the securing straps.

"There you go!" The CP man, a jovial and tubby little Asian named Cedric, handed Peace the propulsor control unit. "This is going to be funny as hell. I'm going to get a kick out of this. Anybody who tries to run a pair of boots with no tuition is just asking for trouble. I offered to show you the ropes for next to nothing, but..."

"Next to nothing!" Peace was scandalized. "Do you call a hundred monits next to nothing? I've got better things to do with my money." He refrained from mentioning that the better things he had in mind mainly consisted of the monumental blow-out planned to take place as soon as he could get to a reasonably civilized planet without his ruby-eyed chaperones in tow. "Anyway, what's so hard about floating around on a pair of little airbeds?"

"Perhaps nothing," Cedric said with a shrug, assuming a look of Oriental indifference. "Perhaps it's all in the mind. Why don't you try it out?"

"Just watch me!" Peace had intended to depress the GO button very gently, but he had been stung by Cedric's attitude and as a result his thumb came down quite hard on the handset. The Sea-Boots surged forwards beneath him with silent force and on the instant he found himself wildly flailing his arms as he fought to remain upright.

He managed to retain his balance and was about to congratulate himself when he made the unhappy discovery that the boots had chosen slightly divergent courses through the yellow water. He exerted all the power of his thighs in an attempt to correct the situation, but the boots stubbornly continued on their



separate ways. In a matter of seconds his legs were almost at full stretch, and he was in a panic in case the canoes had enough power in their paramagnetic propulsion units to tear him apart. He made a lightning assessment of his plight and decided that – given the choice of disengaging one foot and toppling ignominiously into the sea, or being snapped in half like a wishbone – the former was infinitely preferable. He tried to withdraw his left foot from its strap and was appalled to find that lateral forces had bound the two inextricably. By now he was practically doing the splits, with urgent torture signals coming from his hip joints, and in an extremity of fear he suddenly remembered the hand-held controls.

He pressed the STOP button and emitted a groan of relief as the Sea-Boots promptly began losing way and became more tractable. Dragging them together with trembling legs, he coasted to a halt then looked back and gave Cedric a reassuring wave. Cedric, who was doubled over with laughter, waved back. Peace studied the control unit for a moment, deduced the meaning of some curved arrows, and with a great deal of hesitancy persuaded the boots to do a U-turn. Encouraged, he set off at slow speed back towards the shore, but again the boots showed an infuriating tendency to part company.

His abused muscles and joints were protesting so much at the renewed ordeal that he was forced to consider an ignominious plea for help. Suddenly inspiration struck. It came to him that it was the length of his legs which was giving the boots too much scope for their wayward antics. He sank down onto his hunkers and immediately found he had a much greater degree of control. Smirking in triumph, he motored back towards land at a respectable speed, and even managed to stop a few metres out from the shore with a rather showy broadside turn.

"What have you got to say about that?" he called out to Cedric.

"Nuts," Cedric replied.

"If there's one thing I can't stand it's a sore loser," Peace said reprovingly.

Cedric shook his head. "I'm not a sore loser – I'm just explaining why you can't go around on Sea-Boots hunkered down like that."

"Pray tell why not?" Peace said in his snottiest voice. He had barely uttered the words when he noticed a commotion just ahead of his knees in the narrow strip of water between the boots. An instant later a hideous, bright red creature resembling a miniature crocodile lunged up out of the water, snapping with ferocious jaws. Peace gave a bleat of panic and straightened up, just in time to save himself from an unthinkable injury. Disappointed, the ugly reptile swam away, sinking out of sight as it went.

"Does that answer your question?" Cedric said, chortling.

Peace's mouth opened and closed several times before he was able to speak. "You... you should have warned me about the... the..."

"Gondoliers. That's their official name, but we usually call them gonadiers – for reasons I don't need to explain."

"You should have warned me."

Cedric shrugged. "You should have paid for some essential tuition."

"And be ripped off for a hundred!"

"There's worse rip-offs than that around here," Cedric said with an obscene grin. "As you nearly found out."

Still quaking over the narrowness of his escape from mutilation, Peace shook his fist. "I'm going to report you to Superintendent Glauber for this."

"Go ahead," Cedric said, looking unconcerned. "He was looking forward to his cut out of the hundred."

Dismayed by the whiff of corruption, no longer convinced that his was a just cause, Peace activated the Sea-Boots and carefully turned their prows towards the open sea. This time, knowing what to expect, he suppressed the boots' every deviation before it got properly started, and in a short time he was – with reasonable confidence – making silent, stately and upright progress through the calm waters.

**A**head of him, under a canopy of diluted sunlight, lay an expanse of custard-coloured sea liberally sprinkled with what appeared to be very small islands. The islands were conglomerations of lily pads, and widespread upon them – their shapes rendered two-dimensional by low-lying mists – could be seen squelchers going about the delicate task of harvesting glum blossoms. When he passed near workers they ceased their activities and glowered at him until he had drifted away – a reminder that they disliked being under surveillance.

The scene was charming in its own way, a worthy subject for a latter-day Turner, but had a keen-eyed Cosmic Pharmaceuticals share-holder been present he would have been upset by evidence that productivity was not at the optimum level. As Peace scanned his surroundings he was able to discern, here and there, the unmistakable silhouettes of squelchers who had abandoned themselves to the pleasures of vicarious sex.

The unprepossessing beings were either holding magazines widespread in front of their faces, or had already fallen over on their backs and – stubby limbs thrust in the air – were quivering and bouncing, sending tremors through all the lily pads in the vicinity. One part of Peace's mind began to feel mildly envious – it was obvious that a squelcher orgasm was like a full-scale orchestration of pleasurable sensations compared to a human male's brief solo on the piccolo.

Feeling uncomfortably voyeuristic, he kept sailing out from the island until he reached an area where the mist was thicker than usual and only one squelcher was dimly in view. Peace backed off a little to ensure that he could not be spotted by the alien, then took a pair of electronic binoculars out of a pocket. The view through the little instrument, with mist eliminated, clearly showed the squelcher carefully shuffling around a patch of lily pads, gathering tiny blossoms and putting them into a bag.

The alien worked steadily for about twenty minutes, and Peace was starting to become bored and fidgety when another squelcher appeared on the scene. This one was actually walking on the surface of the water in a kind of aquatic shuffle, buoyed up by its enormous feet, and it was carrying several magazines. It approached the worker, handed over a magazine, received money in exchange and slopped off into the murky distance with the energetic gait,

common throughout the galaxy, of a petty crook going about his chosen profession.

"Aha!" Peace murmured, adding, with no attempt at originality, "Now we shall see what we shall see."

He watched intently as the squelcher opened the magazine directly to the centre pages. The angles were such that Peace could not see what was on the pages, but there was no doubt that the content was a very good example of alien porn. The squelcher began its gratification routine with the usual preliminary sniffing and snorting noises – so loud that they reached Peace's ears over a considerable intervening distance – then followed the bulging of the eyes and the protrusion of the revolting, blue-and-green sock-like tongue.

The magnified binocular image showed the squelcher's vertically arranged nipples swelling like little crimson, pulsating balloons. A few seconds later the alien sprang into the air and fell on its back, apparently oblivious to everything, with an impact which sent wavelets racing through the surrounding lily pads. All four of its limbs were sticking straight up and partaking of the quivering which affected the whole of its flabby body.

Peace had been told by Glauber that the alien's ecstatic coma would last for about twenty minutes, giving him plenty of time to inspect the magazine which had fallen from its nerveless grasp. He activated the Sea-Boots and, with a growing sense of scientific excitement, scudded forwards through the tendrils of mist. As soon as the raft of vegetation was visible to the naked eye, he slowed down and gently approached it in silence, even though it appeared that stealth was quite unnecessary. The orange-haired alien, looking more than ever like a partially deflated rubber gorilla, was oblivious to all that was going on around it. Quivering, snuffling and drooling profusely, it was lost in an internal world of alien biological delights.

Luckily, it had swooned right at the water's edge, so Peace did not have to risk crawling onto the lily pads to retrieve the magazine, which was lying open at the centrefold. Taking care not to lose his balance, he leaned over sideways, picked up the magazine and scanned the illustration on the double page.

It showed two large sets of hexagonal wrenches – open-ended and ring-type – tastefully arranged in order of size.

With a cry of mingled surprise and bafflement, Peace leafed through the rest of the publication. All the pictures were of wide-wheeled swamp bikes, engine blocks, performance analysers and varieties of hand tools – most of them of Earth origin. In spite of the indecipherable text, Peace was left with no doubt that he was holding some kind of bike freaks' journal. Nothing could have been less erotic than the solemn arrays of screwdrivers and comfy-sprung saddles, and yet he had seen for himself the effect they had had on the zapped-out squelcher.

A disturbing new thought entered Peace's mind. He had toyed with the notion that the squelchers could have a multiplicity of sexual attractors – but was it possible that they could be turned on by anything? Come to think of it, was he safe? Could it be that the ugly brutes went into a kind of super-heat now and again, and in a berserker frenzy of desire launched themselves upon anything that had a suitable orifice?

Peace was still plumbing the grim possibilities of this new idea when it gradually came to him that, for several seconds, he had been absent-mindedly listening to a strange tearing and munching sound. He glanced around and to his dismay saw that a gondolier, possibly the selfsame bright crimson horror which had lunged at him earlier, had inched its way onto the raft of lily pads – and was busily eating the recumbent squelcher.

It had created a sizable rent in the flabby tissues of the squelcher's side, from which something like a yellowish frogspawn or tapioca was dribbling. The victim of the attack seemed to be totally unaware of what was happening. It lay placidly on its back, still sniffing, still quivering with unknowable ecstasies. Given the sheer lethality of the gondolier's jaws, Peace was surprised that much more damage had not been done to the squelcher, but its skin and connective tissues appeared to be as tough as the plastic used since time immemorial to bind packs of beer cans. It was clear, however, that the squelcher was in mortal danger.

"Hey!" Peace shouted. "Get off!"

The gondolier turned one malign eye in his direction, but continued with its repast.

Peace swore and, unable to think of any other course of action, pressed hard on his GO button. His intention was to run over the gondolier with his puffy canoes and perhaps frighten it away. The Sea-Boots surged forward under full engine power. The prow of the right-hand one slid up over the gondolier's scaly back, but the villainous little beast was not in the least intimidated. It rounded savagely on the boot and bit into it. The boot promptly lost most of its buoyancy, causing Peace to develop a severe list to starboard.

Feeling the water rise up around his leg he gave a wail of consternation, knowing that were he to splash in beside the crimson nightmare he could easily become the next item on its menu. The gondolier appeared to have reached the same conclusion, because both of its eyes were now greedily fixed on Peace as he fell sideways. He threw himself onto the lily pads, frantically wriggling his feet out of the boots' securing loops, and tried to scramble to safety.

Panic and the instability of the leafy platform kept him floundering in the one spot, the lower half of his body in the water and vulnerable to unspeakable savagery. He glanced back – wondering why he had not already been emasculated – and saw that the gondolier was making unexpectedly hard work of shredding up the boot it had attacked. It appeared to have something indigestible in its throat and was twisting its head this way and that as it gagged up the unacceptable object, along with tatters of Sea-Boot skin. In a second it would be free to resume its pursuit of something more to its taste.

*The little git is choking on an engine!* The realization that the gondolier had tried to swallow the Sea-Boot's paramagnetic motor sent a flash of inspiration through Peace's mind. Grateful that the boots' remote controller was still at the end of its wrist cord, he jabbed hard with his thumb on the GO stud.

The effect was immediate, and immensely gratifying.

The superb little engine instantly developed full

thrust and torpedoed its way down the gondolier's throat and into its stomach. Unable to make any more headway within the reptile's digestive tract, the engine promptly bore its new host out towards the open sea. The last Peace saw of the gondolier was its eyes glaring at him in a complex blend of astonishment, accusation, fury, disillusionment, cynicism, bitterness, feral hatred and reproach as it was swept away – backwards – at high speed, gradually sinking beneath the ochreous water.

The other boot, having escaped any damage, went skimming off in a different direction and soon was lost to sight in the mists.

"Wha...What's going on here?" The weak voice came from the squelcher. It had emerged early from its ecstatic coma – not surprisingly in view of the hideously oozing wound in its side – and was gazing up at Peace in bewilderment.

"I was just passing this way, and I couldn't help noticing that one of those gondolier things had started to eat you while you were...er...indisposed," Peace said. "I drove it off."

Folds of flesh rearranged themselves on the squelcher's face, uncovering an extra green eye which regarded Peace with a luminous intensity. "You saved my life!"

Peace shrugged. "Anybody would have done the same thing."

"Not true! Glauber would have let me be devoured a dozen times over rather than risk his despicable hide. This is the first time in my experience that any human..." The injured squelcher paused and studied Peace's face for a few seconds. "Say, aren't you Warren Peace? Aren't you the one who ripped the middle pages out of all the magazines this morning?"

"I was only trying to do my job."

"That's all right," the squelcher said graciously. "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you at once, but you humans...I hate to say this, Warren, but you humans are so ugly that you all look the same to us. Not only that, but you smell."

Peace produced an unnatural smile. "Quid pro quo."

"What does that mean?"

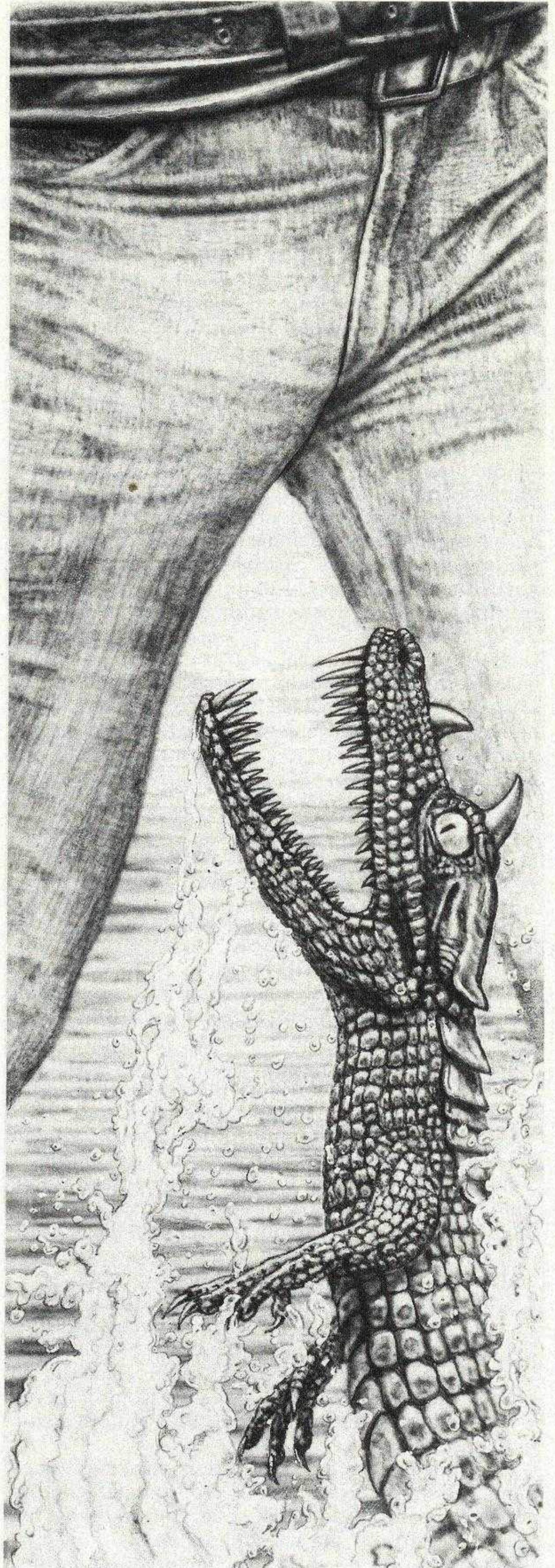
Peace's smile became even more strained as he realized he had only the vaguest understanding of the Latin term. "I'm not quite sure."

"Great! My name is Nooglenorker, and I'm training myself to be a properly qualified lawyer, and I recognize high-class double-talk when I hear it. You and I can help each other, Warren. If you teach me a bit more of that..." The alien raised itself up, apparently intending to shake hands or paws with Peace, then glanced down and for the first time became aware of the full extent of the injury to its side. It gave a quavering bleat of anguish and sank back down, fixing Peace with an imploring look.

"Don't worry," Peace said. "I'll get you back to base."

"How?"

"Like this." Peace cupped his hands around his mouth and began to yell for help, praying there were a few alien workers within earshot who were not erotically delirious.



“Two days that character has been in there,” Superintendent Glauber said in a doleful voice. “That’s one of my best suites, you know. It’s there for the benefit of visiting CP executives. It was never meant as a hideyhole for work-shy bogtrotters.”

“Work-shy!” Not for the first time, Peace was stung into an angry response. “Do you realize Nooglenorker could easily have died? It was lucky there was a surgeon-errant from the White Foundation passing through this sector. Apart from the humanitarian aspects, if we hadn’t been able to get a medic here in time to do the operation, Nooglenorker’s relatives would have put in one hell of a compensation claim.”

Glauber sneered. “Some chance! Nooglenorker brought it all on himself. Nobody could claim he was attending to his duties when the gondolier chewed him up.”

“No, but...”

“But me no buts,” Glauber cut in. “I’ll tell you something for nothing, Warren. I’ve only been here a couple of years, but that was plenty of time for me to start hating the damned squelchers. Sniffing around here, sniffing around there! Even when they’re not indulging in their disgusting self-pollution antics, they keep sniffing at me like I was something the cat had dragged in. If you ask me...”

“Sniffing!” Peace exclaimed, as a startling thought began to form in the deep recesses of his mind. He started tapping his pockets in search of the notebook he had obtained from the CP stores two days earlier in order to jot down observations and theories about squelcher behaviour.

“You got fleas or something?” Glauber said, scowling.

“No fleas, but I think I might have the solution to your alien porn problem.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No kidding.” Peace put on an enigmatic smile. “And you were the one who put me on the right scent, if you will excuse a small pun.”

“Pun?” Glauber glowered at him, his complexion deepening. “Listen, Peace, we’ve already established that you don’t know the first thing about puns. Are you going to tell me what you have found out?”

“Who knows?” Peace did another inscrutable smirk as he tapped the side of his nose. “Knows...nose...”

Glauber jumped up from behind his desk, with an inarticulate cry of rage, and had taken a couple of menacing steps towards Peace when an unmistakable sound filled the office. It was coming from the audio monitor linked to Nooglenorker’s room – the distinctive sniffing and snuffling that squelchers always emitted before going into sexual delirium.

“Nooglenorker must have come out of the anaesthetic and started to...” Glauber’s crimson features twisted in a look of disgust. “The filthy sex maniac! How did he get hold of pornographic material so soon? That’s what I’d like to know. Couldn’t even wait for his stitches to come out! I’ll soon put a stop to that game!”

He strode to his office door and set off at high speed along the short corridor which led to the hospitality suites. Peace followed in his wake, gratified at having the chance to test his new theory so soon after its formulation. On reaching Nooglenorker’s quarters,

Glauber threw the door open and hurtled straight into the bedroom, with Peace close on his heels.

Even Peace, whose sympathies had swung towards the aliens, had to admit to himself that Nooglenorker in heat was not a pretty sight. The squelcher was standing by the bed, his floppy, orange-haired form made even less prepossessing by having been shaved on one side to accommodate a large surgical dressing. Nooglenorker’s whole body was quivering, the vertically arranged nipples were pulsing alarmingly, he was sniffing like a bloodhound, and at least three of his eyes were intent on the small book he was holding in both hands.

“That’s not a porno zine,” Glauber said. “What is it?”

Peace gulped. “It looks like my notebook. I must have left it here.”

“Your notebook!” Glauber’s red-tinged eyes regarded Peace with outrage. “What did you draw in it?”

“Nothing,” Peace said indignantly. “Nothing at all.”

“Nothing?”

“Yes, and this goes to prove my new theory that...”

“Do you take me for a complete fool?” Glauber snarled. He darted forward, with surprising speed for one of his bulk, and snatched the book from Nooglenorker’s unresisting hands. Nooglenorker, who until that moment had been quite oblivious to events, gave a whimper of dismay and sagged down onto the bed. Ignoring the squelcher, Glauber scanned the open centre pages of the notebook and his jaw sagged as he saw that they were totally devoid of script or drawings.

“I can’t take any more of this,” he bellowed in a voice thick with rage and frustration. He threw the notebook down, grabbed Nooglenorker by the loose skin of the upper chest and dragged the alien to its feet. “This is the end of the road for you, Nooglenorker. If you don’t tell me what it is that turns you on I’ll rip your disgusting body apart. What have you to say to that? Eh? Eh? Eh?”

Nooglenorker’s response was quite unexpected.

“Do it to me, darling,” the squelcher said in a dreamy, not-with-it voice, then thrust his blue-and-green tongue – the tongue which so much resembled a putrid sock – right into Glauber’s open mouth.

“Ger-awllcchh!” Glauber cried in a terrible voice, pushing Nooglenorker away from him and claspng both hands to his throat. “Oh, God! I’ve been violated by a filthy...I’ve been poisoned! Get me to a medic!” He lurched to the door and clung to the frame for a moment to cast a distraught and venomous look back at Nooglenorker and Peace. “I’ll get you for this as soon as I get my mouth douched and disinfected and irradiated and sterilized. I’ll get both of you. I’ve got a gun, and I’m not afraid to use it on...” His voice faded as he stumbled out of the suite and into the corridor.

Somewhat taken aback, Peace turned to look at Nooglenorker. The alien, who had dropped onto the bed, was looking around the room with a bemused expression.

“Wha...what’s been going on here?” he said weakly.

“Glauber and I came in while you were...mmm...”

starting to enjoy yourself. As you know, he's been trying to find out exactly what it is in the magazines that gets you guys going, and when he saw the notebook pages were blank he lost his head a little and he grabbed you and said he was going to tear you apart – but you managed to drive him off.”

“Really?” The squelcher sounded quite proud. “What did I do?”

“You rammed your tongue into his mouth.”

“Yug-aarrgghh!” Nooglenorker cried in a terrible voice, clasp ing both hands to his throat. “Oh, God! Maybe I have poisoned myself! Maybe I'll die a horrible death of some loathsome disease, Warren. A ghastly and lingering death!”

“You needn't worry about the lingering side of it too much,” Peace said. “Glauber has gone to fetch his gun.”

“That settles it – I'm getting out of this cursed dump.” Nooglenorker jumped up, clutched his side, swayed briefly on his vast feet and started an ungainly but energetic shuffle towards the door. “It was nice knowing you, Warren.”

“You too,” Peace said, giving the alien's pneumatic upper arm an affectionate squeeze. “Just one thing before you go...”

Nooglenorker paused in the doorway. “Yes?”

Peace gave him a broad wink. “The secret is safe with me. This is against the Oscar rules of conduct, but I promise not to reveal anything to Glauber – even though he was the one who called us in on the case.” Peace winked again. “You can trust me to keep a secret.”

“Secret?” Nooglenorker glanced apprehensively along the corridor, obviously concerned in case Glauber should come into view brandishing a gun. “What are you talking about, Warren?”

“Alien porn!” Peace tried winking with each eye in turn in order to get his message of camaraderie across, but the strain on his cheek muscles was too great. “It's the smell, isn't it?”

“The smell?”

“Yes, the smell of paper,” Peace said triumphantly. “The first inkling came to me when I heard that squelchers relied as much on smell as on eyesight for getting about. Then there was all the sniffing you do just before...”

“Let me get this straight,” Nooglenorker interrupted. “Are you seriously suggesting that we can get off... on the smell of paper?”

“Odours are evocative, and the smell of paper can be one of the most evocative of the lot.”

“Warren, have you any idea of how kinky that sounds?” Nooglenorker eyed Peace from head to foot with what seemed to be the utmost distaste.

Peace was dismayed. “But I was so sure! You mean it isn't the lovely, creamy, musky, papery smell?”

“You should seek some kind of professional help, Warren – and the sooner the better.” With a final scandalized shake of the wattles, the squelcher moved out into the corridor.

“Please!” Peace ran after Nooglenorker. “You can't leave me in suspense like this. I've got to know what it is that gets you going. You can trust me not to talk.”

“Sorry.” The alien kept on walking.

“I saved your life.”

The alien stopped walking, stood for a moment with drooping shoulders, then turned to face Peace. “That isn't fair.”

“Sorry, but I've got to know.”

Nooglenorker hesitated. “You promise not to say anything to Glauber?”

“Cross my heart.”

“All right then.” Nooglenorker glanced up and down the corridor, making sure of not being overheard. “If you really must know – it's the staples.”

“The staples!” Peace took a step backwards. “Is this some kind of a sick joke?”

“I'm serious,” Nooglenorker assured him. “You see, our reproductive cycle is much more complicated than yours. We have six different sexes... in six different forms... all of whom have to fertilize each other in turn. I'm a member of the fourth sex, which is mainly distinguished by the presence of these.” With a strangely coy and delicate gesture, the squelcher indicated the red hemispheres on its torso.

Peace frowned. “What's so unusual about a pair of nipples, even if they're one above the other?”

“They aren't nipples,” Nooglenorker said in demure tones which sounded grotesque coming from an orange-haired gorilla. “They're my gamete sacs, and an extremely well developed pair they are, even if I say it myself. I often get complimented on them, and several times I've been asked to pose for glamour magazines, but of course I wouldn't agree to that sort of thing unless it was artistically...”

“The staples,” Peace cut in impatiently. “What about the staples?”

“Well, you see, a member of our fifth sex has two sets of twin-pronged ovipositors on his trunk. When my mingle-time finally comes... and I see my ideal partner... we will cling together and his prongs will penetrate my gamete sacs and... and...” Nooglenorker's voice degenerated into a series of sniffles, his half-tomatoes began to swell and the hulking, loose-packed body gave a preliminary tremor.

“Get a grip on yourself!” Peace cried in consternation. “Have you no shame?”

“I guess I got carried away,” Nooglenorker said apologetically, obviously striving to bring the symptoms of arousal under control. “My mingle-time must be nearer than I thought. I'd better get back to Billinge – that's my home world – as soon as possible.”

“I'm getting out as well, before Glauber shows up again,” Peace said, falling into place beside the alien as he headed for the building's main exit. “Have I got it right about the magazine staples? They look so much like fifth-sex ovipositors that the sight of them just flips a squelcher over?”

“Correct. When you pulled out the centre folds, all you did was erect the prongs a little and make the magazines even sexier. We're fairly liberal about pornography back on Billinge – ordinary photographs are okay – but no publisher is allowed to use staples.”

“I see.” Peace fell silent for a moment as vast new tracts of understanding were opened to his mind. Truly there were more things on Earth and in the galaxy in general than were dreamed of in somebody-or-other's philosophy.

**H**e and Nooglenorker reached the lobby, drawing some attention from a few CP personnel, and hurried outside. The little landing field – beyond which a sea of green-stippled yellow stretched to the horizon – was completely empty.

"I was hoping a ship would be in," Nooglenorker said in a despairing voice. "How will I get away from Glauber?"

"Leave it to me." Peace slid a hand inside his shirt and brought out the sub-etheric whistle which the Oscars had insisted he should wear at all times. He raised it to his lips and blew a long blast. There was no sound, but he knew that Ozzy Drabble and Hec Magill would hear the signal clearly in their orbiting patrol vessel.

"My friends will have a ship here before you know it," he said. "Let's get out on the field and be ready for them."

"Thanks, Warren." Nooglenorker set off immediately, his elbows pumping as he tried to gain speed on feet which had been designed for slithering through quagmire. "I won't forget you for this."

"Think nothing of it." Peace began to feel magnanimous as it came to him that his spell on the depressing mudball of Golborne was nearly over. "Just tell me one thing before we part – are there any pictures of fifth-sex mates in the magazines the workers keep bringing in?"

"Dozens. But they're not as sexy as the staples."

"Had I any chance of identifying one of them?"

"I doubt it. All you would have observed is something resembling a perfectly ordinary tree."

"A tree!" Peace was astounded. "You're going to do it with a tree!"

"Not just any old tree, Warren. My tree will be sentient, sensitive, caring, concerned for me without being too possessive, capable of adjusting its own needs so as not to intrude on my own essential living space...and...and...it will also have those gorgeous ovipositors growing out of its trunk at exactly the right height to spear my gamete sacs...and when we get together..." Nooglenorker's voice began to quaver and he gave a couple of tentative snuffles.

"And you had the nerve to accuse me of being kinky," Peace said accusingly.

"Quid pro quo!"

"You don't even know what that means."

"Neither do you."

"Maybe, but I'm more entitled to..." Peace broke off as a loud report blasted out behind him, followed by the sound of a bullet ricocheting off the spacefield ferrocrete. "Fork me pink! Glauber has gone mad! He really means to kill us!"

He increased his speed, then slowed down again in an agony of trepidation as he saw that his ungainly companion, hampered by the enormous squelcher feet, could go no faster. Glancing back, Peace saw that Glauber – brandishing what seemed to be an old-fashioned revolver – was skimming over the ground like a champion sprinter. In a matter of seconds he would so close that it would be impossible for him to miss, even with an antique weapon.

"Ozzy and Hec," Peace mumbled to himself in a panic, "where are you?"

As if in answer to his question, a spaceship solidified in the air twenty metres above him. It immediately swooped to ground level and landed, shutting Glauber off from view. Peace heard his pursuer give a howl of frustration as the 200-metre-long metal barrier clumped into place in front of him. Doors swung open in the ship's midsection and two ruby-eyed golden

giants emerged. Peace, who had believed he had his fill of Oscars for life, gave a sob of relief.

"Come on, Noogle," he panted. "Into the ship! We'll be safe in there."

"Noogle?" The squelcher slid to a halt. "How dare you address me by my part-name! That privilege is reserved for members of the first and third sexes in the quarter after the fourth para-mingle, and if you think I'm going to allow..."

"Get into the ship!" Peace shouted, dancing with urgency. "Get in before that madman..."

"What's the trouble here, Warren?" Drabble said, bounding towards Peace. His voice, even though it came from the speech converter he wore at his waist, showed deep concern.

"It's the superintendent – Glauber! He's gone crazy! He's trying to shoot me and my friend!"

"What?" Drabble and Magill exchanged glances and the ruby lenses of their eyes flared in righteous anger. "Just leave him to us, Warren."

They nodded at each other then parted company, running towards opposite ends of the ship so as to be sure of intercepting Glauber regardless of where he appeared. They had barely got into their stride when the superintendent came barrelling around the corner of the ship's forward tower. He skidded to a halt, his expression changing from one of manic belligerence to sheer open-mouthed horror as he saw the huge golden Nemesis bearing down on him at speed. Apparently realizing that his revolver would be useless against such an adversary, he threw the weapon down and ran back the way he had come, emitting high-pitched bleats of terror. The Oscar, feet throwing out sparks while cornering, followed him out of sight in hot pursuit.

"I think that takes care of our Mr Glauber," Peace said complacently. "I just hope Ozzy and Hec don't accidentally break bits off him while performing the arrest. Those boys don't know their own strength."

Nooglenorker rearranged the folds of his face to regard Peace with an extra disapproving eye. "You certainly have some very peculiar friends."

"Listen to who's talking!" Peace snapped. "There aren't any Douglas firs or horse chestnuts among my buddies. Buds! Do you get it? *Buddies!* I'm sorry, puns are a weakness of mine – but have you no gratitude?"

"I apologize," Nooglenorker said. "I think I must be suffering from PMT – pre-mingle-time tension. I want to thank you for saving my life, Warren, and I'll wait right here until your friends come back and I'll thank them as well."

"I'm sure it won't take them very long to deal with..."

Peace's gaze wandered idly in the direction of the ship and his voice trailed off as he realized it was sitting there...unattended...with the doors wide open...

His heart began to pound as it came to him that this was his big chance to head for the fun capitals of the galaxy with no puritanical supermen in tow.

"I can't wait with you," he said quickly to Nooglenorker. "I've got to go now. Look after yourself – and don't take any wooden nipples. I mean nickels. I mean..."

"What's the matter with you?" Nooglenorker demanded.

"Nothing. Just tell Ozzy and Hec not to worry about me."

Before the squelcher could reply, Peace had darted across the intervening distance and into the ship. He slammed the doors shut and sprinted into the forward control centre. His utter familiarity with every panel in the room enabled him to activate all the systems at lightning speed, and within ten seconds the massive vessel was rising into the sky.

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*This story is an extract from Bob Shaw's new novel Warren Peace, forthcoming from Gollancz in the summer of 1993.*

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# Escape to Reality: A Profile of Bob Shaw

by Brian Stableford

When Lemuel Gulliver visited the flying island of Laputa he found that its male inhabitants walked with their heads inclined so that one eye might be permanently fixed upon the heavenly firmament and another upon the ground. They were so dedicated to speculative thought that they had to be attended wherever they went by "flappers" whose task was to attract their attention when they were required to pay attention or speak.

Contemporary readers of Gulliver's memoirs probably thought – as Jonathan Swift presumably intended them to think – that the Laputans were hopelessly eccentric, but modern readers, especially if they are science fiction fans, should know better. After all, what worthier occupation could there possibly be for the intelligent mind than speculation, and how can one possibly retain a true sense of proportion in bridging the gulf between the near and the far if one cannot simultaneously attend to the glorious sweep of the starry heavens and the narrow ground in which one's metaphorical roots are firmly planted?

Bob Shaw is a man who is well able to take an ironic Swiftian view of the many follies of which the speculative imagination is capable. In the "serious scientific talks" which he regularly addresses to appreciative audiences at science-fiction conventions, speculative notions are extrapolated to absurdity in a gravely hilarious manner. In many of his short science-fiction stories, too, Shaw is happy to deal with reductions to absurdity in a cavalier manner. He is a man with a well-developed sense of humour. But there is also another side to him,

which makes him a complete science-fiction writer. He appreciates that speculation is a deeply serious, almost sacred, business which builds vital bridges between the near and the far, the infinite and the intimate.

In his contribution to *Foundation's* long-running series of confessional articles on "The Profession of Science Fiction" (1976) Shaw recalls the manner in which the magical effects of the science-fictional revelation introduced a crucial ambiguity into his attitude to his home life: "One side of my nature was fervently convinced that devotion to science fiction was the path to happiness; the other side was keenly aware of my father's disappointment and shared his conviction that a life of industrious responsibility in a recognized safe job was no more than the family's due." Such ambivalence is understandable in a youth who had spent his boyhood in Belfast during the years of the Great Depression and World War II; what a contrast there must have been between the bleak world of his everyday life and the infinitely wonderful universe contained within the pages of his beloved *Astounding Science Fiction!* Few American readers – for whom pulp science fiction was a domestic product – can ever have been so sharply aware of the yawning gulf which separated the everyday from the imaginary, or so painfully conscious of the impracticality of bringing them into binocular focus.

That acute consciousness of the opposing demands made by the speculative imagination on the one hand, and by family obligations – hardened and reinforced by harsh economic reality – on the other, seems to have remained with Bob Shaw for a long time, and has left

its indelible mark upon his work. His science fiction – particularly the best of it – is both tormented and strengthened by his determination to keep one eye firmly fixed on the ground while the other strives to penetrate the furthest reaches of the imagination. His narratives invariably derive their depth of feeling from the conflicts which his characters experience when their confrontation with new vistas of possibility disturbs, disrupts and reshapes their intimate relationships. The most ample examples are, of course, to be found in his novels, but he has also written some highly effective *contes cruels* in which the point is made with naked and brutal simplicity. "Call Me Dumbo" (1966) and "Dark Night in Toyland" (1988) are among these.

Bob Shaw has always been a writer of vaulting ambition, eager to tackle the big themes and the awesome cosmic imagery of science fiction, but he has been simultaneously aware of a need to anchor this ambition within a mundane context. Looking back over his work of the past quarter century one gets the impression that it has been a need which went deeper than the conscientious cultivation of literary craftsmanship, perhaps almost qualifying as a compulsion. Although he has boldly and reverently dealt with ideas of Stapledonian scope – an ambition altogether admirable in one who is heir to the British tradition of scientific romance as well as to the inspirations of American science fiction – such imagery is always filtered through the highly-personal interests and difficult dilemmas of fairly ordinary individuals. This is what gives his work its distinctive flavour, and is the hallmark of his particular artistry.



The most conspicuous evidence of Shaw's success in bringing his literary ambitions to fruition is his deceptively methodical development of the most startlingly original of all his story ideas: slow glass. Having searched for some time for the right story in which to introduce the notion, he came up with the understated *tour de force* "Light of Other Days" (1966), a rare and precious example of the perfectly-formed sf story. The idea of slow glass gives rise to many possible applications and plots, but the one he chose as an all-important initial display-case is a simple story of domestic life, which hinges on the fact that a pane of slow glass has two sides and may be used to look in different directions according to different motives. This was a happy inspiration, and the story should have won the Nebula award for which it was nominated (it lost out, for understandable sentimental reasons, to a posthumous story by Richard McKenna).

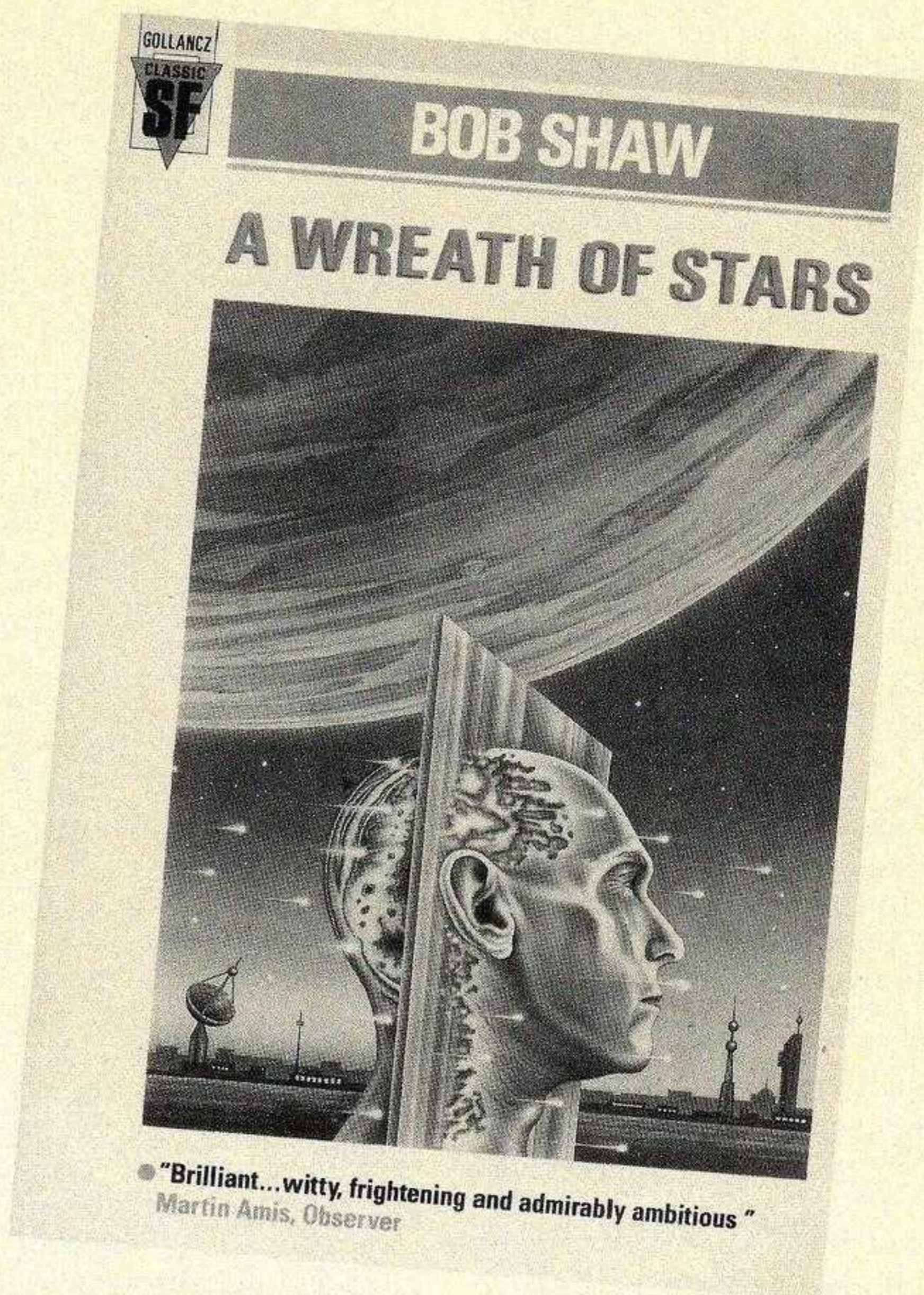
Many writers might have been prepared to leave an idea alone after finding such an excellent showcase for it, on the grounds that it could never again pack such a punch, but the science-fictional artistry of extrapolation makes heavy demands upon its faithful adherents. Shaw could not and did not let the matter rest. In other vignettes he deftly illustrated the impact of slow glass on other personal dilemmas and puzzles: the predicament of a judge who knows that a slow glass "witness" will one day demonstrate whether his judgment is true or false; the predicament of a detective who must figure out how slow glass has been used to construct a not-quite-perfect alibi; and so on. These "side-lights" eventually took their proper place, bound into the fabric of the episodic novel *Other Days, Other Eyes* (1972). The main narrative of the fix-up tracks the discovery and commercial exploitation of slow glass, and carefully takes the extrapolated line of thought to a non-obvious but inevitable conclusion. The climax of the novel explains why the existence of slow glass would change the social world completely and forever. By this means the painfully personal impacts which slow glass has upon its discoverer and users are

supplemented by something much grander – but the bridge linking the different orders of magnitude remains intact and strong.

*Other Days, Other Eyes* provides a paradigm example of a dictum which Shaw laid out uncompromisingly in his "Profession of Science Fiction" essay. There he condescends to agree with the common judgment that science fiction is "escapist," but he goes on unhesitatingly to assert that the pejorative implications of the term are in this instance unwarranted. The escapism of science fiction, he argues, is quite unlike the escapism of those literary genres which take the reader into imaginary worlds which are better-defined and cosier than the lived-in one. This is because science fiction, unlike other "escapist" genres, deals with a world in which all the taken-for-granted aspects of the experienced world are construed as transient and localized elements of a far greater and less well-defined whole, which takes in countless alternative pasts as well alternative futures. Thus, Shaw argues, good

sf provides an escape to rather than from reality.

He is, of course, right. As *Other Days, Other Eyes* demonstrates, in a deceptively modest and neat fashion, many of our taken-for-granted notions about privacy could be rendered obsolete and overturned by an apparently-trivial technological advance whose most immediately-obvious application would be the provision of pleasant country-views for dull town houses. This conclusion endorses the point continually made by the twists and turns of the story-line, that the everyday social situations in which we find ourselves are ever-changing and ever-vulnerable to sudden disruption, and can never be crystallized out into any enduring solidity. As with any work of responsible science fiction, the plot of *Other Days, Other Eyes* – unlike the plots of conventional whodunnits, westerns, romances, etc – moves away from comfortable closure. However paradoxical the statement may sound, the conclusion of such a story is a beginning rather than an end.



The same is true, of course, of the other large-scale literary enterprises which Shaw has tackled in the course of his career. *Orbitsville* (1975) – which was originally conceived as a single novel – is, on the human level, the story of a personal conflict between its long-suffering hero and the vengeful, powerful woman who threatens the life of his son. On that level the plot is resolved, the matter settled. But the story's other eye – its stargazing eye – is fixed meanwhile on the wonder of the huge eponymous artefact itself: on what it might be for, and how, in consequence, it might shape the long-term futures of its colonists. This question is not resolved, nor the matter settled; the enigma extends instead into a deftly understated coda, which subtly introduces a greater spectrum of possibility.

In the two later books in which Shaw revisited the expansive territories of *Orbitsville*, *Orbitsville Departure* (1983) and *Orbitsville Judgement* (1990), this pattern is repeated, becoming more extravagant with each replay. The protagonists of these later stories likewise grapple – with great difficulty but ultimately more-or-less successfully – with acute personal problems. The resolutions which they finally manage to bring about are uncomfortable compromises with cruel fate, but they are, in human terms, authentic conclusions. In the meantime, though, the awesome enigma which is *Orbitsville* continues to display further horizons of possibility, engaging in its own teasing game of recomplication. There is no chance of achieving any kind of closure or finality here – not even a compromise with cruel fate – because the further the stargazing eye contrives to see, the greater becomes the abyss beyond the limit of its vision.

In the stereotypical fantasy trilogy which has recently become so important in the literary marketplace, the pretence is carefully maintained that whole worlds can be set to rights, often by means of a frankly metaphysical adjustment in which incarnate Evil is banished or destroyed. The *Orbitsville* series illustrates the fact that true science-fiction trilogies (including, and perhaps especially, those which evolve as sets of afterthoughts) cannot do

that, even if their plots ultimately reach the point where a confrontation with some de-supernaturalized God-figure becomes possible and necessary – as, in *Orbitsville Judgement*, the plot does. In true sf, unlike fantasy dressed up as sf, a God-figure cannot function as a *deus ex machina*, but only as a signpost to further regions of imaginative *terra incognita*. In true sf there are no escapes except to reality, no ends except beginnings.

The pre-planned trilogy composed of *The Ragged Astronauts* (1986), *The Wooden Spaceships* (1988) and *The Fugitive Worlds* (1989) provides a more convoluted and self-conscious illustration of the same point. Like so many fake sf trilogies this initially adopts many of the key features of lightly-disguised fantasy. In order to set up a situation where a charmingly-primitive kind of space opera could become plausible the author casually plants data to establish that the whole endeavour is set in an alternative reality, in which overmuch respect need not be paid to our limits of physical possibility. At first this appears to be a straightforward cheat, shamefacedly excused by the ironic throwaway fashion in which it is invoked, but in the longer term it is treated more conscientiously as a burden of outstanding debt, which ultimately has to be redeemed.

This distancing move lays the essential groundwork for a whole-hearted revisitation of the wonder and derring-do of naïve and colourful pulp sf, which permitted interplanetary flights by balloon, the building of orbital forts, and various other feats of eccentric engineering, all accomplished with fairly elementary and easily graspable technologies. Modern sf has little room for such lightweight adventures, and their inevitable loss is something that readers reared on pre-war pulp can hardly help but regret. Shaw's cleverly-excused *jeu d'esprit* extends its zestful course over two and a half volumes, not quite as authoritatively as the author must have hoped and intended, but adequately. In the end, though, the expanding horizons of the final group of characters bring them to a fateful meeting with cosmic disaster, which dutifully brings the appointed survivors back to a universe

ruled by our physical laws, where they must buckle down to begin a different kind of adventure. Here the author blatantly follows and takes care to model his own precept: science-fictional escapes must arrive at last in reality, wherever they may have tarried en route for the purpose of vulgar amusement.

Bob Shaw's entire career as a science-fiction writer is marked by the same thrust, the same conflict, and the same determination. Seen as a whole, it clearly has not followed the usual shape of the stereotypical sf-fan-turned-writer career. Born in 1931, Shaw graduated from fan writing to early professional sales in the mid-1950s, but at that point he calculatedly shelved his writing ambitions for nearly a decade. He decided that the stargazing eye could not develop its required range and power until the eye that was fixed on the ground had a better understanding of its field of vision. It was not until he felt that he had an appropriate wealth of real-world experience to draw upon that he began to write sf in earnest.

In those days it was commonplace for sf writers to begin their careers in their teens or twenties and never to pause unless their markets dried up, learning their craft by degrees. Shaw's long hesitation paid dividends in the sense that once he started writing in earnest he was able to move very rapidly to the production of high-quality work. "Light of Other Days" was one of his earliest sales in this first period of real constructive activity, and the novels he produced in the late sixties were striking in their range and ambition. The fast-paced action-adventure story *Night Walk* (1967) was followed by two notable novels whose US editions appeared in Terry Carr's prestigious "Ace Specials" series and whose UK editions were part of Victor Gollancz's distinctive yellowback hardcover line: *The Two-Timers* (1968) and *The Palace of Eternity* (1969).

Both novels move with assurance from the depiction of the relatively mundane predicaments of dissatisfied protagonists to the invocation of apocalyptic imagery. In *The Two-Timers* alternative universes connected by the guilt-stricken hero's need to compensate

for his wife's untimely death must compete for the privilege of existence; in *The Palace of Eternity* the similarly guilt-stricken hero must die before he can begin to expiate his sins by repairing the damage done by man's conquest of space. Both books retain their standing among the best work Shaw has done, and the second is fully entitled to take its place alongside two classic works with broadly similar themes, Clifford Simak's *Time and Again* and Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*.

Another novel of this period, *Shadow of Heaven* (1969), may have had similar potential but stumbled somewhat in its extrapolation. It remained a source of dissatisfaction to the author until he was able to produce a revised edition for 1991 release. Its fundamental premise – the development of a technology of antigravity – was, however, given much more eloquent extrapolation in the later *Vertigo* (1978; recently reissued with its short-story prequel "Dark Icarus" as *Terminal Velocity*, 1991). Although *Vertigo* is a more modest work than most of Shaw's full-length novels it contains some beautifully-expressed visionary moments – most notably the one in which the hero tests the limits of his apparatus by flying as high as he possibly can – and remains a particular favourite of some readers (including me).

**T**he first phase of Shaw's career extended as far as the production of two good but somewhat less typical novels which painstakingly and productively re-examined some classic sf themes: conditional immortality in *One Million Tomorrows* (1970) and nobly-motivated world-blackmail in *Ground Zero Man* (1971; slightly revised as *The Peace Machine*, 1985). In the 1970s Shaw's work became a little more patchy, partly because he was sometimes over-stretched by the need to produce work on a regular basis and partly because he was prepared to allow himself the occasional luxury of relaxing into less demanding projects undertaken mainly for fun. These included the boisterous time-paradox comedy *Who Goes Here?* (1977), which is slicker and funnier than anything Robert Sheckley ever managed to

produce at novel-length; his respectful homage to A.E. van Vogt's *Voyage of the Space Beagle* and similar *Astounding* space odysseys, *Ship of Strangers* (1978); and his suspenseful psi-thriller *Dagger of the Mind* (1979). Alongside these books, however, he continued to produce more adventurous works which set out into untracked regions of the science-fictional imagination, developing fanciful hypotheses with some panache. *A Wreath of Stars* (1976) and *Medusa's Children* (1977) were the most satisfactory of these; *The Ceres Solution* (1981) was weaker, and did not benefit from being severely cut in its UK edition.

A brief gap separated these second-phase novels from Shaw's principal works of the 1980s, which began with *Orbitsville Departure*. His subsequent works have been similarly recapitulative, breaking little new ground. *Fire Pattern* (1984) is a psi-thriller in much the same vein as *Dagger of the Mind*, while the impulse behind *The Ragged Astronauts* seems to have been an attempt to recapture the magic of tales which had thrilled the author in his youth. This phase may not yet have reached its terminus, even though *Orbitsville* and the cock-eyed universe of *The Ragged Astronauts* have both been laid to rest; a sequel to *Who Goes Here?* will appear in the not-too-distant future, and may not be the last; when (or whether) it will give way to another it is, of course, impossible to predict. The evidence of *Orbitsville Judgement* does suggest, though, that Shaw – who is now in his sixties – still has a determination to attempt to push back the horizons of the science-fictional imagination a little further. Men considerably older than he – most notably the redoubtable Jack Williamson – have demonstrated very clearly that ideative boldness is by no means a young man's prerogative, and that not all sf writers are condemned to decay into the kind of idiosyncratic introversion which trapped Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov. With luck, his faithful readers may yet have dozens more Bob Shaw books to look forward to, and there is every reason to suppose that they will continue to provide the kinds of reward to which they have gladly grown accustomed.

**I**t is entirely appropriate, by way of conclusion, to quote yet again from Bob Shaw's essay on "The Profession of Science Fiction." There, after summing up his argument about the local and ephemeral nature of the "world image" of mundane fiction, he presents an intriguing analogy. "Reportage," he says, "is arithmetic; fiction is algebra." By this he means, of course, that what we read in our newspaper is required to be specific, whereas accounts of things which never actually happened start off as hypothetical points of reference for whole series of real-life situations: quasi-Platonic Ideals which many actual predicaments might resemble to a greater or lesser extent.

For Bob Shaw, as for other true believers in the unique merits of the genre, science-fiction stories constitute real progress in "mathematical abstraction." The situations described by such stories are almost invariably unprecedented, and often frankly bizarre, but they nevertheless remain points of reference for real-life situations, all the more valuable in some ways by virtue of their distance and generality.

Given this, we should be able to understand that there were some respects in which Swift was unfair to the worthy savants of Laputa – who were, after all, the only people who owned a flying island while everyone else languished upon the unmoving earth below. In particular, we ought to doubt that they really needed those clownish flappers to call them back periodically from the strange regions of thought into which they ventured while their eyes stared fixedly in opposite directions. The Laputans were neither deaf nor dumb, and must have been versatile enough to listen and reply when they were spoken to – always provided that the subject at hand was worth the effort. We ought never to forget that at the end of each and every day they had probably apprehended and understood far more than the poor tunnel-visioned unfortunates who could not contrive to escape the cage of trivial circumstance.

Had Lemuel Gulliver ever met Bob Shaw, I think he would have learned to respect him. So should we all.

(Brian Stableford)

# Pilgrim 7

## Stephen Baxter

**T**he bombs flowered across the eastern seaboard a hundred miles beneath Mercury, banishing the brightness of morning.

Wally Schirra's first reaction was resentment. *Why me? Why the hell did the world have to blow apart during my flight? Why not Shepard's, or Carpenter's, or – ideally – during that asshole Presbyterian John Glenn's?*

Now, he thought grimly, *now no one will know how damn well I've flown this damn thing.*

It was only when the doors opened in the sky and the Earth – changed – that he felt the touch of fear.

**H**e'd seen sky doors once before.

At the top of a high blue climb, with Korea lost in the mists of the curving Earth beneath his F-68...there the doors were, just waiting. As if they were watching.

He'd heard other pilots, in drunken moments, mention similar sightings. *Just hangin' in the sky, as if they're waiting for something to happen...*

Schirra was a Navy aviator. He wasn't interested in such things then, and he wasn't now. The doors could wait and watch all they liked, as long as they didn't come in the way of his checklist.

Wally Schirra entered orbit on 3rd October 1962, a little before 8:30 EDT. He was 38 years old.

The launch, atop the shining Atlas-D, was as soft as a baby's kiss – smoother and less noisy than the centrifuge trainers, in fact. He lay on his back as the dial climbed to six g. Then, with a soundless impact, he sailed into weightlessness. The absence of pressure points under his back and legs made the cramped cabin seem a little more roomy. As if he were a genuine aviator, rather than a China doll packed in Styrafoam. With a distant thump the escape tower sailed into space, and the green JETT TOWER light gleamed.

Schirra told Deke Slayton, his capcom at the Cape, "This tower is a real sayonara."

"You have a go from Control Centre," Slayton told him.

"You have a go from me. It's real fat."

Slayton asked innocently, "Are you a turtle today?"

Schirra grinned. *Klutz.* It was his job to run the gotchas, not Deke's. He switched out of the radio circuit and spoke into his Vox tape recorder. "You bet your sweet ass I am," he said, according to the Turtle Club constitution.

*Gotcha back, Deke.*

Schirra stared through his window at the receding Earth. Just as Shepard and the others had reported before him, there was no sensation of separateness from Earth, of being some spooky kind of astral traveller. He was only a hundred miles up, damn it, sailing above the Earth in this titanium thimble; the landscape below didn't look so different than from thirty or forty thousand feet.

Then the discarded Atlas-D sailed into view, rotating like a baton between the Mercury and Earth. The Atlas wasn't much more than a balloon kept rigid by its fuel load. Somehow it was seeing that eighty-foot silver cylinder drift around like a toy that brought home to Schirra the strangeness of his new environment.

But he wasn't really interested. There was work to do.

He told Deke Slayton, "I'm in the chimp mode and she's flying beautifully." Chimp mode, a little zinger at those who liked to puncture the astronauts, to point out that a monkey could fly a Mercury. Yeah. Well, the later MA models, like his own Sigma 7, the MA-8, had joysticks for working the five-pound attitude thrusters, a genuine window you could sight the horizon through, and even a hatch you could open from the inside, instead of being packed in and out of the capsule like a TV dinner.

*Spam in a can.*

He had a 35-mil cine-camera for taking photos of the Earth; he jammed it in his little window. The boffins wanted images of fold mountains, fault ridges, volcanic fields, meteorite impacts, so they could compare them with features on other planets.

It was at the end of the second orbit, when he was over the Americas again, that he saw the doors open up in the sky.

He wasn't fazed. And he didn't mention it to Deke. *Not on my mission,* Schirra thought grimly. Even on Vox, this kind of thing got out. Look at Glenn and his god-damn fireflies. Following his checklist, he let the roll of the capsule carry his view past the patient mass of Earth and back to the sky doors. Schirra turned his camera off; he didn't want any pictures of damn UFOs.

The doors were six neat rectangles set against the black, empty sky, with a kind of pink light shining through from – somewhere else. Schirra had no way of judging their size. They could have been ten feet across, or ten miles, or ten thousand miles.

When the capsule rolled away from the doors he turned on his camera again.

Later he went into drifting mode. Drifting, conserving fuel, was one of the main goals of his six-orbit mission profile. The idea was to try out the techniques that would be needed on the longer-duration missions to come, to the Moon and beyond. "I'm having a ball up here drifting," he told John Glenn at Port Arguello. Every few minutes he had to link up with a new cap-com. He looked at the tubes of paste that made up his lunch. "Enjoying it so much I haven't eaten yet," he said.

No damn doors were going to get in his way.

The flight was going like a dream. *Operational precision. The text-book flight.* His pulse never climbed much above 110, and his blood pressure showed a perfect one-twenty over eighty. The capsule around him sounded like a little workshop, with the cameras, fans and gyros whirring. He took to ignoring the view when his windows showed him the looming sky doors; he stared out at the Earthscape, as if that were all that existed.

But then, even the Earth changed, betraying him.

**A**t first he couldn't make sense of the sparks of light climbing out of Cuba. They were hard to see against the morning seascape – it was still only around 11.30 by EDT – and they moved slowly but steadily, like determined fireflies.

*Out of Cuba...*

Red Cuba, ninety miles off the Florida coast. Khrushchev had said that if the US hit Cuba he'd bomb American bases in Europe. Hadn't stopped Kennedy trying, of course, with the Bay of Pigs fiasco his reward. And this year there had been rumours of a nuclear build-up on the island. The CIA had U2 pictures, it was said, of missiles at Casilda Port, of warheads at San Cristobal, of MRBM launchers at Diego.

Looks like the rumours are right, Schirra thought.

The sparks seemed to take a long time on their thousand-mile climb to the Eastern seaboard, but it could only have been minutes.

Schirra imagined more sparks sailing over the Pole.

Slayton kept up with routine business for him – John even ran the turtle gag again – but his voice betrayed his tension. But Schirra felt calm, and he responded evenly. Deke knew what was happening, and so did he; but in the last few minutes it was going to be business as normal, damn it. His pulse, his blood pressure weren't flickering, he knew.

*Operational precision.*

Light, everywhere. Deke's voice turned to a mush of static.

*This is it, Wal. The final gotcha.* When he'd shot down the first of his two MiGs, in the skies of Korea, Schirra had met the eyes of the young enemy pilot – from a distance, and just for a second, as the MiG fell away – but it was enough for a human contact that had felt to the younger Schirra like a stab in the heart. That was the first time it had occurred to Schirra to wonder how it would feel, when his own time came. And how it would come to him.

**T**he detonations looked like droplets, splashes of light and smoke sprinkled silently into the big bowl of atmosphere. Dutifully Schirra peered through his periscope at the glowing landscape, and pointed his cine-camera out of the cap-

sule's engraved window. The little hand-held camera, meant to assist with the exploration of new worlds, was going to record the death of his own.

Smoke rose up through the atmosphere in great plumes from the burning cities and forests, spreading across the top of the atmosphere as if coming up against a great glass ceiling. Soon those clouds would merge, he realized, and then he wouldn't even be able to see the surface; he'd be lucky, when the time came, to hit the ocean. Any ocean.

By the time the plummeting orbit of the Mercury – his third around the Earth – carried him through another forty-minute sunset, he could see fires outlining the continents on the night side.

That was when he started to think of Jo, stuck in a world that was burning up under him.

He wanted to shut down his thoughts. "Got to maintain an even strain," he said to himself. He glanced over his instrument panel. Thanks to his drifting there was plenty of hydrogen peroxide manoeuvring fuel left. There'd be enough reserve in his tanks for fifteen, twenty orbits or more. He could stay up here for a day and a half, if he felt like it. He looked down at his checklist, close-typed sheets in the greenish glow of the cabin's fluorescents. This mission might never mean anything to anyone else – damn it, without contact with the ground he'd be lucky to make it through the atmosphere – and even if he did he wouldn't have a hope in hell of making his rendezvous with the *Kearsage*.

He shook his head, feeling his hairline rasp against the rubber collar of his pressure suit. To hell with it all. He'd do this by the book, just as if he was going home to an intact world, a hero's welcome in Oradell, New Jersey, and Jo.

Schirra worked patiently through his checklist. He filmed everything he saw, allowed the slow roll to sweep his view past the night side of Earth. There were burning points of light even in the wastes of the darkened Pacific now. He continued to shut off the camera as he rolled around past the odd, meaningless view of the sky-doors.

Six orbits, straight down the line, all his mission objectives hit, just as he'd been training for for so many months. And he'd bring the damn thing down as close as he could to the mark, off Bermuda. If there was no one there to meet him, if no one ever knew how he'd done – he, Walter M. Schirra, would know it for himself.

Maybe that would be enough.

It was then, when he'd reached a kind of grim acceptance of his lot, that the continents started sliding around, throwing everything up in the air for Wally Schirra again.

**T**he doors changed. They were opening wide over the tormented Earth.

Despite himself, Schirra was forced to study the doors. They'd grown during the capsule's last couple of rolls, or maybe had come closer to the Earth. The doors weren't standing off, like in Korea. He felt a surge of resentment towards them; he felt as if the doors were strangers intruding on the death of a parent. *Is this what you came to see, assholes? Maybe Korea wasn't violent enough for you. Maybe you want to watch us blow each other to bits, huh?*

The doors looked a hell of a lot more real than before. They were rectangular slabs of pink light, casting purple highlights off the sleeping ocean below him. The reflections gave the ocean a texture, like skin; he could pick out the wake of some ship, a feather laid across a shadowed cheek.

The Sigma 7 was going to pass under the doors, between the doors and the ocean.

Abruptly the window filled with light. Squinting, he peered out. The pink glow had emerged from behind the doors now. It came down at the ocean in wide, square beams, like shafts of stained-glass sunlight in a dusty church, touching the Earth. But beams didn't make sense, because there was no atmosphere to carry dust. Right? So how could he see the beams themselves?

Schirra couldn't have evaded the pink beams if he'd wanted to.

Pink-purple light filled his cabin, glinting from the dials, from the wires and air-feeds connected to his suit, banishing the dingy undersea glow of the cabin's fluorescents. It seemed to shine through the walls, not just through the ports.

Schirra tried to keep still, not to cower in his pressure suit. He held his breath and clutched the cine-camera against his chest, in one gloved hand. As an afterthought he pulled down his visor, isolating the suit's air circuit.

The kitchen-sounds of the little cabin, the whirr and clunks of the fans and inverters, died away. The moment stretched; Schirra felt as if he were embedded in this thick light, like some insect. He counted off. "Oh...kay...Oh...kay...Oh...kay..."

The pink glow died, leaving the dirty-green of the fluorescents dingy by comparison. The kitchen noises faded back up to normal, no stranger than if he'd turned up the volume on some TV. Schirra was aware of his blood pulsing rapidly but firmly; his breath was regular, even. He was grimly satisfied. He wanted to be damn sure that none of his fear would show up in the biomedical scans on some hypothetical return to Earth.

He pushed back his visor and squinted into his periscope.

He was over the dayside again. The doors had vanished – closed up and gone, taking their beams of light with them. Schirra pushed back from the periscope and reached for his checklist and his grease-pencil. He pushed away any speculation, the last traces of fear, and forced himself to concentrate. He'd lost maybe 15 minutes out of his schedule. Well, he could make that up readily enough. He'd been careful to leave plenty of white space in his checklist for a start – he'd wanted a profile he could achieve – and he could always skip a meal, or compress a rest period. And –

"Pilgrim 7. Pilgrim 7. This is the Cape." The radio crackled in his ears, jolting him stiff in his seat. At first he couldn't recognize the voice...or rather, he could recognize it, but it didn't make sense. "Pilgrim 7, this is the Cape. Do you read?" The voice was clipped, even, but Schirra could hear anxiety in its heavy tones.

"...John? John Glenn?"

There was an audible sigh on the line, noises in the background. "John here, Deke." Deke? "Good to hear

your voice. You were out of contact for an orbit and a half; even the telemetry went down. And –"

"What the hell's going on, Glenn? You're at Arguello, not the Cape."

There was silence at the other end of the line. Damn it, Schirra thought, it had sounded like the Cape. He remembered the explosion of relief when Glenn himself had got through the ionization blackout on his return from orbit.

"Deke?" Glenn's voice was hesitant. "How are you feeling? Has something gone wrong?" Glenn paused. "Listen, we're not feeding this out; it's just you and me, buddy." *Patronizing asshole.* "Maybe there's something wrong with your air supply. Deke, have you tried isolating your suit circuit? And –"

Again, here he was with his Deke.

John Glenn wasn't capcom at the Cape. John Glenn was capcom at Port Arguello, California.

In fact, John Glenn was a mound of irradiated ash at Port Arguello, California.

Wasn't he?

Irritated, baffled, Schirra pushed his face to his periscope. The sight of the blasted dayside was almost going to be a comfort now, a confirmation that he wasn't going crazy – that the war really had struck – despite the confusing babble in his ears.

...But he was denied that comfort.

No smoke, no flame, no lingering, blackening mushroom clouds. The Mercury sailed over a sunlit, mid-morning coastline. He could see the grey mottle of towns, white feathery ship-wakes; a few high clouds lay like lace over the whole diorama.

Nothing wrong with that. Except, it wasn't a coastline he recognized. And, where was the nuclear war?

Apart from that, everything was fine.

**"D**eke? I've got Flight here. The Flight Director," Glenn explained carefully. "And Kraft thinks –"

"Zip it," Schirra muttered. "I've got some thinking to do. And don't call me Deke."

He stared into the periscope, conscious of his mouth dangling.

It took him a couple of orbits to work it out, to pull together a picture in his own head of this new Earth, or wherever-the-hell-he-was. Successive capcoms called plaintively to him as he passed over them. He ignored them. He sketched maps of the new coastlines on the back of his checklist with his grease pencil.

Half the Earth was covered by ocean. More than half. An immense, empty Pacific stretched 200 degrees around the globe.

The continents had gone.

They had been replaced by a single, huge landmass. It stretched (as far as he could see) from pole to pole, surrounded by the bloated Pacific. The supercontinent was shaped like a fat letter "C." Away from the coasts the supercontinent was arid and given over to yellow-red desert. Far to the south, right on his horizon, the glint of polar ice lightened the layer of atmosphere: a huge icecap engulfed the southern third of the supercontinent.

The open mouth of the "C" shape was filled by another ocean, which must itself have been the size of the Atlantic. This sea straddled the Equator, and cities glittered like jewels in the bays around its shore.

The air over the cities was hazy with industrial gases, and Schirra could see bridges across the bays, stitchings of stone and iron. The wakes of boats and ships fanned around the ports.

There were more cities on the outer edge of the "C" shape, on its western shore; they spread along the complex seaboard away from the Equator, north and south into the temperate latitudes. Schirra filmed it all with his cine-camera. From the Mercury the western coast looked much like California.

The cities and surrounding hinterlands of cultivation, pushed a little way into the interior desert; the supercontinent was bordered by neat rectangles of fields, like a quilt edging. But the immense desert areas were almost empty – although here and there lakes glimmered in the sun, and Schirra caught glimpses of more towns near the lakes. There were metallic splashes which must be fuel installations or mines. Plane contrails feathered across the sky, far below him.

Nowhere was there any sign of the war.

Where were the schoolmap continents? Where was America, for Christ's sake?

Schirra stared at his maps. Some of the topography looked kind of familiar. Like, the southern half of the C-continent looked as if it could have been a jigsaw of cut-out continents: there was Africa, with South America snuggling its nose into the Gulf of Guinea, and Antarctica and Australia had been slid around and pushed together into the mass. In the north, Schirra thought he could make out the eastern half of North America – couldn't that circular depression be Hudson Bay? – all pushed up against Western Europe. But the west coast of North America, and much of Asia, would have to be underwater, immersed in that great globe-girdling ocean.

Maybe it was wishful thinking. Or maybe his continents were there, their familiar shapes struggling to emerge from beneath this layer of strange landscape, the alien Pacific.

It was all a perfectly logical and plausible world. It just wasn't his.

Over the place where America ought to be, he opened his radio line. "Hey, Glenn," he said.

There was a crackle. "Pilgrim 7," Glenn replied cautiously.

"This is 'Deke.' I've got some questions."

Schirra heard muttering off. Didn't that prig Glenn know enough to keep his hand over his mike, when discussing whether a fellow astronaut had lost his beans?

"Go ahead, Deke," Glenn said at last. He sounded like a schoolmaster, or a doctor. "What do you want to know?"

Schirra thought for a moment.

"History," he said. "And geography."

**T**he eastern coast of the landmass – the inner curve of the "C" – was called Europe. Schirra didn't bother with the jumbled-around country names, some of which he recognized and some not. The inner sea was the Mediterranean. The west coast, the outside of the "C," was America.

There had been a Columbus here. He'd take a huge caravan west across the central desert, half-expecting to walk off the edge of the world.

New Jersey existed, but not Oradell, his home town. There was a Jo. But –

"But," John Glenn said slowly, reluctantly, "you're not Deke Slayton. Are you, Deke? I mean –"

Schirra sighed. "No, John, you Presbyterian pooch. I admit it. I'm Walter M. Schirra, Jr, of the USN."

Schirra was beginning to work out what had happened. Glenn, though, was still in the dark. He plodded through the logic like a schoolkid. "This is John Glenn," he said. "And I'm capcom for your mission – for Deke Slayton's mission, in the Pilgrim 7."

Christ, Schirra thought. *You'd think they'd take this klutz off the air.* "Not any more," he said. "This is Wally Schirra in the Sigma 7. And Deke is – was – my Cape capcom."

Glenn sighed audibly. "Then where's Deke?"

Slayton hadn't been able to fly at all, in Schirra's world. Heart fibrillations, discovered after he'd joined the programme.

"I don't know," Schirra said simply. "Maybe he's okay, somewhere." A thought struck him. "Where's Jo?"

Glenn paused, evidently checking with somebody. "At home. With Wally Schirra," he said heavily.

Insulated by the surroundings of the capsule, familiar from a hundred simulator rides, Schirra had felt bemused by all that had happened – the war, then no war, the sliding continents... Now, though, something touched him.

Not that he couldn't see the funny side. *The final gotcha. I'll never top this one.*

"John," he snapped. "I've some more questions. How's your geology?"

**C**ontinental drifting was a respectable theory, but not universally accepted by geologists – or so Glenn relayed to Schirra. Schirra imagined telephone lines buzzing with strange conversations ("He's asking what?"). There might be currents in the mantle; the continents might float this way and that like rafts, bumping and jostling. Maybe their single supercontinent hadn't always been this way; maybe once it had consisted of different pieces which had drifted together.

Yeah.

Schirra stared down at the changed, seamless world. Maybe if you dug down deep enough, he wondered, there would be a fine layer of ash, some of still radioactive-hot...

As he passed over "America" on his next orbit, his sixth, Schirra described the position of the continents in his world: Africa and South America and Antarctica split apart and scattered around the southern hemisphere... He asked Glenn if there had been a time when the world had looked like that.

It took Glenn another orbit to get answers from his telephone panel of specialists. Yes, such an era was possible. The guesses ranged from two to three hundred million years... *into Glenn's future.*

They'd all been moved into the past. The whole population of the Earth, to somewhere close to the Permian-Triassic boundary, from what Schirra remembered of his high-school geology. Moved by little green men from beyond the sky-doors, Schirra supposed, to get them away from the devastation of the war. To save the species. They'd been watching,

since Korea and perhaps before, maybe drawn by the light of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Waiting for the spark.

Everything had been reconstructed, as near as it could be, to the world that had been destroyed. Of course there must have been changes. Schirra wondered what had happened to the Chinese – to the Californians, for Christ's sake. And, somewhere, Israelis and Arabs must be fighting over some other portion of land, just as sacred and eternal as Palestine had been. But no one seemed to know about it, except him... and, presumably, the unfortunate copy of Deke Slayton who should have been up here instead of him. Maybe by being in space, he'd been missed out somehow.

Schirra thought it over. For some reason, being moved hundreds of millions of years into the past was more disturbing, philosophically, than moving into the future. Why should that be?

He laughed at himself. What the hell difference would it make? It would surely cause him a lot less trouble than the fact that, here, there was another Walter M. Schirra, as large as life, married to his wife.

He sighed, and told Glenn he was ready to come down.

**T**he retrorocket package shoved him into his moulded seat, hard, with a few seconds' worth of six g.

The atmosphere bit at the capsule. The retros were strapped over the heatshield; Schirra watched the hull glow red, the package straps break and fly past his window. He remembered when they thought Glenn's heatshield had come loose, that he might burn up. (Maybe that hadn't happened here.) He watched the dial creep up – six, seven, eight g. He tensed his calf and stomach muscles to counteract the g-forces. He counted out: "Oh...kay...Oh...kay..."

He was kicked in the back again. The main chute blossomed against blue sky.

He splashed down ten miles from the *Kearsage* – from a *Kearsage*, anyway – in the new Pacific, off the coast of "America." Not bad, for the first landing on an alien planet. "Good enough for Government work," he muttered.

He'd got through most of his checklist, in spite of everything. He wondered if the other Deke Slayton had had the same checklist. According to procedure, he marked the positions of the dials and switches on his control panel with his grease pencil.

Now he could lie here and wait for the copters to lift the capsule to the *Kearsage*.

He looked at his cine-camera, and thought about the images it contained. He imagined spending the rest of his life explaining away a world which didn't exist any more, a world which had been negated.

On impulse, he pulled the safety pin from the capsule's escape hatch, punched the three-inch detonator button. The explosion as the hatch blew out was too damn loud in the enclosed cabin.

The sea air was fresh, salty, full of sunlight; it banished the greenish gloom of the cabin. He could hear the blades of a copter, only minutes away.

He undid his chest strap, lap belt, shoulder harness and knee straps. He disconnected the sensor wires trailing from his suit, took off his helmet, and rolled

the suit's inner rubber neck up around his throat, sealing the suit.

He clambered out of his form-fitting chair and struggled through the hatch. He brought his cine-camera with him. The capsule looked like a misshapen bell, lolling in the water. Yellow marker dye stained the water for ten feet around the *Mercury*. The lower half of the capsule was scorched black by the re-entry, but you could still see the *Sigma 7* design, and the US flag.

On the horizon was the *Kearsage*. It was still recognizably a carrier but its profile, flattened by distance, was subtly changed.

Schirra used his weight to haul at the capsule, made it rock until the sea lapped into the cabin.

It sank fast. "Too fast," Schirra said to himself as he struggled in the water in his heavy spacesuit. "Bad design by those McDonnell assholes."

The copter dropped him a horse collar. He let himself be hauled up, returning the curious stares of the airmen with a grin. "Turned out fine," he told them.

The airmen couldn't take their eyes off the US flag sewn to his suit. Maybe he should have ripped it off before he got picked up.

But that wasn't the worst, he reflected. By losing his capsule, they'd think he'd screwed the pooch, just like poor old Gus Grissom. Well, he'd have to live with that. He'd always know the truth.

Schirra grinned. He was going to enjoy meeting the other Schirra. They could pull some gotchas like the world had never seen.

He leaned out of the copter and dropped the cine-camera into the rotor-thrashed surface of the sea. It sank, disappeared.

A few minutes later they were over the *Kearsage*.

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**Stephen Baxter**, who lives in Buckinghamshire, is the author of *Raft* (1991), which was described by Bob Shaw as "a special kind of hard sf in which the alienness is only starting where less imaginative writers would have given up." He has a second novel out this month – *Timelike Infinity* (HarperCollins). His third, a Victorian space opera, will appear in 1993.

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# The Dead

M. John Harrison & Simon Ings

One year, in the park, there were strange grey birds scavenging the shoreline of the ornamental lake.

"Don't be afraid," Elizabeth's mother said.

She said:

"Feed them. They're hungry."

The birds, which were perhaps geese, looked at Elizabeth with big round greedy eyes. They walked very slowly – very smoothly – back and forth over the snow-specked gravel. Elizabeth's mother stroked Elizabeth's neck: woollen gloves scratched Elizabeth's skin just above her red scarf.

"Feed them," she repeated.

Her grip was fierce.

Elizabeth's uncle Tony laughed. It was just his way of trying to cheer her up. He would laugh in exactly the same way at his brother's funeral – which was, of course, her father's too. Uncle Tony was gauche. He found it difficult to speak. Now he laughed at the geese and said to Elizabeth:

"Look. They're almost human."

And indeed they had formed a little line, to wait for the bread.

"Almost human!" said Uncle Tony.

"Shut up," said Elizabeth's mother.

"Nearly human."

Why have a stale bread roll in the pocket of your tailored red coat, if not to feed birds? Elizabeth, always a punctilious child, took the roll out of its paper bag, broke it up, and scattered the pieces. The geese bobbed up and down in front of her in a slow way, necks curved, beaks open. Elizabeth's mother stared at them with an angry but helpless expression, as if her feelings ran in contrary directions. Her eyes, Elizabeth saw, were more gold than green; there were wrinkles under her jaw.

In those days the winters were colder than the rest of the year. Every month they would visit Uncle Tony, who was a painter in the city. They often set out in darkness, arriving so early that mist still obscured the ends of the cobbled streets. After feeding the birds, they would eat breakfast in his house: fresh rolls, strong coffee for the mother, hot chocolate for Elizabeth.

"Will I have a cake?"

Uncle Tony was delighted.

"No one has cake for breakfast!"

"Will I have some cheese?"

He threw up his hands. What a game!

"Cheese is for lunch, Elizabeth."

"Will I have a goose, then?"

Silence.

"Can I have a goose?"

"Shut up, Elizabeth," said her mother.

Elizabeth was four years old.

She found Uncle Tony's house hard to sleep in. Pocked bulky wooden beams emerged from the plaster work in one room, to disappear into another. By day the bare, varnished boards were black with trapped reflections. At night they creaked; while the uncle gave great shouts and snores, like communiqués from his dream-life. He would speak a full sentence just before dawn, his voice reasonable and calm:

"I wanted blue."

Or:

"Let's get the pegs first."

There were other noises, perhaps less random. One night on a visit not long after her eighth birthday, Elizabeth was woken by a woman sobbing. One moment, this sound was low and contemplative, brooding over events gone by; the next it rose angrily to meet some immediate pain. It came and went in the night, full of the pure pity of the self – present anguish, passing sorrow – but also something as raw as a broken tooth.

Elizabeth got out of bed and knocked at her mother's door. The only answer was an inhuman screech. Elizabeth opened the door and looked in. There her mother knelt, quite alone, on all fours on the bare floor in the dark. Moonlight came through the window, picking out the wooden bed-head, the white china jerry. It glistened in the sweat on the mother's forehead, pooled between the muscles in the narrow small of her back, which she first hollowed and then rounded in some rhythm of frustration.

"Mother?"

"Go away."

"Mother?"

There was a strong smell in the room. The mother's breasts hung down. She stared emptily ahead.

"Go away and wait your turn," she said.

After that, things went from bad to worse. It rained all winter; and all the following summer, and all the winters and summers which followed that. December was too warm. July was too cold. At home Elizabeth's mother spent her nights on a trestle bed in the conservatory, while Elizabeth's father sat on the stairs practising the violin until his wife was quiet.

When she was fourteen, Elizabeth's father taught her a song.

*Oubliez les anges*, it advised:

*Oubliez les bossues*

*Et partout*

*Oubliez les professeurs!*

He took her to the café by the bus station, where, from a table by the window, a very fat woman called Hetty Calver played clock patience and watched the buses go in and out all day. The air was full of the smell of cigarettes and hot fat. As soon as you entered, Hetty would drag herself to her feet and fetch from behind the formica-topped counter a bottle of marjolaine, a dusty jar of honey. Anywhere else they would warm the honey over a little hotplate before it was added to the marjolaine. That was the modern way. But Hetty Calver still dipped her finger in the jar, licked the honey off, and rolled it round her mouth to liquefy it.

"There you are, dear."

"I'm not drinking that," said Elizabeth.

"It tastes of roses," said her father. He smacked his lips mournfully.

"It's been in her mouth."

"We all loved Hetty when she was young."

He took Elizabeth to the park. It was a miserable day for summer, as if someone had collected all the damp and forgettable moments of the year and strung them together regardless of season. The fair was cancelled. Elizabeth's coloured paper parasol, so necessary in former summers, crumpled in the drizzle and fell to pulp. If the summer was no longer hot, the winter was no longer cold. Elizabeth fidgeted.

"Why is Mummy like she is?"

Her father made no answer.

"Listen!" he said.

The town's famous silver band had begun its afternoon practise.

"Listen," he began.

He said: "There are a great many dead —"

Elizabeth's father was quite different from his brother. Everything had to be proper for him: a suit, a marriage, a phrase in music. He smelled of lavender water. If he over-wound his watch that morning he would walk round worriedly all day, murmuring: "The spring will be strained. The spring has strained. Perhaps the spring is broken." Uncle Tony had no watch. His paint brushes stuck up surprisedly out of a jam jar, like men with mad and sticky hair. These brushes were responsible for the biggest, most garish pictures Elizabeth had ever seen. Hot yellow fishes hung in a green sky, a sky the colour of her mother's eyes. "Green sky!" Elizabeth ticked him off. "Rubbish! And those fishes are a baby's fishes." Her father was easily defeated by life, but Uncle Tony would never give up. It would be hard to imagine two more different people, but Elizabeth loved them both.

"There are a great many dead," her father repeated.

"They far outnumber the living," he explained. "We must pay our debt to them."

He thought for a moment.

"We must accommodate them somehow."

At his own funeral, some months later, the rain never stopped. The cortège wound its way across town, up a hill, between factories, behind rusty gasometers and over the canal by the

derelict lock-gates, corner by corner, junction by junction, as if it had lost its way. It was late afternoon. The pall bearers tried to walk in the centre of the street, where the wet cobbles, gleaming in the light of the boarding-house windows, were less overgrown. Bird-droppings mottled the flagstones in the churchyard, piled up in the corners beneath the broken guttering. Elizabeth's father changed hands three times on the journey. His friends from the silver band, somewhat drunk, found him heavy; they played him along on their sodden instruments, with *Oubliez les anges*. Hetty Calver followed a little way behind the mourning party. Great fat woman, great fat arms. She had brought her son with her, an idiot with dirt under his nose and breeches several sizes too big, who prowled about the edges of the cortège picking up half-bricks and bits of corroded pipe and calling out, "No more. No more." Over the grave he was the only one to produce tears. "Hush," said Hetty Calver, stroking his hair: "Hush." The cemetery, Elizabeth saw, was full of headstones so worn you could read on them only the word "Father."

Afterwards, as they ate the funeral baked meats in a room above the grocer's shop, a grey bird came tapping against the window. Elizabeth stared at it and burst into tears. She cried until she was sick. The women stood round her, uncertain what to do. The air was absolutely still. The rain fell straight down, and Elizabeth's father was dead, and everything smelled the way it had smelled for weeks. "There, there," said the women. The grey bird ruffled its feathers as if settling into a coat, and looked in at Elizabeth from the window sill.

"Get it away!" she screamed.

What happened to Elizabeth's mother?

She died, too, but not before she had explained everything.

"You will remember?" she said anxiously. "Your father would so want you to remember."

She sighed and took Elizabeth's hand.

"There really is nothing we can do, is there? About the world? Little one?"

"I hate you," said Elizabeth. "I hate him too."

The mother laughed softly.

"How shocked I was when you came into that room and found me there! All those years ago, when we still had summers and winters!"

"I hate you."

Elizabeth inherited her father's house and her mother's advice. "Pick a clear, starless night. Wear a cotton dress. Get up on to the mausoleum. It helps to lick your finger and wet yourself between the legs. If anyone is with you, have them turn away." And then:

"Do you remember our summers by the lake? You used to love them so. Feed the birds my darling. Good-bye."

One other thing she inherited was her mother's chair, an ugly wooden object with a high back and curious, scooped-out seat. "We must carry it to your room," her mother said. How heavy and awkward it was, for an old woman and a young girl! At first it would not go through the door. But between them they got it in, and set it down in the corner by the window. "There!" the mother said. She tried to smile, but exhaustion made her face immobile. She and Elizabeth, at this astonishing juncture of their lives,

could only make together a comedy of domestic affections – each starting to speak, each hanging back for the other, over and over again. In the end, the mother said:

“Well. Sit down.”

Then she turned and went tiredly out.

It was a “birthing” chair, designed less for comfort than the correct posture.

“I hate it,” whispered Elizabeth, when the door was closed at last.

“**W**ill you come to the funeral?” she wrote to her Uncle Tony. She was seventeen years old, not so much angry as puzzled. “The world is just such a hateful place.” In the end, though, he was less support to her than she had hoped. He arrived late, and left before the meats were served. She watched him walk away down the rain-silvered cobbles of the high street. He was preoccupied, and his shoes were new. Later, it turned out that he had remarried, to a middle-aged woman with a few black curly hairs along the line of her jaw, whose thirteen-year-old son, gassed by a faulty boiler, had drowned in the bath the year before. She wore a little silver bird on a thin silver chain round her neck, and all she ever talked about was how to cook vegetables. Elizabeth met her only the once.

“How is my uncle?”

“He eats well.”

“How are his odd skies and yellow fishes?”

Uncle Tony’s wife wiped her upper lip. Uncle Tony was eating his greens: but no one was buying his pictures. They had been called too colourful for the middle-class taste. Uncle Tony, on the other hand, believed they weren’t colourful enough. It was his theory that there was something wrong with the paint.

“It isn’t lively. The colour is washed right out of it as it arrives on the canvas,” he complained to Elizabeth in a letter.

“The world seems washed out too,” he admitted.

He and his wife had moved into a smaller house, on a road that was always being dug up.

“I miss the children most,” he wrote: “Their bright clothes and ribbons. “Do you remember when we fed the birds together? You looked like a little wooden doll in your red coat. So proper, yet you asked: ‘Can I have cheese for breakfast?’ I miss the language of children, which we forget so easily. Perhaps my eyes are tired, and I have grown out of sympathy with my public; but my ears are perfectly good. The world has grown out of sympathy with us all. Of all the things the dead have stolen from us I miss the children. Of all the children I miss you, Elizabeth, the most.”

Elizabeth was obscurely disappointed by this.

She imagined Uncle Tony in an upstairs kitchen, arguing desultorily with his wife. Outside, the workmen were shouting, and a mechanical digger went to and fro, shaking the fabric of the house, making it hard to hear what anyone said. Uncle Tony’s wife stood by the window, lifting one corner of a faded net curtain. The room smelled of cooked macaroni. As she looked down at the new hole in the road, which was full of muddy water, some thought made her face tighten briefly then relax again.

“You never go to church,” she accused.

“Pardon?”

If she wants me to hear, Uncle Tony thought, she’ll have to shout.

“You’ll have to shout,” he said.

His wife looked down at the mechanical digger, rocking backwards and forwards in one place with a mouthful of paving slabs.

“Nothing,” she said.

Elizabeth had hoped Uncle Tony would help her, but he came to nothing. Uncle Tony was someone who needed help himself. She wrote to him:

“I do remember the breakfasts we had.”

She wrote:

“How happy we were, long ago!”

“They’ll never put the gas back on,” he told his wife. “I know that.”

**D**awn breaks over the town. Its factories and recreation grounds and terraces of dark brick are silent in the pale horizontal wash of light. The old chimneys make faint long shadows across the grass. The railway bridges and advertisement hoarding are silent. An old bicycle is parked against a wall in the rain. Every wall – every factory or warehouse, every nice house on the outskirts – is carved with the names of the dead. There are dried flowers in the niches. The air chokes on a mouldy perfume: lavender and birdlime. Lavender and birdlime, and the smell of yeast from a run-down brewery on Thomas Street.

Elizabeth gets up early and walks through the town. Time has passed. Uncle Tony is dead now too. At nineteen years old – tallish, and with what would have been called a good body – she is already greying at the left temple. Her eyes are rather large, the irises unnaturally wide. She has a thin, anxious smile.

“I’ll wear a green and gold dress,” she promised herself last night.

By now the town is waking up.

Bicycles go past, wheels hissing in the rain. Workmen will be gathering in the bus station. At the café, Hetty Calver is already playing patience at the table by the window. She says to herself aloud:

“Hearts on hearts, my love.”

Her cards are soft and sticky with wear. “Hearts on hearts.” Then: “Be with you in a minute, love.” Her chair scrapes back. Breathing heavily through her mouth, she squeezes behind the counter. “Nasty day.” Out comes the marjolaine and honey. “There you are, dear.”

Elizabeth smiles and empties the glass.

“Thank you.”

“They all loved me when I was young.”

In the centre of the town, where the canal flows through the municipal park, there is an iron bridge. At all times of day but especially in the quiet morning, before the town wakes properly up, this bridge is grey with birds. You think they are pigeons: they cover the pavements like a rustling, cooing rug. You think they are starlings: they perch heads cocked on the railings, the mossy rusted beams above and beneath. You think they are great soft grey geese: they fill the sky with creaking wings which obscure the sluggish green water of the canal below. They wheel about you. The air flutters and susurrates with their feathers. They are like a musty grey growth on everything. Elizabeth comes to the mid-point of this bridge, where the oldest

birds perch. When you pass they launch themselves from the rails and swoop close to you, brushing your hair for luck!

"Not too close," says Elizabeth.

"I love you, but not too close."

On the other side of the canal she takes the brick-paved lane to gardens, wrought-iron benches, and the ornamental lake where her mother and her uncle used to sit talking while she fed the birds. Now she can sit on the same bench and reflect: "How proper of the dead to leave us their ashes, which silt down quietly in the lake." A breeze springs up, full of dust, bringing from the waking cafés the smells of instant coffee and soap. Elizabeth feels it through her mother's dress, against her skin. She grips the bench with her hands and brings her hips forward so the small of her back rests against the cold iron slats. She bends her knees to take the weight of her body, and parts her legs so that the wind can penetrate. Dust on her skin. Dust on her breast. Dust in shapes rotten and terrible and heartbreaking: but the years have passed, all exactly alike, and she has grown so used to them!

She remembers her mother's advice.

"If someone else is there, have them look away."

No one else was ever there.

**B**ack in her room, Elizabeth pulls her mother's dress up round her waist, and tells herself:

"It's always cold in here."

Shut the windows, draw the thin curtains.

What light they admit is as grey as a feather.

Elizabeth sits in the birthing chair. Her pains begin.

"What? Are you so beautiful?"

She groans: "Oh, oh, nnnnh, oh no."

The first of them is stillborn, a drizzle of wet feathers. The next two unwrap in an instant, flutter to the window and beat their wings against the glass. Elizabeth is dizzy. Pushing the last one out, she has wet herself. Birds, little birds, flutter round the room, all colours first, then fading to grey. They throw themselves so helplessly against the glass. "If only I could get them to the light!" As soon as she can Elizabeth goes to the windows to release them. Out they go, one after the other, glisten for an instant in the light as if they might regain their colour; then they're gone, round the corner of the building, off towards the bridge. Exhausted, Elizabeth washes the blood-streaked mucus from her thighs – cleans the window, looking out – rubs half-heartedly at the stain on the carpet. Mid afternoon: she lies upon her bed and goes to sleep. The boundaries between states have all crumbled: no more snow, no more sunshine. The dead leave no room for us: if anyone is there when you do it, make them look away. *Oubliez les professeurs*. Why do you have a stale bread roll in the pocket of your red coat, if not to feed the birds?

So that they will feed you.

It would be an odd world, Elizabeth thought, if we could really forget our teachers.

She wakes hungry, looks out. The birds have left a heap of things under the window while she slept – some peanuts from the floor of a bus shelter, bread-crusts, a square of chocolate with the blue silver paper still on it. Elizabeth squats down on the bricks outside her room to go through this stuff, the air still and warm on her skin. Everything sorts quite easily into

a meal. While she is eating, a single starling flies in and settles on the bricks beside her. Its feathers have a mad, sticky, iridescent look. One of its eyes is green, the other gold. In its beak is a cigarette butt, which it drops in front of her.

Elizabeth looks at it and smiles.

"Thank you," she says.

She says: "I don't think I'll eat that though."

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**M. John Harrison's** most recent novel is *The Course of the Heart* (Gollancz) and **Simon Ings's** debut book is *Hot Head* (Grafton), both published earlier this year. Each writer has contributed separately to *Interzone* in the past, and the above story is (to the best of our knowledge) their first collaboration. It first appeared two months ago in Chris Kenworthy's small-press anthology *The Sun Rises Red* (available from Barrington Books, Bartle Hall, Liverpool Rd., Hutton, Lancs. PR4 5HB, at £3.95). We are grateful to Chris Kenworthy for permission to reprint it here.

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With a rise in subscription rates imminent (see page 5), now is a good time to...

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# Mutant Popcorn

## Film Reviews by Nick Lowe

Traditionally, this is the time of year for all involved with the enterprise of entertainment to give themselves up to seasonal rituals of death and rebirth. All across the land, the old year's celluloid is being gathered up and collectively buried according to ancient form in a thousand end-of-year roundups, top-ten lists, critics' choices, Oscar prophecies and fireside so-you-think-you-went-to-the-pictures-this-year quizzes. Then everyone sits down to a week-long communion of being forced on a national selection of recently-forgotten three-star films featuring cars rolling over and going up; and as we finally wake from our trance into the frosty dawn of a new fiscal year, the rebirth of fun is announced in a knee-high tide of doorstep press releases and paid supplements in the trade papers, proclaiming each distributor's gleaming new slate of candidates for the coming year (as well, of course, as the annual reannouncement of *The Thief and the Cobbler*).

Well, enjoy it while you can, suckers, because this year the old style of movie Christmas is CANCELLED FOREVER, and I don't just mean that in future squads of heavy-armed riot personnel have been assigned to every major airport across the US to escort Macaulay Culkin personally to his seat on the right plane. No: this year, the future of cinema is being rewritten even as the world sleeps, for it is with pride and a sense of manifest destiny that this magazine is at last able to unveil details of its own feature film studio.

Pictures from Interzone is a wholly-owned ultra-independent production, marketing, and distribution operation dedicated to the overthrow of established order, the single-handed rescue of the British film industry, and the inexorable conquest of all world culture. Our initial aim is to become the world's most successful film company by January 1st, 1993, and already it seems unlikely that anything can halt our progress towards this goal. For public health reasons we can only list details here of a small sample of our first year's releases, but these alone should be enough to show, in the words of our corporate slogan, that "PfIZ means business!"

Central to PfIZ's creative strategy is a whole fistful of exclusive bandwagon rights to 1992's barnstorming successes. First, in the wake of *Beauty and the Beast*'s massive critical and commercial success, PfIZ has begun preprod on family-oriented animated musical remakes of all the rest of jolly "Jack" Cocteau's evergreen oeuvre. First out the gate will be a new version of *Orphée* with singing motorbikes, a talking car radio, and the voices of Patrick Swayze as the happy-go-lucky but

merchandisable cartoon toastracks; and the trilogy is completed with a scintillating update of *Blood of a Poet*, telling the romantic story of a homoerotic surrealist's enchanting relationship with a spirited and amusingly "liberated" singing statue. Book now — and bring the grownups too!

But that's only the beginning. PfIZ has already sewn up exclusive sequel rights to 1992's most popular movie character, with Arthur C. Clarke already commissioned to script 1942:



From 'Beauty and the Beast' (copyright The Walt Disney Company)

inwardly dissatisfied rock star hero and Juliette Lewis as the impish death goddess who captures his wayward heart. The magic continues in the followup *Testament d'Orphée*, where themes of poetry and mortality and the dying artist's relationship with his muse mix unforgettably with a hummable soundtrack and heartwarmingly

*Discovery Two* (in which Columbus's inept twelve-greats-grandson Chris Colon gets mixed up in a hilariously tasteless WWII naval farce when his battlecruiser inadvertently discovers Okinawa), *2149: Paradise Strikes Back* (one man's obsessive intergalactic quest to prove that spacetime is curved), and *9421: The Final Carry-On*

(transcendental antics and timeless seaside humour at the end of history; from the director, needless to say, of *Home Alone 2*).

In a parallel move, PflZ has daringly trumped all rivals in the *Basic Instinct* sequel wars, by signing Sharon Stone aboard to reprise her role in a fabulous five followups "climaxing" in the slam-bang finale *Catherine's Dead: The Final Pick Up*; while already on release is PflZ's fleshcreeping *Dead Again* sequel originally titled *The House That Dripped Luvvies*, in which the star-crossed couple find themselves reincarnated into yet another nightmare – this time, a country house hideously stuffed with escaped Oxbridge artistes. (Test screenings in Culver City revealed that the film was actually scarier *without* its supernatural prologue and scissors-slasher climax, and that preview audiences preferred the more suggestive title *Peter's Fiends* – unfortunately mistyped in a key production memo.)

But original projects are strongly represented too, with the emphasis on traditional high-concept big-name

moviemaking to provenly winning formulae. Since the secret of high concept is to cast Arnold Schwarzenegger, Danny DeVito, or strange-looking country singers in any role whatever, PflZ is preparing a string of imaginatively-cast remakes of beloved black-&-white classics: *Ice Cold in Alex* with Tom Waits in the part made famous by Sir Johnny Mills, DeVito as Death in a blackly comic update of *The Seventh Seal*, and – in an exclusive deal to profit from the public's rediscovery of Manhattan's zaniest sex offender – Hollywood's popular ex-muscleman action hero has been signed aboard for the leading role in a big-budget remake series of the entire Woody Allen oeuvre.

Of course, such an ambitious production slate demands innovative and even revolutionary methods of studio accounting. In a move sure to be copied by rival corporations, PflZ is the first studio to do away altogether with the thorny concept of budgets. All Pictures from Interzone have an automatic net dollar budget of zero, with no actual salaries but a guaran-

teed 100% profit points written into all contracts – and not just for star names, but for every single person attached to the project. Since it is now well understood in the industry from highly-publicized claims over *Coming to America* and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* that even the top-grossing box-office earners do not in fact make any profit at all, we will additionally be able to outplay ordinary studios in bidding wars by offering point agreements in the several thousand percent. It is this, for instance, that has made it possible to sign Arnold Schwarzenegger, Julia Roberts, and Wayne & Garth to play in every single picture ever to be released, a niche unoccupied since the retirement of Donald Pleasence.

All this, of course, frees existing studio finance for more radical uses. One of PflZ's most daring and envied coups will be to ensure record admissions by actually paying people to watch our movies. At a stroke, this will breathe life even into tissue that has never lived: thus *Freejack* will be simultaneously rereleased under three separate new titles, on the grounds that nobody will notice because nobody went to see it in the first place. Naturally, this in turn will mean that it is in our interest to ensure that as few people as possible actually know about our films. For this reason, in the above reconstruction all names and other details have been disguised, and future PflZ releases will be camouflaged under the banner of other studios. This is entirely in line with the Pictures from Interzone corporate strategy, which in the mid-term aims to take over every major motion-picture studio *without anyone's noticing*, including the studio itself.

Nevertheless, you will unerringly recognize a Picture from Interzone when you see one. Does this film seem to have been packaged by an organization of cultural terrorists and scripted by a mugwump on mesc? Do you feel that this product is not merely insulting your intelligence but wrestling it to the floor, pinning it by the throat, and abusing it savagely with an electric cattleprod? Does the very fact that this stuff got made challenge all rational models of financial accountability and the responsible use of global resources? Why do you find yourself obsessively scanning the text of the any-resemblance statement for clues to a cosmic conspiracy? Those who know, will know; and before even you know it, *all films on earth* will be completely from Interzone. So throw the SWITCH, Ygor! Let the power FLOW! See: our creation LIVES! Now nothing can stand in the way of our triumph – wait, not that way, stop, I command you... I am your creator, you must obey – erk – gack – no...

(Nick Lowe)

## FOR SALE

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# The Gravity Brothers

Stephen Blanchard

I was working under the van when Carmen rolled along in her electric chair. I lifted my head and saw her wheels with their shiny spokes beyond my splayed feet. She called out to me. "Frank...!" She must have heard the clicking of the ratchet. As I wriggled out I scraped my arm on the rusty underside.

"I've got something for you," Carmen said.

It was lying in her lap – a round dark shape in crinkled cellophane. She looked anxious for a second, lifting her broad face. Her heavy hair was almost black and the pupils of her eyes were a pale blue-green like the leaves of cold-climate plants. She was on her own today.

"So where's your friend?" I asked. Sometimes she was pushed along by a silent chain-smoking youth a couple of years younger.

She lifted the corner of her mouth. "Dunno." I saw her swallow and realized that she was hiding her breathlessness. I looked at her hand on the arm rest. The fingers were short and strong. She wore a denim jacket and a purple dress which covered her legs to the ankles.

"Did you have trouble on the hill, Carmen?"

"Coming down was okay."

"Something wrong with your batteries?"

"Things just won't take a charge anymore... Look, do you want this or not?"

"Another cake? Hope you didn't steal it."

She lowered her eyelashes for a second and then nodded towards the van. "Got problems?"

"Hole in the exhaust. And I need it for tonight – I'm moving some furniture."

I wiped my hands on a greasy cloth and then pushed her through the missing gate into the tiny yard. The front windows of the house were still boarded because I liked it that way. Privacy. The door was reinforced with a sheet of corrugated iron and swung back into the hall with a shriek and a slam.

"You're mad living in this place," Carmen said. "Borderline-schizophrenic."

"You're clever for your age, Carmen."

The house was part of a long terrace sloping down towards the railway line, one of the few left liveable after the big clearance. On the other side of the street there was nothing but a high iron fence topped by wire and behind that the holes and dusty spaces of the development. The grind and rattle of the big diggers woke me in the morning. The brothers lived in the house next door. They were my guarantee.

At the foot of the stairs I had to tilt the chair so that one pair of wheels left the ground. Carmen laughed and held onto her skirts. Then there was a step to negotiate down into the kitchen. I found a knife and a clean plate and unwrapped the cake from its cellophane and cut it into sections.

"Tea?" I asked.

She stared at the gas-cooker. "You're getting yourself equipped."

"Somebody gave it to me. In lieu of payment."

"In loo," Carmen said. "I don't know why you bother with those kind of people."

"Some of them are friends."

"I'm the only friend you've got. What do you think about that?"

"Suits me," I said.

The kettle boiled and I made the tea. We ate alternate pieces of the cake until it was gone.

"You must keep yourself starved," said Carmen.

"I have to tax the van. That's the first priority."

"Above eating?"

"No van, no work, no food."

"Makes sense to you," Carmen said. She stretched herself and looked out of the window. I wondered if one of the brothers, Leonard or Ivor, was there. You could see the back of their house and then part of the yard through the break in the fence.

"Seen them lately?" Carmen asked. "The bro's."

I nodded. "I keep an eye out. As long as they stay over there then I'm safe over here. You see if you pull this place down then next door will just fall over."

She looked unconvinced. She picked crumbs from her lap with a precise finger and thumb. Her hands were strong and eloquent. "Those old guys have thousands," she said.

"Thousands of flies."

"You know what I'm talking about. Anyone that old and mean must have plenty tucked away."

"You'd be surprised, Carmen."

She was adopting me, or the other way around. I'd helped her with a high kerb one day and we'd stayed to chat. She visited now about twice a week, cruising down the long slope gravity-assisted, sometimes with the youth. She'd ask questions about my life and motives, looking over the house with her mouth in a scowl. That day I pushed her back to level ground and then returned to work under the van. I applied a patch and ran the engine

to make it harden. I drank more tea and then stepped out of the back-door to take the air and saw Leonard or Ivor walking down their long garden holding a plate of something. I made a noise with my throat and he half turned, putting on a gentle smile. He wore spectacles with heavy horn rims.

"Hello Leonard," I said.

He bent carefully from the waist and put the plate down on a level spot among the weeds and strewn rubbish. I saw the effort it took him to straighten up again. The plate carried scraps of cooked gristle and fat.

"Ivor," he gently corrected, massaging the small of his back. Both the brothers were heavy, slope-shouldered old men with big bellies and stiff zinc-grey hair. I suppose they were twins or nearly. At the end of a warmish summer they dressed almost identically in layers of disintegrating woollens above sagging trousers. Ivor's plimsolls were filthy and without laces.

"Those are Leonard's glasses," I said.

"Leonard's asleep," Ivor said. He frowned and looked about the garden. Bulging black sacks were stacked against the rear wall of the house, torn and buzzing with flies. Standing quiet one night I'd seen a long-bodied rat emerge and fuss with its whiskers.

"Look, I could move all that," I told him. "I could take it to the dump."

He whistled and made sucking noises with his lips. I turned to the garden and saw a skinny white cat creeping from a thicket of waist-high thistle.

"That stuff attracts vermin," I said.

He reached with the toe of his shoe to edge the plate towards the nervous cat. It was getting dark now, the garden filling with shadow. I saw another cat in the half-light among the tall weeds.

"Oh, we don't mind those," Ivor said. "We don't mind the vermin at all."

**I**n the small hours music began to seep from the house next door, the brothers' house. It was big-band with slippery strings and a soft-voiced singer. I rolled out of bed and stood in the dark. Through the single window I could see the brothers standing in their narrow paved yard. They were laughing and smoking, flicking the ash from their cigarettes. Their kitchen window was open and the music must have sounded from a radio inside. The announcer's voice came on and then the chimes for the hour. Three o'clock.

"Ivor wears the specs," Carmen said.  
"No, that's Leonard. Sometimes they swap, just to confuse people."

"Ivor killed his wife and buried her in the garden," Carmen said. "He planted a rosebush on the spot."

"You seem to know a lot about them."

"They get talked about. They go to the shops sometimes. It's always Leonard on his bike. He buys fags and meat. Never fruit and veg. Never bread. People don't like to stand next to him. They reckon he smells..."

"That's possible."

"You're a vegetarian, aren't you?"

"Meat is murder," I said.

She took the cigarette from her mouth and blew a fancy shape of smoke. She was with her silent friend

today and they had bought or stolen a pack of twenty. "The brothers were around since I was a kid. Since before."

"You're still a kid," I told her.

The youth laughed softly and stared at us from under his lashes.

**T**hat night I rigged up a light from the house so that I could work under the bonnet of the van. A slimy mix of water and oil was leaking from a perished hose. I straightened up to ease my shoulders and saw Leonard standing at the kerb behind me. The spectacles sat with authority on his face. He wore the same sagging clothes as Ivor but I noticed a black digital wristwatch below his frayed cuffs. It was the kind with many different functions and the times in capital cities around the world.

"It doesn't work?" he asked.

"Just a leaky hose."

He nodded. "Ivor told me you spoke to him."

"We passed the time of day." Something about Leonard made me feel defensive. Behind their condensing lenses his eyes had none of Ivor's watery mildness.

"You offered to clear some rubbish for us," Leonard said.

"Anytime you like."

He waved his hand. "Just forget about that... You could perform a service though. I mean we'd pay."

I waited for him to explain. The lives of the brothers seemed so basic and self-sufficient.

"It's lead," Leonard told me. "We'll need some soon. An amount of lead."

"Lead," I repeated. Standing beside him I caught a whiff of mildewed clothing and another smell which I didn't try to place. "For the roof, you mean?"

Leonard smiled. "No, not the roof. Some little job of our own. Come inside if you like..."

It was for the first time. I locked my tools into the van and followed him through the front door. There was a bare bulb hanging on a twist of black flex and its light seemed to coat the walls with brown varnish. The hall was the mirror-image of my own with closed doors guarding the same rooms. There was a heavy-framed cycle leaning against the wall and we had to edge around crabwise to reach the foot of the stairs. I glanced up and saw the door half open on the small room at the landing. There was darkness inside. There would be another flight leading to the two bedrooms and I imagined sealed, mothy air and then mattresses of ticking and straw on iron bedsteads. I pictured their identical heads on the pillows.

"It's through here," Leonard said. He beckoned and led me towards the back of the house. "Mind the step..."

In the kitchen a tap dripped into a deep earthenware sink piled with dishes like geological strata. There was an iron gas-stove on curved feet and then sagging shelves and cupboards. The floor was covered by lengths of filthy linoleum curling at their edges. Leonard squatted down wheezingly in the corner near the cooker and tugged open a pair of cupboard doors. Muttering to himself he pulled out pans and basins, tins which he opened with his nails to let loose a waft of expired biscuit.

I waited in the door. Leonard pushed himself to his



feet. He looked annoyed and suspicious and raised his face to the ceiling. "Ivor!" he called loudly. "Ivor...!"

There was no answer from upstairs.

"He likes to hide sometimes. He stays as quiet as a mouse..." Leonard tugged at his lower lip, and then crossed the room to pull out a narrow drawer. He picked out handfuls of cutlery, piling them onto the table, and then opened another drawer, this time sliding it completely from its runners and upending it. A blackened tangle of tools fell out.

"These things come in," Leonard said. "Come in useful that is." He jerked his chin to indicate upstairs. "He doesn't see the value in preservation. He's all for the new."

He winked at me and then lifted a sealed glass jar to his eyes, shaking it and peering inside. I saw screws and bolts, small nails welded together with scale. Leonard twisted at the metal top but his big hand began to slip. Suddenly he gave a shout and flung the jar onto the floor. It shattered in a shower of metal and glass. He brushed some of the mess away with his foot and then squatted stiffly down to sift through the rest with the tips of his fingers.

"Here," he said.

He lifted something between his thumb and finger. It looked like an oily lump of dull brass about the size of a fishing weight. He gave it a wipe against the leg of his pants and handed it to me. It was heavier than I'd expected and warmed in my palm.

"That's gold, you know," Leonard told me.

"**T**hey want lead," I told Carmen. "Lead for gold." The ingot lay heavy and warm like an animal curled asleep in my shirt pocket. "They want a ton of scrap. I could buy them ten with this stuff."

"Taking advantage of those old men..."

"It's their choice, isn't it?"

She shook her head. "Those old guys are out of touch, you know. The pair of them belong in a home. They don't know the value of things: their minds don't make sense any more."

"It makes good sense for me."

"**P**ure gold," the man with the scales said. "25 carat. We don't often see it in a form like this... Is it yours?"

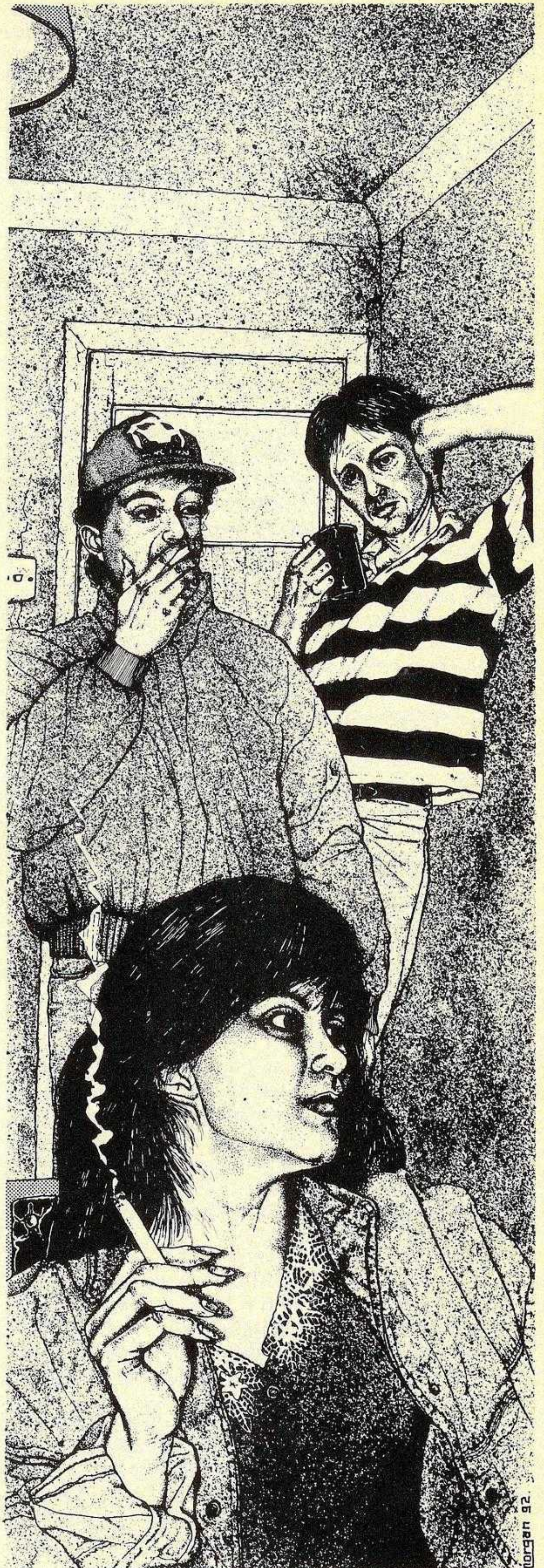
I showed him my driving licence, the false one. "I'm doing this for a friend," I said. "He's laid-up at the moment."

"Then I'll have to give you a cheque."

"A cheque's no good." I hadn't a bank-account and I wasn't sure about the brothers.

The man sighed and called for a small plump woman with silver-blue hair. She watched me until he came back with the money. There was a slim fold of new-minted fifties and then some smaller, scruffier notes.

I drove across town to the scrap-metal place. The men were drinking lager from cans and watching a porn video in their wheelless caravan. It took them over an hour to find the lead and load it. It was in rolls and lumps. On my way back the engine began racing and scraping as if something had broken inside. A couple of times there was a lurch and a wrenching



Illustrations by Russell Morgan

bang from the exhaust. I had to nurse the van in second-gear through the side-streets.

The trip home took me nearly an hour. At the end I freewheeled down the hill and nosed into the kerb outside the brothers' house. They were already standing in their front garden – two old men in layers of moth-food clothing, one wearing carpet slippers and the other plimsolls. They must have heard the death-rattles of the motor from a half-mile away.

I climbed down from the cab. Leonard looked down at his watch as if time was precious. "Got the lead?"

I pointed to the back of the van. Relief passed over their faces like a single expression and they both smiled at me without showing their teeth. I noticed that they were holding hands under the folds of their woollens.

I carried the lead into the kitchen and stacked it on the linoleum. Luckily there was a stone floor. I made about ten journeys and then took a break and made another few. Leonard and Ivor fussed like old hens. When it was over I was glad to step outside into the yard where at least a breeze stirred the compost smells of the rubbish.

**T**he next day a woman and two men were knocking at the brothers' door. They looked official: council, social-workers, Inland-Revenue. The woman beckoned me as I stepped out of my house.

"We're concerned about your neighbours," she said. "Leonard and Ivan."

"Ivor," I said.

She looked behind me to my boarded windows. The van was still parked at its disabled angle. "Have you seen them lately?" she asked.

"The other night," I said. "No problems there."

"They may need some help," the woman said. "My name is Mrs Rinse."

One of the men was still busy at the door, rapping with his knuckles and calling through the vertical slot of the letter box. There was no answer or sign of life.

An hour or so later Carmen rolled down the hill with her quiet friend. Even at a hundred yards I could see that there was something wrong with her face.

"Who did that?" I asked.

She squinted at me from her working eye but said nothing. The youth turned his face to the side. He fished a dog-legged cigarette from his back pocket and lit it with a match.

"You ought to talk to people," I said. "If someone's hurting you."

She shook her head. "I know about this stuff. I know what would make things worse."

"You can take advice, can't you?"

She lowered her eyes. "Advice is a waste of time."

The youth smoked with a hand on the handle of her chair. I felt a heaviness in my belly like the beginnings of flu. I pulled the wad of money from my shirt and showed it to them. "I've got this now. You could take some of it."

Carmen looked surprised and troubled. The youth drew on his bent cigarette with his look concentrated on the money. I separated a couple of the fifties. "Buy yourself a new battery for instance."

She jerked her chin. "That's the money you got from the bro's?"

"For the work I did."

"Those old bastards aren't in their right minds, you know. Gold's the same as bird-shit to them."

"Then there's no harm done. Why don't you just take it, Carmen?"

I dropped it into her lap. She pulled a face as she took it and folded it away into her denim jacket.

**I**n the evening about seven the brothers began work in the kitchen. I heard the clatter of pans and saw steam lifting from the gap above the window. One of them yelped as if he'd touched something hot, and started to laugh. The other brother joined in like an echo. The noise went on until well past midnight. The door was open and one of them would stand in it for a few minutes to take the air or smoke a cigarette while his brother worked on inside. Leonard's spectacles had been repaired by tape and rested crookedly on his face. He looked down often at his special watch. The window was running with condensation. There was a constant heating and quenching until about two o'clock when, lying on my mattress, I heard the sash squeaking shut and the slam of the door. I listened to the squeal of the bolts.

The next day I had the van towed to a garage and got a quote for a re-conditioned engine and gear-box. It was more than I'd thought, but I still had a couple of hundred of the brothers' money. I swallowed a few drinks in some dark pub in the city centre and then bought a cake with icing and candles. I took it home in a cab. The cabbie looked worried as he drove down the hill with its boarded houses and the high fence of the redevelopment. I made him stop outside my door.

"Keep the rest," I said, handing him a tenner.

I spent the afternoon on my side of the fence, taking the sun on a blanket spread in a cleared space among the vegetation. I'd bought a radio and a pack of drink and I felt carefree and drowsy for a while. Sometimes I heard the low talk of Ivor and Leonard from across the way. I slept and then woke to find one of them standing over me.

"I think you should go," he said quietly. I could see only his shape against the bright sky and it could have been either of them.

"What do you mean, go?" I asked. "Go where?" I was fuddled with sunshine and lager, and my voice came out croaky.

He thought for a second. "I think abroad somewhere. Yes."

"The van'll be fixed soon," I told him. I felt a twinge about the money suddenly. The weight of it on me.

"Forget about the van, son. The van is too slow. Get a train tonight. Fly if you can."

"But I'm starting to like it here..." I said.

The brother shook his head. "Here's no good. Here's finished."

I squinted up at him. "That's a pity, because I've just bought a cake." Then I couldn't stop myself laughing.

Later I sat on the low front wall waiting for Carmen. I had a feeling she'd call that evening and after a while I saw her wheelchair at the top of the hill.

I went to meet her halfway. She was cruising down smoothly. Her eye was open now and that side of her face was blue-green. She held out her arms and smiled. "Look, no hands..."

I helped her inside. I'd already set up the cake. I found matches and lit the candles.

"Who's this for?" Carmen asked.

"Why not you?"

"Because it isn't my birthday."

"Then it'll have to be mine."

I lit the last candle. The shaky white light seeped into the corners of the room.

"Where's your friend today?" I asked.

"He got into some trouble over a car. He gets stupid about them."

"He should have some of this."

"Yeah well... So help me blow them out."

We made a cross-fire of breath. The flames leaned and went out and left a smell of sweetened wax. I cut the cake and put wedges of it on mismatched saucers.

"I'll eat till I'm sick," Carmen said.

"That's not a bad idea."

"I love cake," she said.

"I know."

After she'd gone there was about a quarter of the cake left. I cut it again and put the biggest piece on one of the plates and took it out into the garden. It was getting dark and I saw the light on in the room above the brothers' kitchen. The kitchen was dark but the door was open. I called through, "Leonard? Ivor?" and then stepped inside. The room had been cleared by throwing every loose item into a pile against one corner. The rotten linoleum had been cut away from the stone tiles and then stacked in curling sections under the table. The air still smelt of heated metal and there were scrapings and shavings of lead among the pans. There were tools scattered about - a hammer, a hacksaw with yellow tape around its handle, a file with a broad blade. An arc of lead lay like solid water in the bottom of an enamel bowl.

I moved some things from the table so that I could put down the cake, and saw Leonard's black watch propped up like a timer against the fold of its strap. I watched the rapid changing of the seconds and fractions in black figures on the face.

Mrs Rinse knocked at my door at nine in the morning. I stood blinking in the glare and noise in my vest and Y-fronts. Across the road a section of fence had been torn down to give access to a high-sided skip at the kerb. A yellow dumper truck raced in a cloud of dust and cinders across the cleared spaces.

Mrs Rinse wasn't concerned by my undress. "We're rather worried," she said, looking me straight between the eyes. "We've already sent several letters to your neighbours. We wondered if they were too feeble or too confused to reply. Their whole house is a health hazard as you may have noticed..."

She tugged at the clips of her attaché case while resting the base against her raised knee. The top opened suddenly and awkwardly with a shower of biros and unsecured papers. I helped her to pick them up. She bundled the things back inside her case and then retrieved a small card.

"Here is the number of my desk," she said. "Call me anytime you think necessary."

"Why should I do that?" I handed her a tiny plastic ruler.

"In a spirit of common humanity I think, Mr...?"

I said goodbye without giving her my name. I stuffed the card behind a loose edge of wallpaper in the kitchen. Ivor stepped through the fence with my plate an hour or so later.

"Cake is too rich for us," he told me. "Both of us have old digestions. We fed most of it to our friends."

He sat down at my table. His ancient cardigan had powdery stains on the shoulders and was scorched at the hem as if he had stood too close to a flame.

"You shouldn't feed them," I said. "It just encourages."

Ivor laughed. "We all need that sometimes."

"There was a woman earlier. Mrs Rinse. She's very worried about you both."

"We find friends all over now," Ivor said.

"You have to be careful with friends."

He nodded sleepily. They'd been up again until the early hours.

"How's your brother?" I asked.

"Oh, you shouldn't listen to everything Leonard says. Leonard was unlucky in love, you see."

A heavy dull hammering broke out next door. The blows seemed to shake both houses like the passage of a train. Ivor smiled into my face as if to say I told you so.

"You'd both find life easier with help," I said. "Professional help, I mean."

"You mean in a home to watch TV and wait for visits."

"You can't stay here, Ivor. Not for much longer."

He shook his head. "That's where you're wrong, Frank."

We listened to the hammering. I could feel the vibration of it under my soles. Eventually it stopped. Ivor sighed and reached into a pocket of his cardigan. He took out one of the birthday candles, between his big thumb and finger.

"Have you a light, Frank?" he asked softly.

I took the box from above the cooker and lit the scorched wick. Ivor dripped wax onto the table and set the base of the candle in the congealed pool. The flame burnt narrow and upright with a strand of white smoke at its point. The fineness of it made me hold my breath.

"You need patience," Ivor said. He pointed his nicotine-tipped finger. The flame leant towards it suddenly as if a draught had sprung up. "Leonard doesn't understand that. He's impetuous."

He brought his other hand close to the candle. I saw the flame curve and dip as he stretched his finger towards it and then lie almost flat, its smoke breaking into wisps.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

He smiled shyly. "It's easy, Frank. You only have to concentrate."

In the night I sat in my bedroom with the radio turned down and watched the brothers behind their upstairs window, their big shapes against the lit glass. There was more hammering and then the noise of a drill or a grinder. A couple of times they came into the yard for a breather.

"You look rough," Carmen said.

"I couldn't sleep last night."

I could see that she had something on her mind. She advanced and reversed on the pave-

ment in front of my house. The wheels of the chair left trails in the fine dust from the redevelopment. I could see her friend further up the hill, sitting on a broken front wall and keeping his distance.

"I wanted to ask you something," Carmen said. "Something serious."

"So what's that?"

"Me and Jason are together now, you see, and we need somewhere. Just a room. I promise we wouldn't get on your nerves. We could help you decorate..."

"I don't want to decorate. How old are you, Carmen?"

She didn't answer but screwed up her mouth tight.

"Because I reckon you're about fifteen and your friend's younger than that."

"He's mature for his age," Carmen said. "Thing is I don't get on with my old man any longer. He's turned funny."

I looked away from her and watched Jason light up a cigarette. He tossed the match over his shoulder into the debris of a garden. "You can't stay here, Carmen: I've got some woman sniffing about already. Social Services or similar. I just can't take on a couple of kids."

She steered her wheelchair in silence for about half a minute over the same stretch of pavement. "You're no better than my father," she said finally.

"So what's the difference?" I asked.

She turned the machine towards me. Her face had gone crumpled and venomous. "You'll finish up like those two next door," she said. "Knee-deep in your own shit!"

She spun the chair in a tight curve and rolled past my toes. As she started to climb the hill I saw her spit into the dust of the road.

**L**eonard sat on the kitchen chair and looked out at the weeds and thistles. Stray cats growled over the plate between his feet. I told him about Mrs Rinse and handed him her card. He glanced down at it and then crumpled it into a ball and flicked it into space with his big, curving thumb. In a second I'd lost sight of it against the sky.

"You have to talk to these people sooner or later," I said. I'd already made a note of her number.

He shook his head. "We're not frightened of them, Frank. We've always done as we've pleased, you see. A dozen of that sort couldn't move us an inch."

"You've been here all your lives?" I asked.

He rocked forward, cupping his thighs with his hands. "Longer than that, sonny." He reached down to lift one of the quarrelling cats. It was a stub-eared tom with a dead eye. It struggled for a second and then went quiet in his hands, its long body relaxing. After a while I heard the motor of its purr.

**I**rang Mrs Rinse from a phone-box. "The brothers need space," I said.

"Yes, peace and space. A light, airy environment, a warden-assisted flat."

"I meant *breathing* space. I think you should back off, Mrs Rinse. I think all this is causing pressure."

She was quiet for a second. "Yes, it's judging the time of intervention, Mr...? Yes. We tread a knife-edge between too soon and too late."

I looked through the tinted glass of the box and saw oily smoke rising from the demolition site.

"We've managed to locate a relative in Boreham Wood," Mrs Rinse told me. "That would give us some legal weight."

"You mean you could have them committed?"

She laughed. "Well, only as a last resort."

I put the phone down and walked the mile or so to the garage. The van was standing on its flat tyres in a gravel lot. Most of the engine and transmission seemed to have been removed and stacked beside it on a tarpaulin and I could see a red film of rust on the machined surfaces. I went closer and a bristly-haired dog jumped down through the open rear doors and began to snarl and snap at me. Luckily it was on a rope. Behind it in the van I could see a half-chewed bone like the shoulder of a horse.

The owner sidled up behind me, smiling and smoking a cigarette. "There was a bit more work than we realized," he said.

"I need it," I said. "I need it urgently. Today."

He pointed to the dismantled engine. "Waiting for parts, you see." The dog showed its long tongue and sat down in the dust. "These old motors aren't really worth the bother... Let's say an extra couple of hundred: I promise I'll not make a penny on that."

**B**ack at the house the cats were walking in and out of the brothers' kitchen, spitting and fighting as they crossed on the step. The room was dark behind them. When I stepped inside I saw that the floor and every spare surface was covered by sheets of newspaper carrying scraps of greasy meat and half-melted fat. The meat was already swarming with flies. The long backs of the cats pressed together like snakes and then broke in flurries of claws. Stout lengths of timber were angled like pit-props between floor and ceiling.

I stepped through them with care and opened the door into the hall. The racket of the cats and the background buzz of flies lessened as I went towards the stairs. I called the brothers. "Leonard? Ivor...?" The doors along the hall were open on dark stacks of furniture as if the contents of several houses had been tipped into the rooms. I stopped at the foot of the stairs. The door on the landing was closed and I began to climb towards it. My legs felt tired and heavy and the effort needed to raise my feet seemed to increase at each step. I reached the landing and listened for a second. When I touched the door I could feel a faint vibration as if I'd touched the casing of a smoothly running engine.

"Just go away," Leonard said.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Curiosity killed the cat," Ivor said. "You'll just fuck things up, you know."

"No, let him learn from his mistakes," Leonard said. "If he's such a smart-arse."

I turned the handle. The brothers were sitting back to back on a double-sided chair, a throne carved or beaten from solid lead. The worn rug was folded in circles around its solid base like ripples around the splash of a stone.

"Shut the door!" Ivor ordered. There was a faded tattoo on his upper arm. The brothers were naked, sitting upright in the chair so that the backs of their heads were pressing together. The flesh hung from their bony shoulders so that the weight of their bodies

seemed to rest in their laps. Together with the chair they formed a cone of lead and flesh with their narrow heads at the apex. I could sense the weight of it like a tugging in the air.

I managed to pull the door shut. I heard the straining of the panels as I went downstairs. The carpet seemed to be crawling under my feet and when I reached the hall I turned and watched it beginning to tear away from its tacks and lift from the angles of the stairs. The cats wailed and gagged in the kitchen, and flakes of plaster were drifting down from the ceiling over my head. The heavy muscle of my heart began to squeeze and so I rested for a second with my palm against the wall. Then I felt the wrinkles in the paper migrating and saw the shadow of my arm swing suddenly. I looked up and saw the lamp lifting towards the stairs at the end of its flex.

A black key stood crosswise in the front-door lock. It wouldn't turn at once. I fought with it for half a minute while the house shifted around me. As the door opened I felt the air funnelling past me into the hall. It was almost dark outside now, with the widely separated lamps coming on up the slope of the hill. Carmen was descending in her electric chair. She passed through a pool of light and I heard the thin whine of the motor. She saw me and waved. I ran towards her. There was the dry crack of a breaking pane behind me.

I stopped her fifty yards up the hill. "I'm sorry," she said. "For what I said. You shouldn't take offence." The wind blew her hair in front of her face.

"I'm sorry too. But we ought to go now, Carmen." I caught hold of the handles of the chair and turned it around in a curve.

"But I've got something for you," she said.

"Thanks, but not just now."

Dust and scraps of waste-paper were blowing past us towards the house and the hill looked steep and endless. "So, where are we going?" she asked over her shoulder.

I wouldn't answer. I heard more glass breaking and the wind was getting stronger. Slates were flicking into the road from the broken roofs of the houses. I pushed as if I was pushing for the end of the world.

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**Stephen Blanchard** wrote "The Fat People" (*Interzone* 61), an edgy weird tale which received praise from some discerning readers. He lives in London, and is currently working on a novel.

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Back issues of *Interzone* are available at £2.50 each (£2.80 overseas) from the address shown on page 3.



# Ansible Link

## David Langford



To update my hasty notes last issue: *Intersection* is the official name of the 53rd World SF Convention to be held in Glasgow in 1995, with guests Samuel R. Delany and Gerry Anderson. Until 31st December 1992, attending membership costs only £40 (with a complex and bizarre system of discounts for those who gave money before or took part in the site selection voting): the contact address is now 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley, West Midlands, B66 4SH. The most painful aspect of the publicity campaign that won the bid for Glasgow, said one of the team, was having to wear a spurious kilt and flaunt one's haggis at the 1992 Worldcon. "The sporran was artificial fur pasted on this bloody wooden board, so when you walked it kept thumping into your groin..." The impression gleaned by American congoers was thus that authentically kilted Scots always walk very, very slowly.

### The Utter Zoo

J.G. Ballard's favourite reading? The Los Angeles *Yellow Pages*, of course (see the recent *The Pleasure of Reading* edited by Antonia Fraser).

Deborah Beale (Millennium editor) was seen at a convention making agonized little puking noises: the problem proved to be not illness but her discovery that the latest title in Piers Anthony's sensitive, cultured "Xanth" series had been announced as *The Colour of Her Panties*.

John Brunner sends a personal newsletter detailing months of horror with antibiotics and intestinal flora (don't ask), and saying he's now doing "posthumous collaborations"; apparently it's the other authors who are posthumous, such as Jorge Luis Borges (story in Oct/Nov *F&SF*) and now Eric Frank Russell.

Richard Evans of Gollancz spent the whole of October's Fantasycon looking strained and tight-lipped when offered drinks by low newshounds...mere days later it emerged that he was holding in the Great Secret of Gollancz's acquisition by Cassell plc. Sf will continue to be published under the Gollancz name; staff will move from the famously poky Covent Garden address (full of memorabilia like wooden filing

cabinets and places where George Orwell was told he was unpublishable) to Cassell's offices in the Strand. "It's good news!" hiccuped Mr Evans.

David Garnett, the self-confessed "editor of Britain's most celebrated sf anthology," has been trying very hard to make us all believe in the letter he received from a potential *New Worlds* contributor, professing bafflement at the peculiar requirements of British publishers who say they won't look at any material that hasn't been previously handled by a solicitor. (That is, to use the esoteric technical jargon of the trade, "unsolicited submissions.")

David Pringle, according to leaked 1992 Hugo nominations statistics, is the eleventh most popular sf editor in the world...just after Martin H. Greenberg. [*Crawling again*, Langford—Ed.]

Brian Stableford, invited to comment on the understated cover of his recent vampire epic *Young Blood* (Simon & Schuster), merely winced and said, "I was not consulted...I never saw the jacket."

### Infinitely Improbable

*Distribution and Redistribution*: the Forbidden Planet bookshop chain and Titan Distributors have split, with Nick Landau continuing as Bookshops Boss and Mike Lake flogging Titan to the US comics distributor Diamond (likely to abandon books and handle only comics henceforth, the pundits suspect). The fate of FP's Titan Books publishing line is uncertain: if it dies, who will carry on its valuable work of reissuing US comics without their original colour (rather like reprinting novels on the cheap by leaving out the adjectives)? Meanwhile, Kosmos Distributors had already gone bust owing *Interzone* around £500 (wept our editor).

*SF Encyclopaedia II*: sneaking a look at the draft text on disk, I discovered my submission for the best cross-reference in any textbook ever...at the end of the SF Writers of America entry it says, *See also: PARANOIA*.

*Forbidden Works*: world-famous author John Grant's daughter Jane reports that various writers' books are banned from her Exeter school library because of their unsuitability for impressionable kids. "Foremost

among them?" asks Mr Grant rhetorically: "Salacious Terry Pratchett, no less."

*GW Books Exhumed*. The Games Workshop line of spin-off books has been in limbo. Now an outfit called Boxtree ("their catalogue consists of TV spinoffs and books about fishing") will release six GW titles in January: three David "Ferring" (Garnett) fantasies, one unpublished, and three *Warhammer 40,000* books including at least one unpublished Ian Watson epic. Former GW Books editor David Pringle was not consulted; also out in the cold are voluminous GW authors Brian Stableford and Kim Newman. "Brian Craig' and 'Jack Yeovil' were the ones who won the praise and good reviews; but it's Ferring they want to publish. Give the readers what they want, that's the way..." said an anonymous writer in Ferring. (Unfortunately for him Newman/Yeovil's best contributions tied in to a game called *Dark Future* which has been scrapped with extreme prejudice.) No doubt most unjustly, my own spy described the Boxtree packaging boss as "clearly a man who had never read a book in his life."

*British Fantasy Awards* for 1992 went to: novel *Outside the Dog Museum* by Jonathan Carroll, short story "The Dark Land" by Michael Marshall Smith, collection *Darklands* edited by Nicholas Royle, small press *Peeping Tom*, artist Jim Pitts, best newcomer Melanie Tem. The little award statuettes hadn't turned up in time, so the bases alone were presented alone; Jim Pitts rose to the spirit of the occasion by accidentally breaking his dentures ("an award with no award accepted by a man with no teeth!").

*The Conquest of Space*. I was slightly bemused to open a HarperCollins box measuring 23" x 15" x 5", containing two review copies and a record 93.8% of empty space. But HarperCollins tries hard to save space in other areas, by painfully leaving all the spaces out of phrases like "HarperCollinsTradeDivision" and "HarperCollinsSanFrancisco" and (I confidently anticipate, as the influence of Germanic compound nouns continues to grow with Bundesbank power) "HarperCollinsFictionFührerMalcolmEdwards."

# Teething the Gap

## John Clute

For a while, it seemed there would be no hope. *The Gap into Conflict: The Real Story* (1990), which constituted a kind of prologue to a projected five-volume sequence of space operas by Stephen R. Donaldson, seemed to be one of the worst single books ever published by a writer of interest who had not yet become senile. Its shortness did nothing to moderate the congested bewilderment and ennui it inflicted on readers – it's been noted before that Donaldson works best at considerable length, and it seems almost certain that its leaden brevity contributed to the sense of desperately ill-at-ease toothlessness *The Real Story* generated. The sense that it could gum any reader into wax.

One might go on: about the infelicity of a book which regurgitates synopsis from the depths of the third stomach and calls it Story; about the stumble-bum weensiness of the space-opera universe deployed (it features *asteroid belts* apparently in the middle of interstellar space, for there is no mention of a single star or solar system or term of magnitude: an imaginative vacuum in which props like mining colonies and ore ships and saloons and pirates and cops and cadets flail about, perspectiveless and mute: and in which the Story, having been inserted as a much-told and retold *Legend of Space*, jumps, like a frog on a table, only when galvanized); about the cloying jaw-jaw of a narrative strategy which apes the Wagnerian retrospective monologue (more about Wagner in a moment) but which fails to capture the essence of how it is conveyed – fails to present any analogue of the live-snake presentness of the leit-motifs that sustain the Wagnerian tale from underneath. One could go on: but it would be a mistake to do so. Because all of this is wrong.

It's not wrong that the book is awful, for awful it truly is. What is wrong is to assume that the paralyzed belatedness of the thing was in fact unintended. This is not to say that Donaldson could have deliberately tried to evoke the powerful negative response to his art that has crippled more than one reader's enjoyment; it is, rather, to suggest that the legend-recalled-in-tranquillity, club-story ambience of the narrative voice, and the black ritardando-before-the-fact obduracy of the whole tale's untelling, were clearly meant as a kind of combined incipit and anchor.

*The Gap into Conflict: The Real Story* (and here we return to leit-motif) looks like an attempt to encode within a single verbal "chord" the entirety of an unfolding epic, just as Wagner encoded the whole of the music of the *Ring Cycle* in the opening notes of *Das Rheingold*. The sound-universe of the *Ring* is, as a consequence, unmistakable. Whether or not the story-universe

of the "Gap" sequence will come to be seen as direct verbal consequence of its opening shots, we cannot yet say, because we are only part way there. Last year saw *The Gap into Vision: Forbidden Knowledge* (1991), and now, with **The Gap into Power: A Dark and Hungry God Arises** (Bantam, \$21.50; HarperCollins, £14.99), we do begin to feel the rhythm of the thing, we begin to understand that something both heavy and adventurous has invaded our minds. Next year we may expect to see a fourth volume, *The Gap into Madness: Chaos and Order*, and then a final instalment.

So we're in *medias res*. A few things can be said. After reading its first two successors, *The Gap into Conflict: The Real Story* begins to soften in the memory as the tale – or chord – it makes such an odd meal of simplifies in the mind's eye. A space-cop named Morn Hyland suffers gap sickness – gaps are doubletalk openings in space which make interstellar travel possible; and gap sickness is a mysterious response to travelling through the gap which makes its victims behave strangely – and has blown up the space-patrol cruiser on which she's serving, along with all the rest of her family.

Angus Thermopyle, an extremely ugly pirate on the run from the space-patrol cruiser, captures Morn, along with her zone implant – a device which allows her to control her gap sickness, but which in the hands of others allows them to control her – and makes her into his sexual slave. But his ship has been damaged, and he cannot escape the general region (given Donaldson's vacuity about locations, it could be anywhere) of the asteroid belt, and for this reason, and due to other complications, he allows Morn to escape from him into the arms of his great enemy, the extremely handsome pirate Nick Succorso, who takes her in every way possible: she has her zone implant control back, and uses it to make herself into his sexual slave, so as to keep him from killing her (don't forget she's a cop). But soon she discovers, to her horror, that Nick is moving his ship in the direction of Forbidden Space, which is somewhere left of the asteroid belt, and in which the dread shapechanger (or mutagenic) Amnion reside. Meanwhile Angus is put in prison.

The plot thickens in a slow crescendo that by slow increments crowds the stage with principals and extras, all of whom thrust prognathously into the text. The second and third volumes are less easy to follow, more gripping, and faster. We are introduced to various prime-mover characters – the director of the United Mining Company Police (impassive, secretly melancholic, one-eyed Warden Dios, who eschews longevity treatments and is a dead ringer for Wagner's Wotan: who ages in the *Ring*) and his top executives; and Holt Fasner, CEO of the United Mining Company itself, an inconceivably rich man who staves off ageing and who is nicknamed the Dragon.

All these prime-movers display conflicting agendas about the three protagonists of the first volume, each of whom is complexly (and in general covertly) engaged in dealings with most of the powers that be. Morn finds she is pregnant by Angus. (Those of us who are not Americans, and who do not therefore know God well, may find it hard to immediately understand why she refuses, under circumstances when her survival – and maybe the fate of the whole human race – almost certainly depends on her being fit, to abort a foetus conceived in rape and slavery: but of course refuse she does, after some internalized "debate.") Nick takes her to the dread station in Forbidden Space of the mutagenic Amnion, with whom he has had intricate dealings, and whom he has previously betrayed, and the foetus is brought to term and thence to adulthood in the space of an hour; to give its *tabula rasa* brain a structure, Morn's own mind is implanted on her son's, a process which should drive her insane: but her zone implant saves her by making her supernaturally serene. Her son (Siegfried?: Angus, Donaldson has already told us, is Siegmund) thinks he's her, but begins gradually to become himself.

The plot thickens. By the time we have reached *The Gap into Power: A Dark and Hungry God Arises*, it has become too frayed and fast to synopsize, beyond indicating that the *mise en scène* is now Billigate, a criminal refuelling and refitting station in Forbidden Space (whose distance from and spatial relation to Earth Donaldson has not yet divulged), where Morn and Nick arrive in one ship, chased by the

Amnion, who have been cheated by both of them, in two more ships; where Angus soon arrives as well, after having been fitted with his own zone implants and superhero prosthetics by Warden Dios back on Earth, but Angus is under the control of Milos, a weasely traitor in the cops' employ, and we must not forget Sorus, the female pirate who scarred Nick years earlier. She's there. And so is Morn's son. And the owner of Billigate. And some extras. And the plot thickens.

**F**rom the beginning of the sequence, and for 1,000 pages, we have been subjected to what has become an utterly relentless and bravura crescendo (Brian Stableford, reviewing the second volume in *Interzone* 57, remarks on the Donaldson crescendo, correctly, I think, characterizing it as unique in the literature for intensity: though it may be that the new Gene Wolfe tetralogy, beginning with *Darkside the Long Sun* (1993), will provide an analogous case). In the grips of a complex story none of them understand, and a crescendo they all feel building in their savaged and weary bones, every single character in the sequence operates under some terrible duress. Everyone is imprisoned, or zone-implanted, or bribed, or trapped, or betraying, or without money, or fuel, or a gap drive, or sleep, or a gun. Everyone has been driven to the edge of endurance. Everyone sweats fear, loathing, self-betrayal, anguish, heat. And no one knows what anyone else knows, or is in bondage to, or committed to accomplish, or on whose behalf any of the betrayals and reversals (there are very many of these) have been prepared.

An astonishingly high proportion of this extremely long text is taken up with lies – lies told to, for, by, or in the presence of, the main actors, and always at the risk of death if a cover is blown, a deception exposed, a desperation admitted. Nor are we anywhere close to the end. The Gap is a nightmare of stress – in fact stress may be the key word, it is often reiterated in the text, in any attempt to understand the ramifications of what Donaldson may ultimately mean by the Gap itself – and it seems to have no ending. The sequence, which began as a lugubrious waxworks, has become a blow between the eyes, an aesthetic *Somme*: it does not stop marching into the guns of the next sentence. It is a terminal book, a tale of terminus.

What it all has to do with Wagner, we should perhaps wait to find out. Analogies between human and inhuman characters (Donaldson has already told us that the Amnion are Wagner's dwarves) and the cast of the *Ring Cycle* are rife, but weirdly multi-valent, viscous. Doppelgänger flashes – Loki equals Hashi Lebwohl?, Thor/

Brunnhilde equals Min Donner? – seem to float into view, but then the analogies fade, and there is no time to think. It may come clear in the end; it may not (Donaldson is not an open writer, and the essay he has written on his sources of inspiration for the sequence – it appears at the end of volume one – is not very helpful). But we are left with something of a small miracle. At the end of volume one, few of us (I'd guess) would have given very good odds on anyone ever being haunted by Angus or Morn or Nick. At the end of volume three, all of them (and a dozen more, but Angus Thermopyle in particular) have become, like indigestive dreams, nightmares at the gape. Our gap will be to look back.

**Lords and Ladies** (Gollancz, £14.99) is the fourteenth volume of Terry Pratchett's "Discworld" sequence, and the second this year, and a great deal could be said. But *Lords and Ladies*, while in no sense an inferior example of what Pratchett has learned how to give us, cannot be said to stress the medium of comedy like its immediate predecessor, the superb *Small Gods* (1992); nor does it suffer any internal collapse – as *Moving Pictures* (1990) did – from a plot structure insufficiently weighted to carry its burden. *Lords and Ladies*, in other words, lies deep within the Discworld tessitura: funny and fluent, loving but swift, sane and paradisaical.

It is a more or less direct sequel to *Witches Abroad* (1991) – a tale which suffers from the same lack of gravitas in the plotting that diminished *Moving Pictures*, though less seriously in this case – and features the same three witch protagonists: Granny Weatherwax, who is getting touchingly close to becoming a voice the reader will identify with Pratchett's own; Nanny Ogg, on something of a back-burner; and Magrat Garlick, inching to the utmost verge of being marginally less of a damp page when you open the book. The eponymous elves are – it is a relief to say – vicious, and their attempt to return to the world is – it is good to know – thwarted. It ends in twilight, with small silver bells through slow air.

Shore it, reader, against the day.

(John Clute)

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## The Kick

### Mary Gentle

**T**he trouble with Stephen King – whether the genre he is writing in be defined as "horror" or "bestseller" – is that he has to deliver the kick. The buzz. The zap. The kick of mainstream horror, these days, is less the meta-

physical uncertainties of M.R. James and more the guided tour round the anatomy lab.

**Gerald's Game** (Hodder & Stoughton, £14.99) has something of the air of an identikit Stephen King, but is addictively readable. The main protagonist, middle-aged Jessie Burlingame, is discovered as the book opens in a lakeside holiday cabin, handcuffed to the bed. Her husband Gerald has recently spiced up their sex games with a little light bondage. When Jessie points out that this is boring the tits off her, and asks would he unlock the cuffs – and he won't, and won't stop – she kicks him mightily between wind and water, and Gerald keels over with a heart attack. This leaves Jesse police-handcuffed to the supports of a slatted bedhead, the key out of reach, no one else around but a dead body, and isolated miles from anywhere and anyone...

I suppose it's a version of the locked-room mystery, though it does smack a bit too much of the "let's do Misery with a female victim." There is in *Gerald's Game* no double act between captor and prisoner, however. Jesse's story alternates between her efforts to gain her freedom before she dies of starvation, or more likely of lack of water, and her memories of an incident in her childhood that she has repressed. Voices inside her drive her back to re-live that day when the sun went out. Determination drives her to make every effort to get a drink, drive off the wild dog that the dead body attracts, and free her trapped hands.

It is no surprise that her "secret" is child abuse, and King wisely doesn't make this into a thumping revelation. Jesse remembers it and thinks, What was so terrible about it? What was so terrible is, when it comes, quite subtle – if still something of a let-down.

Meanwhile, Jesse in the abandoned cabin is visited not only by a hungry dog, but by a shadowy death-figure who appears to carry dead men's bones and jewels in his bag...

The kick of horror is amply satisfied here in the way that Jesse does, finally, tackle the problem of her captivity. For all that *Gerald's Game* appears to quite blatantly take the catch-causes of today – a little SM, a little child sex abuse – the novel works.

At least, it works up until about the last fifty pages. There is a long coda, necessary in terms of having the woman protagonist come to terms with what has happened to her, but it slackens the tension. I begin to wonder if *Gerald's Game* is not a little bit politically correct, in its own way. There are, for example, things that could happen to Jesse – that traditionally happen to horror protagonists, and their progenitors, the Gothic heroines – which do not happen here. She is not allowed to be destroyed by what happens to her now, by what happens in her past; she



is not allowed despair or conversely to be turned into an avenging fury. Which is strange, given *Carrie*: a book that is both feminist and manages to hit female revenge fantasies spot on.

Is that immoral? Hell, the kick of horror doesn't depend on morality.

**T**he kick of fantasy is different, and sometimes depends on reversing those things that one might expect to find in the mainstream variety. Jenny Jones' **Lies and Flames** (Headline, £15.99), volume three of *Flight Over Fire*, continues to examine the trope of a person taken from our world to a fantasy world to be its saviour, with its own peculiar spin.

Spoiled yuppie Eleanor Knight has, by this third volume of her involvement with the world of Chorolon, become, if not much nicer, at least more sympathetic to read about. There are few fairy-tale consolations in this tale: Eleanor arrives back in one of the lands, Shelt, to find the man she loves married to a Duke's daughter, and in no particular hurry to get a divorce. What can she do? Unlike most protagonists of this kind of fantasy, she can refuse the fantasy: she can return to her own world. Which she does, only to find emptiness and responsibility; the same things she had fled from in Chorolon. She decides to confront them on fantasy turf.

The *Flight Over Fire* world has always had as a motif the battle between the sun god Lycias and the moon goddess Astret. *Lies and Flames* resolves this. In a very old fantasy of this nature, the sun would be rational and good, the moon deceitful and bad. In the current standard received text, the good moon goddess would be all for peace, as against the nasty Apollonian warrior sun. In Jenny Jones' version, both of them are pretty nasty. *Lies and Flames* spends some time debating what exactly the world would be like if gods *did* exist. Eleanor Knight comes to the conclusion that most fantasy protagonists should have come to a long time ago – the Gods are more trouble than they are worth. In fact, they're a positive liability. Something should be done...

The main narrative of *Lies and Flames* follows the apparently unstoppable attack of an ice-sorcerer, and the resolution of emotional dilemmas from previous volumes. For new readers, the latter would be fairly impenetrable: it is the latter third of a story, rather than the third volume of a trilogy. My advice is to lay hands on the first two volumes and investigate some of the more unconventional rewards attendant on the kick of subverting genre fantasy.

**W**here exactly the buzz and the zap of science fiction lie has always been a matter for debate. As a

rule of thumb, I take it to be difference. Science fiction is one of the few genres where ideas wear out – can you imagine crime fiction tiring of murder, or mainstream novels of adultery? And yet it seems quite valid in sf to say: I have seen this done too many times, in the same way, perhaps there are no new ways to do it.

Unfortunately, Eric Brown's **Meridian Days** (Pan, £8.99) sparks exactly that reaction. Meridian is a world twenty light years from Earth, with a few habitable islands on it. It has become a refuge or a colony for artists. To Meridian comes Bob Benedict, escaping from his past, hooked on drugs, and making a lackadaisical attempt at passive suicide.

The problem is that it feels like I have read this before, and it feels as if it had been written in the Fifties when I did. The artists' colony world is a tired trope. The world with tiny habitable islands is a tired trope, even if the inhospitable continents and their deadly "sand lions" are attractive. But the archetypal problem is that this is not an sf novel at all, it is a British Empire novel spiced up with a bit of drug abuse and technological augmentation. Benedict, escaping his own crisis of causing a ship crash (à la *Lord Jim*, one thinks), is friendly with his whisky-drinking neighbour, and otherwise does nothing at all but mope until he meets Fire Trevellion, daughter of Tamara, superbitch Art queen.

There is really good stuff in here, but it is not used effectively. The drug which hooks Benedict, while it lasts, makes him re-live exactly and in real time a segment of his past. Nicely two-edged: one wishes for the high spots, but may get the devastations. And Meridian itself, where it is "always day," has unfortunately a "mylar shield" to give a false night – why not, if you are going to use eternal day as a trope, go right ahead and use it, and investigate its effect on human biorhythms?

In terms of the art, there is a novel to be written about how art will change when one can be plugged into computers, as the Augmented are here, or change one's form to animal, as the Altered do. *Meridian Days* is not it. These are stereotype prima donnas, not multi-dimensional artists. All these self-obsessed, self-promoting sculptors and painters and writers really are going to hide themselves away on some backwater world from whatever the current cultural metropolis is, aren't they? Well, some of them, yes. But characters like Tamara Trevellion are hardly self-effacing, and com-links do not substitute as a rule for meeting employers, agents, and fans.

The mystery of why Tamara keeps her daughter Fire a prisoner, and about what happened to Fire's older sister

Jade, and the plot-spins around the idea of what art can be used for, are all potentially interesting. But there isn't any kick. However, there always are new ways to do these things – on the whole, as any reader of *Great Mambo Chicken and the Transhuman Condition* will be pleased to tell you, the science, and the concepts deriving from that science in *Meridian Days*, are strictly yesterday's tomorrow.

**T**he difference kick is a great motivator of alternate world and near-future sf. Katharine Kerr's **Resurrection** (Bantam Spectra, \$3.50) is a long novella or a short novel, coming in at 144 pages, and moving with the pace one would expect at that length. The details of the differences are deftly sketched in. Tiffany, American air force captain, is in rehabilitation after a crash in a war in the Middle East. She was ferrying a partly-armed jet to the front. Women, after all, are not allowed to be combat pilots.

Part of her programme is an extremely interactive arcade game, designed to bring back her neural responses. We are in the Gulf War, possibly, by historical coordinate; or by the technological coordinate we are in the future? Who cares: the world works. Tiffany lives with her partner/house-husband, rehabilitating gradually back into her world of sister and mother and nephews and nieces, hoping for a job, knowing she won't be a pilot again. She travels to the hospital by bus; she knows there is a Mars base. Near future; alternate world? One of the things she craves, missing memory as she does, is the book she was reading out east before the crash: *Hunter's Night* by the sf writer Albert Allonsby.

The trouble is that Tiffany actually remembers it all differently. Tiffany remembers being a combat pilot. (Either this novella was written before women were accepted into pilot combat training in the US, or this is yet another achronological pointer.) But Tiffany was pretty smashed up, nine minutes without oxygen to the brain. She is still in bad shape, she can't trust what she remembers. She can't anywhere find a copy of *Hunter's Night*, either.

At which point two strangers turn up. She was a combat pilot; something about the accident threw her into this world; in that other world she is remembered, commemorated as a hero. Or so she's told. And there might be a way back, to her family there, and her career. Or so she's told. But the two strangers are neither allies nor necessarily truth tellers, and what their real nature is makes this another kind of narrative altogether...

*Resurrection's* short narrative will give you the kick of an alternate future, a brain-damaged protagonist coping very humanly with rehabilitation, and

and a moral choice from an unexpected direction. Go buy.

**E**sther M Friesner's *Yesterday We Saw Mermaids* (Tor, \$16.95) is not much longer than *Resurrection*, but reads with a lot less pace. Humorous fantasy's buzz, which is Friesner's métier, is as unclassifiable as humour traditionally is, but we know what it is when we point at it. *Yesterday We Saw Mermaids* has funny bits, but it is mostly a magic-goes-away fantasy transported to 1492 just in time for the 500th anniversary of Columbus.

The title is a Columbus quote. We never do find out much about that. *Mermaids* is the story of a collection of nuns escaping the Inquisition, with a gypsy and a genie and Jewess in a magic metal boat. They are racing Columbus to the New World – or rather, to the Kingdom of Prester John, where the magic took refuge when it fled Europe. Can magic stand against the united onset of Church and greed?

Catholicism and magic and Jewish culture sit somewhat uneasily in each other's company throughout the book, as the brightly-coloured fantasy sits uneasily with the tragedy it tries to mirror. Prester John's cause cannot be other than lost – or can it? But the disappearance of magic, or a wish-fulfilment fantasy of it being preserved, may not be the right thing to set against the coming of Europeans to the North American continent, and the genocide that followed. History has its thumb too firmly in the scale.

**H**istory may be the kick for mainstream, or the kick may be that eternal facination – shared with sf – of just what it is that goes on inside other people's souls. Garry Kilworth has written at least one mainstream novel, *Witchwater Country*; here is another, *Standing on Shamsan* (HarperCollins, £14.99), which is just as good.

*Standing on Shamsan* is the story of Oliver Carson, known as Cass, brought up in a service family in Aden in the 1950s. The narrative alternates between first-person narration by Cass as a child, and third-person narration of his life as a young soldier when he comes back to Aden in the Sixties, during the unrest of the British withdrawal.

Cass has Mowgli's dilemma: he is a third culture child, neither quite British nor, in this case, quite Arab; with loyalties and ties to both but completely at home in neither. Legend says only those who climb Jebel Shamsan can leave, never to return. Human nature says you can never leave, never to return; but you can never come home again either.

*Standing on Shamsan* is detailed, suspenseful, discursive, and gripping. It is unashamed in the way that it details the naivety of a boy in the 1950s, and, one suspects, honest.

Cass's attitudes to women, to race, and to violence are of his time; indeed he may be sympathetic because of that. His dilemma in coming home armed is acute, and made more acute by his not having the emotional tools to deal with the job. If the novel relies on its climax for something that seems contrived, that may be because life (unlike genre) rarely reaches moments of closure, and a book has to finish somewhere.

"The gulli-gulli man sailed away... Or maybe we went with him? Heather and Dix and I? Perhaps someone else stayed to grow into an adult in my place, to do the things that grown-ups have to do?" The kick can be simply finding the words for something in one's own feelings, there on the page.

(Mary Gentle)

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## Like, Nowhere, Man

Paul J. McAuley

**L**ike dreams, utopias exist nowhere but inside our own heads, for these highly personal views of the way the world should be are closer to wish-fulfilment than sensible programmes or schemas. This is not to denigrate them: responsible daydreaming is a creative act enjoyed by any sensible sentient. But because of their grounding in dreams, utopian novels, more than most, are prone to be jerryrigged with a scaffolding armour of givens. Judith Moffett's *Time, Like an Ever-rolling Stream* (St Martin's Press, \$21.95) is a case in point. And more: it is an example of the recent fashion of attempting to justify recycling the well-worn clichés of traditional fantasy by disguising them as science-fictional tropes, in much the same way that New Age philosophy attempts to patch its threadbare arguments with promiscuously borrowed scientific jargon.

*Time...* is a sequel, more self-contained than most, to *The Ragged World*, in which an alien spacecraft returns to Earth to pick up two groups of Hefn, hobgoblin-like aliens who have been living in hiding ever since being dumped in 17th-century Britain and Sweden following an unsuccessful rebellion against their Gafr masters. A major nuclear meltdown in the USA prompts the Gafr to act to save not humanity but Earth itself, by using the hypnotic powers of the Hefn to effect mass sterilization by a television broadcast. Humanity is allowed to live on sufferance, and may be allowed to reproduce again only if they clean up their act, forsake all technology based on use of non-renewable resources, and obey the thousands of ecologically

protective regulations which are designed to save them from themselves.

Some time after this draconian imposition, Pam, a teenage math prodigy, has been recruited by the Hefn as an apprentice at the Bureau of Temporal Physics. *Time...* is Pam's own very personal account, long after the event, of what happened when she took another apprentice, Liam, to a special place called Hurt Hollow, close by her home, for their spring break. Liam featured in the last part of *The Ragged World*, and is still suffering the guilt of having survived the nuclear meltdown while his friend did not. Pam also bears a secret wound, her disgust at her own womanhood.

*Time...* begins as a traditional utopian novel with a journey or guided tour laying bare how the world works, and slowly grows into something else, a story of mutual healing which ends in the birth of the way towards a new world order. Hurt Hollow is the site of a experiment in self-sustaining 20th-century homesteading, now a national monument and a place of pilgrimage. It is there that Liam, who like Pam is a math prodigy, experiences an insight which will eventually pave the way towards a new world order. They are visited by a Hefn who has taken an especial interest in Liam, and must survive a crisis caused by a rabble-rousing preacher, who associates the Hefn with Satan. Through use of Hefn time-window technology, the past is knitted into the future. The way to Utopia is opened.

**J**udith Moffett is dealing with important issues, and her attitude at first seems promisingly radical and uncompromising. If technology is destroying the planet, why not examine what might happen if it is replaced by a back-to-the-land movement? And her depiction of the growing relationship between Pam and Liam, and the working-out of Pam's self-disgust and the evocation of rural Kentucky, are fine, and done with no little style and affection.

But it soon becomes clear that this Gaian utopia is shored up by the miraculous powers of the Hefn, and by Judith Moffett's refusal to deal with the inconvenient problems inherent in her scenario. For instance, Pam falls into a brief discussion with a black man loading the riverboat she's travelling on, and he points out that abolition of most technology means that all heavy labour must be done by people, and most of those are black. But once raised, this allusion to the possible return of slavery (and what are all of humanity under the Hefn but slaves, allowed to breed only at the whim of their masters, allowed free will only if it doesn't clash with their masters' ideology?) is allowed to drift away.

There are hints of the terrible displacements caused to much of the population, but these are dramatized only in the motives of a drunken gang which attack a Hefn. The loss of benefits of 20th-century technology are parodied as foolish nostalgia for supermarkets full of out-of-season goods, but there is no clue as to how the population of the United States is fed without high-tech agriculture. And so on.

For this is not a utopia which has been derived by careful development from first principles, but one which has been built from the top down. It is a means to an end which needs the *deus ex machina* powers of the Hefn to make it work. It is an excuse to turn the future into a fantasy of rural harmony. All goodness lies in the past – before puberty for Pam, before the meltdown for Liam, before about 1920 for Judith Moffett. Hurt Hollow is important not because it is a locus of earth magic (there is much pseudo-scientific discussion of significant tangling of magnetic fields, but magic is what it really is), but because it is a time capsule.

There is no denying that something drastic may be needed to save us from ourselves. But the rationale behind Moffett's *recherche du temps perdu* Utopia, tirelessly and relentlessly preached through her characters, that everything done to humanity by the Gafr is for our own good, boils down to a kind of eco-fascism. No discussion of right or wrong can be allowed because Daddy knows best; rebellion is futile, the last resort of drunken prejudiced rednecks or racially motivated Klu Klux Klansters. Moffett puts one side of debate with honest and fierce clarity, but lack of counterarguments – Pam and Liam are already converted to the cause, and do nothing but agree with each other while remaining in total awe of the Hefn (just as Liam, while being presented as an agnostic, is soon singing along to the hymns of Pam's born-again Baptist faith) – turn it from science fiction to fantasy, complete with magic furry hobbits. In sf, the heroic cause is the evolution of the world towards an ideal state; in fantasy, as here, the heroic cause is the protection of the established ideal state from defilement. And in trying to fuse the form of the science-fictional utopia with the fundamentalist tenets of New Age fantasy, Moffett has created not a vigorous hybrid but a well-written, stillborn tract.

**A Million Open Doors** (Tor, \$19.95) is very definitely science fiction, and offers not one but two contrasting societies constructed from differing first principles. It is John Barnes's second novel, and like many young American hard sf writers, he has had the mantle of Heinlein hung like an albatross around his neck. But although

*A Million Open Doors* touches upon both social engineering and libertarianism, there is none of the solipsism that pervades Heinlein's later novels, and which set his characters in stone. It is instead as much a novel about the getting of wisdom as it is about exploration of societies sustained only by the bootstraps of their own logic.

The narrator is one Giraut, a young swashbuckler from Nou Occitan, where honour is all, poetry is considered as important as the planet's terraforming programme, and duels are a ready means of settling any argument. Betrayed, as he sees it, by his latest paramour, Giraut takes up an offer of employment on an ambassadorial mission to Caledony, one of the two cultures on the neighbouring world of Nansen.

Nansen is grim and storm-lashed, but its inhabitants have chosen not to terraform it because it already possesses a primitive ecology – although since Nansen was recently the core of a gas giant, exposed after its sun's expansion into a red giant, the origin of that life is a mystery. It has recently been opened to visitation by springer technology, the million open doors of the title, which by breaking down all barriers between humanity's hundred separate worlds threatens to send their social and economic systems into chaos.

The ambassadorial mission is an attempt to help Caledony develop a plan to minimize disruption. The society of Caledony is particularly vulnerable because it is a closed market economy engineered around the belief that everything has a value. All social interactions are transacted at a monetary level. Nothing is owned; everything is rented. Society is monitored by omnipresent Artificial Intelligences which offer citizens a chance to logically justify their actions if they deviate from the accepted norm, so that within limits, laws are in continual flux. This is taken to extremes in the carefully named city of Utilitopia, Sparta to the rest of Caledony's Athens.

Giraut soon finds that all citizens of Caledony, even ambassadorial visitors, must contribute labour to the state. Because he is a typical hard-sf hero, which is to say a resourceful winner, as an alternative to hard labour he persuades the overseeing AIs that he should set up a Center for Occiptian Arts in grim Utilitopia. Through the Center, he becomes involved with a group of artist-radicals, although he misunderstands just quite how rebellious and therefore dangerous they are by Caldeonian standards. Slowly, we begin to understand that although Giraut considers himself resourceful and worldly, he might be failing to understand quite a bit.

There's a revolution, with reactionary elements opposed to cultural mingling taking control of the government of Caledony; the artists, Giraut amongst them, become a focus of protest. Courtesy of instantaneous travel, an interplanetary cultural bazaar arrives. Giraut's former girlfriend is helping run his home culture's stall, and he begins to realize how false are his assumptions about himself and his role even in his own society. The bazaar leaves; the reactionaries clamp down; defiantly, the radicals win permission to set off on an expedition to make a kind of documentary about the unexplored hinterlands of the planet. Things are swiftly brought to a conclusion: the expedition stumbles upon the ruins of an alien colony, explaining the preternatural eco-system; the reactionaries are overthrown by fiat of the Council of Humanity, which has decided it is a Bad Thing; Giraut discovers he has grown up.

Barnes describes his contrasting societies with cheerful verve. He works from the bottom up, from the inside out, with no little invention. And more than a handful of his characters have a solidity, an authoritative reality, which is both welcome and unexpected in a traditional hard-sf novel. That much is good, as are a handful of setpieces: a duel of honour at the beginning of the novel; the black comedy of Giraut's misunderstanding of the radical underground cabaret, which to him (and us) seems like an amateur recreation of Greenwich Village bohemia circa 1960, but which in its cultural context is more like, say, the first great Dadaist event in the Zunfthaus zur Waag in Zurich. Good too are Barnes's depiction of Giraut's growth in self-understanding, the comedy of manners as he tries to stay aloof from and then succumbs to the strange new culture, and a seemingly improbable love affair. It is unusual, but welcome, to see actual human beings inhabiting the schematics of a hard-sf novel.

But what is good is too often smothered in sheer detail. The unfolding of the plot proceeds at the same unhurried rate whether it is describing a revolution or apple-picking. A lot happens, but a lot of what happens takes place in the background, smothered by foregrounding of interminable detail and even more interminable debate between characters. For like many hard-sf novels, *A Million Open Doors* too often lapses without shame into long conversational explications, so that, for instance, the effects of cultural interchange are discussed at hypothetical length and with undergraduate earnestness long before being perfunctorily dramatized (glimpses of an unmoving crowd lined neatly around a building and an interruption to a TV broadcast are about as

close as we get to the action). It isn't a bad novel, it just talks about itself too much. If you can get through the talk, there's enough that's good to want to see Barnes's next, where one hopes the debates will be fewer, the detail essential, and the ideas fully integrated with the plot.

We are left with only a little space for Garry Kilworth's saga of hares, **Frost Dancers** (HarperCollins, £14.99). As with *Hunter's Moon* (foxes) and *Midnight's Sun* (wolves), *Frost Dancers* examines the survival, and the world myths and culture, of a particular species in a natural world much diminished by humans. Its hero is a mountain hare called Skelter, who is captured for hare coursing and taken from his Highland home to Southern England. He survives the coursing only to find himself, stranger in a strange land, amongst a group of his field hare cousins, who are being terrorized by an escaped and crazed South American harpy eagle. The novel tailors its stately progress as much to the turning of the seasons as the patchy, episodic plot of Skelter's heroic quest against the monster eagle, but its hedgerow lore sufficiently engages the reader's imagination to keep the pages turning. Nature endures in spite of man, is the hopeful message, and we have come full circle.

(Paul J. McAuley)

## "May Your Ghod Go With You"

Graham Andrews

James White has written several fine novels, most notably the Hugo-nominated *Second Ending* (1962) and *The Watch Below* (1966), an undersea generation-ship saga that "anticipated" the awful made-for-TV movie, *Goliath Awaits*, by 15 years. However, he is more generally popular with sf readers for his mellow dramas about the planetoidal Sector Twelve General Hospital, in which are reproduced the environments of all known sentient life-forms.

Sector General (its short form) has been lent solidity by well-thought-out background material; e.g. the complex infrastructure, the biological classification system (Earth-humans are designated DBDG, for reasons that could be explained here, but —), the indispensable Translators, and the ditto Educator Tapes.

A full list of alien patients would be prohibitively long, but I can't resist mentioning Emily, the Brontësaurus ("Trouble with Emily"/*Hospital Station*, 1962).

However, the law of diminishing returns finally caught up with Sector General. The background material was no longer enough, in itself, and only the infusion of yet more exotic aliens with yet more exotic maladies (like the eponymous "Meatball"/*Major Operation*, 1971) kept the series from slipping into sameiness.

White himself must have been aware of the problem, because in *Ambulance Ship* (1979), *Sector General* (1983) and *Star Healer* (1985) he plonked the overworked viewpoint character, Doctor Conway, into the ambulance service. Then, in *Code Blue – Emergency* (1987), the now-Diagnostician Conway was relegated to bit-part status, far behind Cha Thraat, a female Somardvan Warrior-Surgeon who can best be described as "feisty."

White's new novel **The Genocidal Healer** (Ballantine, \$4.99) carries the renovation process begun in *Code Blue – Emergency* one stage – no, several stages – further. It takes place on Sector General, for the most part, but White has used the once-cosy hospital setting to consider terminal illness, euthanasia, pangalactic theology, and many other deep-think things:

"For the first and only time it [an observation ward/operating theatre] was the venue of a military court and, Lioren thought hopefully, it would be used to terminate rather than extend life" (p.1). The life that Surgeon-Captain Lioren (a Tarlian BRLH) wishes terminated is his/its own, having charged himself with gross professional negligence leading to the deaths of a large but unspecified number of patients while under his care. Note: White has substituted neutral pronouns for the politically incorrect(?) he/she and his/her, which might prove disorientating to readers who aren't familiar with the regular characters. Not always, though; *hé* it forgets *himself* every now and then.

Lioren was the medical officer responsible for treating the pathologically violent Crowsaggs, who are almost continually beating the lights out of each other (sometimes literally). I won't divulge the reason behind this apparent urge towards racial suicide, because finding out is part of the fun. But when Lioren stumbles between two frenzied DCSLs, they immediately turn on *him*. The flyleaf extract from this scene has been blurred HOSTILIS INTERRUPTUS – how's that for a clue?

Sector General develops an anti-plague specific, but Lioren is forbidden to use it until additional field trials have been carried out. But the self-inflicted massacre will soon depopulate Crowsag, so the Surgeon-Captain uses his own initiative – resulting in genocide by negligence. Semi-genocide, really, but you can't have a

novel entitled *The Semi-Genocidal Healer*.

Lioren demands the death penalty, but he doesn't get it (a good thing, too, or the novel wouldn't have got much beyond Chapter Five). Chief Psychologist/Major O'Mara points out that (a) the Galactic Federation has long since abolished capital punishment, and (b) Lioren is guilty of exaggeration, not genocide. The (former) Surgeon-Captain is placed in O'Mara's charge, for emotional readjustment and career guidance.

O'Mara is an unforgivably neglected character; he runs Sector General like a not-so-benevolent dictator, and his *raison d'être* is to shrink heads, not swell them.

Lioren's occupational therapy begins with watching Senior Physician Seldal (a Nallajim LSVO) for signs of abnormal or uncharacteristic behaviour. Then he meets Diagnostician Mannen, an Earth-human who has been on Sector General since it was little more than a neighbourhood Health Centre. The now-aged Mannen is terminally ill (the first time that any Sector Generaler has been faced with *certain* death), and he obliquely requests Lioren to take up homicidal healing.

It need hardly be said that Lioren doesn't accede to Mannen's plea for "premature termination"; in fact, the ethical dilemma posed by euthanasia is cut like a cognitive Gordian knot. The dying Diagnostician realizes that Lioren's problems make his own pale into near-insignificance, and the two men entities soon become fast (if argumentative) friends. Lioren himself gains the maturity needed to cope with his next ornery critter – a Groalterri patient named Small Hellishomar the Cutter.

The Groalterri are BIG; warm-blooded, oxygen-breathing BLSUs who continue to grow from parthenogenic birth to the end of their l-o-n-g life spans. Hellishomar is the first Groalterri to be treated at Sector General, and the ramifications of this by-no-means simple case might affect the entire Federation. He/it has got much in common with Lioren: "I am guilty of a great and terrible sin" (p.110).

Then the focus widens from melancholia to take in theological speculation: "...there is a struggle between the destructive forces of environment and instinctive, animal behaviour on one side and the efforts of thinking and cooperative beings on the other. By some entities it is called the continuing battle to impose order upon chaos, and by many the struggle between good and bad, or God against the Evil One... it is the former, at times with great difficulty, who is gaining ascendance over the latter" (p.157).

There's talk-talk-talk about the

universality of Christ-figures, the way God (or Whatever) often seems to reward evildoers while punishing the righteous, and the widespread belief in a paradisaical afterlife. What is Ghod playing at? How is He/She/It minding the store? Will thinking creatures finally evolve beyond the need for physical bodies, turning into "ghosts"...? We might as well be reading about *Spectre General*.

However, White links the philosophical digressions to his main theme – forgiveness. Lioren (*What is the difference between a crime and a sin?*, p.112) and Hellishomar ("I do not believe I can be forgiven because I cannot forgive myself", p.121) eventually find redemption for the honest mistakes that led to patient-harm. Their matching problems are neatly resolved, but not too neatly, and there's a – well, neat – piece of macro-surgery at the climax.

Reviewing *The Genocidal Healer* in *Locus* (March 1992), Carolyn Cushman wrote that the "...exploration of religion on a galactic scale feels uncomfortably out of place" (p.34). I couldn't disagree more. Sector General is a galactic hospital, dealing with the life-and-death concerns of sixty-five intelligent species, so reflections upon mortality and possible afterlives would seem to be firmly in place.

*The Genocidal Healer* is an enjoyable medical mystery tour that also harks back to White's acerbic *Underkill* (Corgi, 1979), as yet unpublished in the USA. It expands upon some of the thinky bits in *The Silent Stars Go By* (1991), a significant novel that bears the classic(?) blurb "When Irish Spies are Smiling." At any rate, Sector General has been given a new lease of life (or afterlife?)

(Graham Andrews)

## UK Books Received September 1992

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.

Adams, Douglas, and John Lloyd. **The Deeper Meaning of Liff**. Illustrated by Bert Kitchen. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32220-6, 146pp, paperback, £4.99. (Humorous dictionary of non-existent terms, borrowed from actual place-names; first published in 1990; an earlier version was published a decade ago as *The Meaning of Liff*.) 16th October 1992.

Amis, Martin. **Time's Arrow, or The Nature of the Offence**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-016779-X, 176pp, paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1991; this is the one about a man who lives backwards in time, experiencing the Nazi death camps as a benign

event; as has been pointed out frequently, the central conceit is an old one in science fiction, having been used by J.G. Ballard in his 1964 short story "Time of Passage," by Philip K. Dick in his 1967 novel *Counter-Clock World*, etc., etc.) 24th September 1992.

Anthony, Piers. **The Colour of Her Panties**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-58135-7, 346pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; the fifteenth "Xanth" novel; we shan't comment on the title, other than to bring you the information that the panties in question belong to a glamorous mer-woman.) 15th October 1992.

Atkins, Peter. **Morningstar, or The Vampires of Summer**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-223908-6, 238pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first edition; a debut book by a writer, born in Liverpool in 1955, who is already quite well known for his screen work, collaborations with Clive Barker, etc.) 5th October 1992.

Attanasio, A.A. **Hunting the Ghost Dancer**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20836-4, 445pp, paperback, £4.99. (Prehistoric sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; it's set "fifty thousand summers ago," yet the cover painting shows a man on a horse – some anachronism, surely?) 24th September 1992.

Ballard, J.G. **Empire of the Sun**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-06430-3, 351pp, paperback, £4.99. (Non-sf novel by a leading sf writer, first published in 1984; eighth Grafton printing; winner of the *Guardian* fiction prize, filmed by Steven Spielberg in 1987, and frequently hailed as "the best British novel about the Second World War," it must have sold well over a million copies worldwide.) October 1992.

Ballard, J.G. **The Kindness of Women**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21099-7, 348pp, paperback, £4.99. (Non-sf novel by a leading sf writer, first published in 1991; it's clearly billed as "the sequel to *Empire of the Sun*," yet it's more of a retake or variation on themes from the earlier novel, told in the first person rather than the third, and beginning four years earlier than the events of the previous book; a brilliant work and most illuminating for all readers of Ballard's earlier fiction.) October 1992.

Barth, John. **The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor**. Hodder/Sceptre, ISBN 0-340-55910-1, 573pp, paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 58.) 1st October 1992.

Baxter, Stephen. **Timelike Infinity**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224016-5, 253pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; Baxter's second novel, and the first in his proposed "Xeelee" trilogy; recommended, for those who like their sf hardish and with an old-fashioned gosh-wow sense of wonder.) 7th December 1992.

Coburn, Anthony. **The Masters of Luxor**. "Doctor Who: The Scripts." Edited by John McElroy. Titan, ISBN 1-85286-321-8, 174pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf television script, first edition; this one was written in 1963 but never produced; Anthony Coburn, now deceased, was the series' original scriptwriter, preceding the better-known Terry Nation.) 22nd October 1992.

Compton, D.G. **Nomansland**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05422-0, 286pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's dedicated to John Gribbin, who seems to have been instrumental in persuading Compton to write again [this is his first solo novel in a decade].) February 1993.

Compton, D.G., and John Gribbin. **Ragnarok**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05321-6, 344pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Andy Robertson in *Interzone* 54.) 8th October 1992.

Cooper, Louise. **Revenant: Book 7 of Indigo**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21443-7, 325pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; is this the last in the "Indigo" series?; the publishers don't say, but the saga is about a heroine's quest to destroy "seven demons," so presumably she has reached the end of her labours.) 24th September 1992.

Cornell, Paul. **Love and War**. "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20385-2, 235pp, paperback, £3.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first edition.) 15th October 1992.

Davies, Robertson. **Murder & Walking Spirits**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-015932-0, 357pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1991; by the leading Canadian novelist [now in his late seventies], it's a tale of the afterlife and imaginary time travel.) 24th September 1992.

Delany, Samuel R. **Triton**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21420-8, 369pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1976; buried deep inside the prefatory matter is a sub-title: "An Ambiguous Heterotopia"; it's another of Delany's dense and challenging novels.) 8th October 1992.

Eisenstein, Phyllis. **Born to Exile**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20732-5, 215pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1978; it consists of a story-cycle about the adventures of Alaric the Minstrel, most of it first published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in the early-to-mid-1970s.) 8th October 1992.

Eisenstein, Phyllis. **In the Red Lord's Reach**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-246-13527-1, 225pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989; a sequel to *Born to Exile*, concerning the further adventures of Alaric the Minstrel; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 22nd October 1992.

Frayling, Christopher, ed. **Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula**. Faber & Faber, ISBN 0-571-16792-6, 429pp, paperback, £9.99. (Horror anthology, first published in 1991; the editor's 80-page introduction is an interesting study of the vampire theme in literature; there are also longish introductions to each story and six pages of "Bibliography and Acknowledgments," so it adds up to a substantial book on its subject; as to the stories and extracts themselves, they include several 19th-century "classics" by Polidori, Dumas, Rymer, Hoffman and, of course, Bram Stoker, among others; there's also a section entitled "Haemosexuality" which reprints three psychological essays by Krafft-Ebing, Ernest Jones and Maurice Richardson; all in all, a fascinating work; a note on the reverse of the title page says: "A considerably shorter version, *The Vampyre*, was published by Gollancz in 1978.") 26th October 1992.

Gemmell, David A. **Dark Prince**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-970360-2, 547pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 55.) 1st October 1992.

Gemmell, David A. **Waylander II: In the Realm of the Wolf**. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-4830-5, 296pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; a note on the back cover neatly summarizes the volume's place in the Gemmell oeuvre: "This is the brilliant sequel to David Gemmell's best-selling novel *Waylander*,

and is the fifth book in the hugely popular Drenai Saga, comprising *Legend*, *King Beyond the Gate*, *Waylander* and *Quest for Lost Heroes*.) 8th October 1992.

Green, Simon R. **Two Kings in Haven**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3861-8, 211pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; latest in the "Hawk and Fisher" series.) 22nd October 1992.

Harris, Joanne. **The Evil Seed**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0008-9, 425pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first edition; this is a debut book by a new British writer.) 24th September 1992.

Harrison, Harry, and David Bischoff. **Bill, the Galactic Hero...on the Planet of the Hippies from Hell**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04983-9, 214pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; sixth in the "Bill" series – or rather, fifth in the new sharecropped series devised by book packager Byron Preiss.) 8th October 1992.

Harrison, Harry, and Jack C. Haldeman II. **Bill, the Galactic Hero...on the Planet of the Zombie Vampires**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05320-8, 217pp, paperback, £3.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; fifth in the series.) 8th October 1992.

Harrison, Harry, and Marvin Minsky. **The Turing Option**. Viking, ISBN 0-670-83127-1, 422pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1992; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition: we listed the proof copy in *Interzone* 63.) 12th October 1992.

Holdstock, Robert. **The Fetch**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0084-4, 376pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 55.) 24th September 1992.

Howe, David J., Mark Stammers and Stephen James Walker. **Doctor Who: The Sixties**. Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 1-85227-420-4, 162pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Profusely illustrated reference book about the early years of the "Doctor Who" television series; first edition.) 15th October 1992.

James, Peter. **Twilight**. Penguin/Signet, ISBN 0-45-117426-7, 432pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Mary Gentle in *Interzone* 56.) 24th September 1992.

Jones, Gwyneth. **White Queen**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05398-4, 312pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1991; winner of the James Tiptree, Jr. Memorial Award; nicely packaged, this paperback edition comes graced with glowing quotes from Iain Banks, John Clute, Bruce Sterling and Lisa Tuttle.) 24th September 1992.

King, Stephen. **Needful Things**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-57458-X, 790pp, paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 15th October 1992.

Levy, Steven. **Artificial Life: The Quest for a New Creation**. Jonathan Cape, ISBN 0-224-03599-1, 390pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Popular science text, first published in the USA, 1992; there is some mention of sf, including an allusion to John Brunner's novel *The Shockwave Rider*.) 1st October 1992.

McCaffrey, Anne. **All the Weyrs of Pern**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13729-4, 478pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 17th September 1992.

McCaffrey, Anne, and Elizabeth Moon. **Generation Warriors: Volume Three of The Planet Pirates**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-033-7, 345pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 24th September 1992.

McDonald, Ian. **Speaking in Tongues**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05062-4, 248pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; it contains 11 stories from Asimov's, *Interzone*, *New Worlds*, *Other Edens*, *Zenith* and elsewhere; this edition actually appeared some days earlier than the American edition we listed in issue 64; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 66.) 14th September 1992.

Meyers, Jeffrey. **Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy**. John Murray, ISBN 0-7195-5023-8, xii+348pp, hardcover, £25. (Biography of the great horror/mystery short-story writer and poet; first published in the USA, 1992; there must have been a hundred-and-one biographies of Poe before now, but it's claimed on the back cover that "Poe is here for the first time the subject of a major biographer"; Jeffrey Meyers has previously written biographical studies of Conrad, Hemingway, D.H. Lawrence and others.) 22nd October 1992.

Meyrink, Gustav. **The Green Face**. Translated by Mike Mitchell. Afterword by Franz Rottensteiner. Dedalus, ISBN 0-946626-92-8, 224pp, paperback, £7.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in Germany, 1916; by the celebrated Austrian author of *The Golem*, a writer whose reputation Dedalus are doing much to resurrect; this is the first English translation, and it is published simultaneously in the USA by Ariadne Press, California, at \$14.99.) 14th October 1992.

Morrow, Bradford, and Patrick McGrath, eds. **The New Gothic: A Collection of Contemporary Gothic Fiction**. Picador, ISBN 0-330-32403-9, 336pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror/gothic anthology, first published in the USA, 1991; it contains an impressive line-up of contributors, including Kathy Acker, Martin Amis, Scott Bradfield, Angela Carter, John Hawkes, Joyce Carol Oates, Ruth Rendell, Peter Straub, Emma Tennant and Jeanette Winterson; however, some of the "stories" are novel extracts; the title on cover and spine is given as *The Picador Book of the New Gothic*, and the ordering of the editors' names is transposed.) 9th October 1992.

Murray, Terry, and Jeff Anderson. **The Shadow's Edge**. "Legends of Larian, Book 1." Lion, ISBN 0-7459-2369-0, unpaginated [about 48pp], trade paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy graphic novel, first edition.) 30th September 1992.

Newman, Kim. **Jago**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21367-8, 668pp, paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 54.) 10th September 1992.

Pratchett, Terry. **Witches Abroad**. "A Discworld novel." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13465-1, 286pp, paperback, £3.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 56.) 12th November 1992.

Rigelsford, Nigel, and Andrew Skilleter. **The Monsters**. Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 1-85227-238-X, 166pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Profusely illustrated reference book about the imaginary creatures from the "Doctor Who" television series; first edition.) 17th September 1992.

Suggitt, Phil. **Shadow and Substance: A Novel**. Backstreets of Nowhere [9 Shelley Close, Maldon, Essex CM9 6DD], ISBN 0-9519572-0-1, 185pp, paperback, £3. (Sf [?] novel, first edition; all proceeds from this small-press item go to Amnesty International.) 30th October 1992.

Thompson, Carlene. **All Fall Down**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-57821-6, 280pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA [?], 1992; a debut novel.) 1st October 1992.

Tolkien, Christopher, ed. **Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10258-3, unpaginated [about 110pp], hardcover, £25. (Large-format art volume by the great fantasy writer, first published in 1979; the book was originally issued by Allen & Unwin; the pictures remain the same in this version though the accompanying text by Tolkien's son has been revised.) 22nd October 1992.

Warrington, Freda. **A Taste of Blood Wine**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32578-7, 446pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Horror novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; autumn 1992 seems to be the season for vampire books – we've seen new bloodsucker novels from Peter Atkins, Kim Newman, Anne Rice and Brian Stableford, there are anthologies from Christopher Frayling [see above] and Stephen Jones, and forthcoming is a new novelization of *Dracula* itself to accompany the Francis Ford Coppola movie...) 23rd October 1992.

Wylie, Jonathan. **Shadow-Maze**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13929-7, 384pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Jonathan Wylie" is a pseudonym for Mark and Julia Smith.) 22nd October 1992.

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## Overseas Books Received

Bova, Ben. **Triumph**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85359-9, 253pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's about an alternative world in which the European events of 1945 turned out very differently.) January 1993.

Card, Orson Scott. **The Call of Earth: Homecoming, Volume 2**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-93037-2, 280pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) January 1993.

Dozois, Gardner. **Geodesic Dreams: The Best Short Fiction of Gardner Dozois**. Foreword by Robert Silverberg. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-08197-9, xv+271pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; Dozois is best known as a magazine and anthology editor, but this book should remind the world of his very real talents as a short-story writer.) 16th October 1992.

Gerrold, David. **A Season for Slaughter: The War Against the Chtorr, Book Four**. "The long awaited fourth book in the classic series of alien conquest." Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-28976-4, 562pp, paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 12th January 1993.

Haber, Karen. **Mutant Legacy**. "The spectacular conclusion to *The Mutant Season*." Introduction by Robert Silverberg. Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-29671-X, 243pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 12th January 1993.

Holt, John R. **The Convocation**. Bantam Falcon, ISBN 0-553-29197-1, 370pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author has written a previous horror title called *When We Dead Awaken*.) January 1993.

Jordan, Robert. **The Shadow Rising**. "Book Four of *The Wheel of Time*." Tor, ISBN 0-312-85431-5, 688pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous leather-bound edition priced at \$200 [not seen].) November 1992.

Lafferty, R.A. **Tales of Midnight: More Than Melchisedech**. Illustrated by R. Ward Shipman. United Mythologies Press, ISBN 0-921322-30-5, pagination confused [about 120pp], hardcover, \$19.95. (Fantasy [?])

novel, first edition; sequel to *Tales of Chicago* and second in the "Melchisedech" sequence; there is a simultaneous signed limited edition [not seen.] No date shown: received in September 1992.

Laidlaw, Marc. **Kalifornia: A Novel.** St Martin's Press, no ISBN shown, 245pp, hardcover, no price shown. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; Laidlaw is a talented writer, author of *Dad's Nuke* [1985] and *Neon Lotus* [1988], whose career stalled a few years ago when this book met with rejection; it's good to see it out at last.) February 1993.

Norton, Andre, with P.M. Griffin and Mary H. Schaub. **Flight of Vengeance. Witch World: The Turning, Book Two.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85014-X, 383pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *Storms of Victory* in this new, sharecropped series of "Witch World" novels.) December 1992.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. **Red Mars.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-09204-9, 459pp, hardcover, \$22.50. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1992; proof copy received; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 63.) 15th January 1993.

Spinrad, Norman. **Deus X.** Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-296771-9, 177pp, paperback, \$3.50. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 12th January 1993.

Wilson, Robert Charles. **The Harvest.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-09123-9, 395pp, hardcover, \$23. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 15th December 1992.

Wolfe, Gene. **Castle of Days.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85209-6, 445pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; proof copy received; this omnibus volume contains the complete contents of his earlier books *Gene Wolfe's Book of Days* and *The Castle of the Otter*, plus a substantial amount of previously uncollected non-fiction material; a rich lode of Wolfeiana, recommended for completists.) December 1992.

Yolen, Jane, ed. **Xanadu.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85367-X, 256pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; first of a proposed series; Martin H. Greenberg seems to be co-editor, though his name does not appear on the title page; it contains all-new stories by Eleanor Arnason, Gardner Dozois, Esther M. Friesner, Ursula Le Guin, Tanith Lee, Nancy Kress, Mike Resnick, Lisa Tuttle and others.) January 1993.

See 1992 Popularity Poll questionnaire on page 24.

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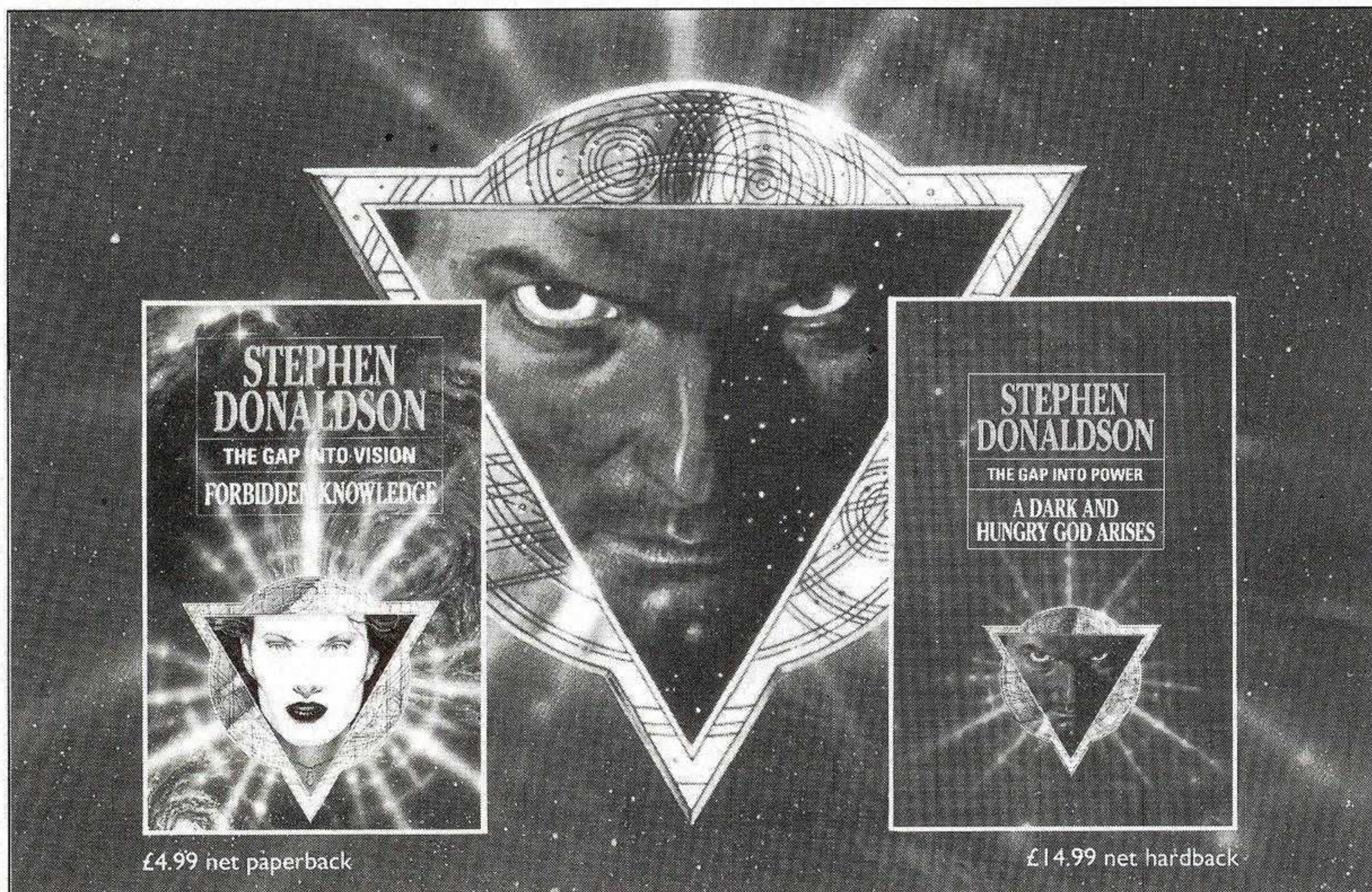
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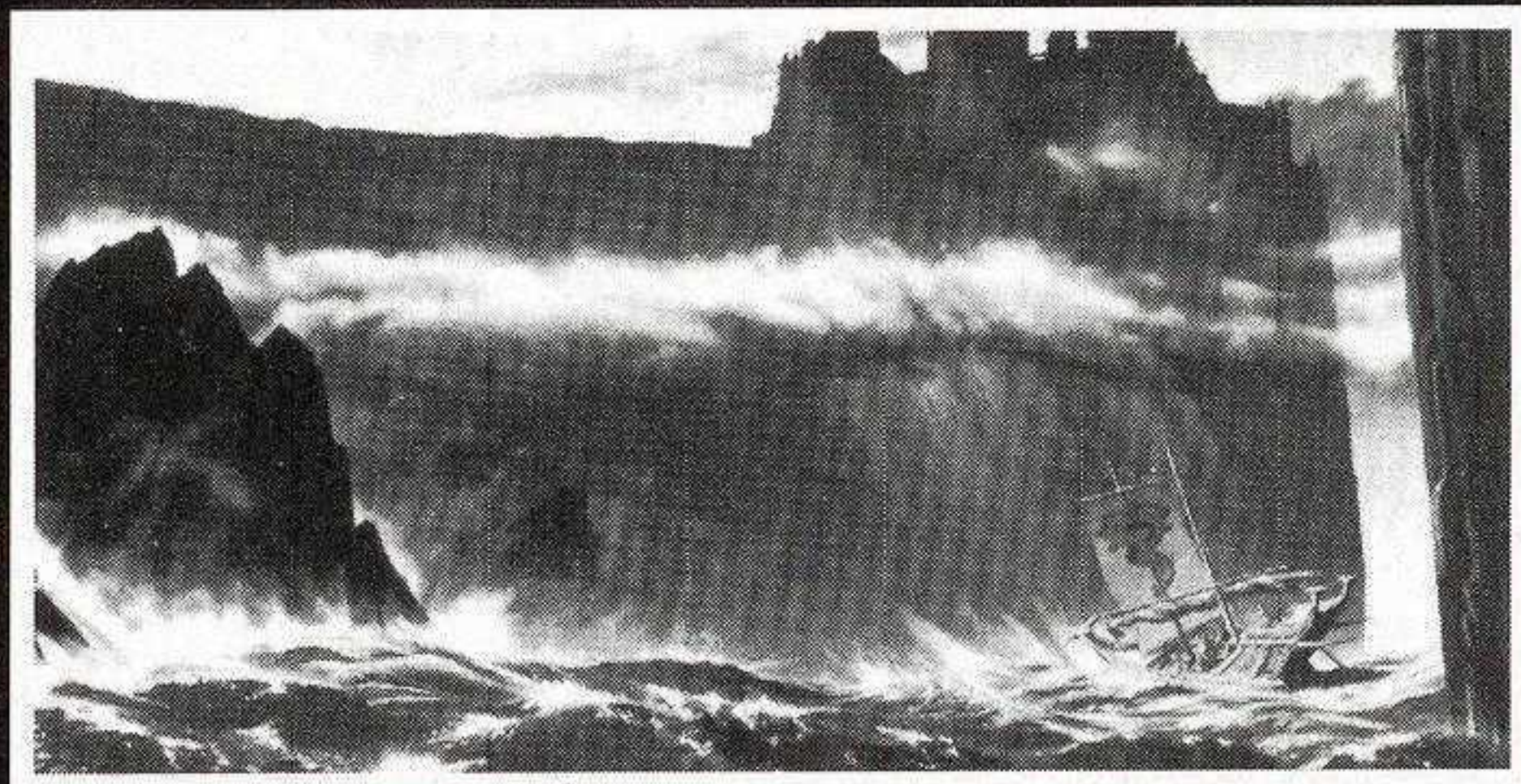
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