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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

January
1994

INCORPORATING
MILLION

New stories by
Molly Brown, Leigh Kennedy
Kim Newman and others



Jim Burns talks
about his paintings

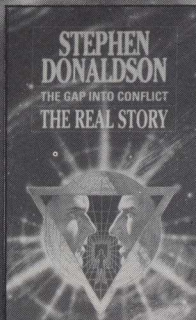
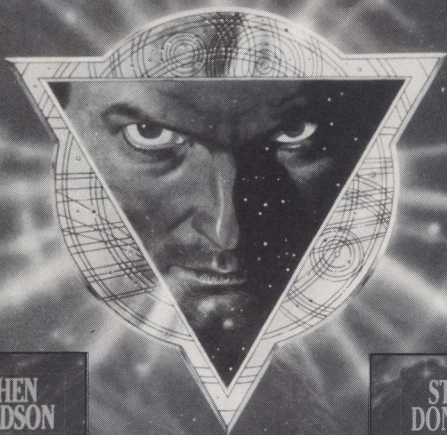


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STEPHEN DONALDSON

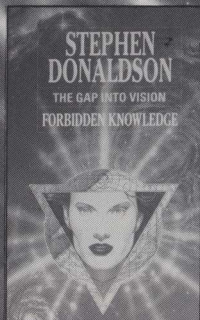
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interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 79

January 1994

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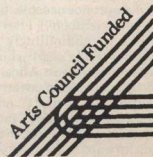
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Interaction

Dear Editors:

Was it some kind of joke to publish David Wishart's "Chronotetannymenicon" in the same issue (IZ 76) as Terry Lovesev's letter? I expect that every first-year physics undergraduate who reads the story will be able to send you a detailed demolition job so I shall politely refrain. Suffice to say that all glass is (sic) "slow" within the context although certainly not the sense of the usage in the story (even fresh air is not truly "fast" as I'm sure you'll know).

I tried to work out whether this was an alternate-reality-with-slightly-different-natural-laws story or an attempt at a historically accurate piece with only the central piece of science actually fictional. I concluded the latter; maybe I'm wrong. In either case I believe there are simply too many errors of detail in the text. The "Scientist" makes so many mistakes as to be utterly unconvincing. In particular, even with "slow" photons (or a stream of dried peas for all the difference it would make), a reflected image will appear to move, after a delay, at the same apparent speed as the object, cloud or otherwise. This is indeed exactly what is observed in reality. You can convince yourself with a simple sketch of the situation.

Please take note of Terry Lovesev's comments and be careful to differentiate between fictional science and incorrect science.

I'm genuinely sorry to keep on in this moaning vein but for my money this was the poorest issue I've read so far. Molly Brown's "Ruella in Love" is my next mean; I feel this story was simply too trivially juvenile and shallow for *Interzone*, a bastard pastiche of Terry Pratchett and Anne McCaffrey at their worst. I'm sure it will have an audience out there but count me out thank you.

Kim Newman's "The Big Fish" was also a disappointment, the suspension of disbelief factor totally absent for me. But I found the pieces by Greg Egan and Ben Jeapes interesting and enjoyable in their own respective ways.

Andrew Munley
Kilwinning, Scotland

Dear Editors:

Regarding David Wishart's story with the unpronounceable title ("Chronotetannymenicon"), I haven't seen H.G. Wells so enthrallingly echoed since Michael Ende's early short story where he sent an almost Alice-like heroine's sleepy dreaming awareness down a corridor of "perfect" mirrors stretching away "infinitely" into the mists of memory and re-awaken time. I'm looking forward to the next occasion when

Wishart gives an exercise in Steam-punk - he's talented!

Claire Hall
Malton

Dear Editors:

John Clute is simply stunning. His work, both as reviewer in *Interzone* and elsewhere, and as co-editor of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, leaves me in awe. Here is someone who can write. Aside from his essay/review collection *Strokes* and *The Encyclopedia of SF*, has he published any other compilations - or fiction? Are any of these available?

Dale Woolery
Omaha, Nebraska

Editor: John Clute has written a few short stories over the years and one novel, *The Disinheriting Party*, which was published by Allison & Busby in the UK in 1977 (it was not sf, it never reached paperback and it's long out of print). As for his non-fiction, a second collection of reviews, similar to *Strokes*, is scheduled for 1994 publication by Serconia Press in the USA - and it will contain many of his reviews from *Interzone*. As Dave Langford has reported in his "Anisible Link" column, John is now at work (with Dave and others) on an *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* which is likely to see publication in 1995.

Dear Editors:

I have no quarrel with the fact that Chris Gilmore thought John Grant's *The World* was a bad book (*Interzone* 77), because it's the job of a reviewer to make arguments about texts; but I do have a nagging sense that in this case there were some failures in his reading of the actual words printed. Alven, the "boy herdsman who...fades out halfway through" is, in fact, a minor character who appears in one chapter only, and is clearly not meant to bulk larger; the prisoners whose "captors fail to disarm them" are not armed in the first place; and so on (there are about half a dozen moments of similar unease, though some of them are judgment calls). It all adds up to a jokey scumbling of a text whose actual narrative shape - pace Chris's claim that the whole thing lacks "form and continuity" - is the heart of the whole enterprise. *The World* is, after all, a metamorphic fantasy. It starts in Albion. It crosshatches complicatedly into something called *The World*. It stands (or fails) on the passage.

I should have liked a negative view of this book to have assaulted it upon its ground, not through a farrago of mechanical misreadings.

John Clute
London

Dear Editors:

Interzone is a splendid magazine with a wide variety of stories and opinion. I do not enjoy every story nor agree with every opinion but I realize that this variety is part of what makes IZ such a good magazine. However in his letter (issue 77), responding to Colin Munro's letter (IZ 75), S.T. Joshi expresses views which I find disturbing.

I have to start by saying two things: firstly, I have not read Mr Joshi's article on Stephen King in *Million* 13 and my letter is not concerned with it; and secondly, I am not a Stephen King fan and I suspect I may agree with some of what Mr Joshi has to say about King's work in his article.

Mr Joshi started his letter with an anecdote about H.P. Lovecraft not needing to respond to an attack because it refuted itself. Mr Joshi then says that likewise, Mr Munro's letter needs no response so he will not respond. Strangely he then proceeded to respond to Mr Munro's letter point by point. Perhaps he just wanted an excuse to demonstrate his extensive knowledge of H.P. Lovecraft.

His response gets off to a bad start. Paragraph two of his letter contains an example of seriously flawed logic, which can not be excused as he later accuses Mr Munro of a logical error. Mr Joshi's syllogism, "1) King is popular; 2) King is a bad writer; and 3) King must therefore appeal primarily to those readers who do not have well-developed literary tastes," is faulty. Granting propositions 1) and 2) in no way proves 3). The only conclusion that can be drawn from propositions 1) and 2) is that it is possible for bad writers to be popular. A person's enjoyment of bad writing has nothing to do with their ability or lack of ability to enjoy good writing. There are many well-read people who like to read pulp novels.

He then talks about a "democratic fallacy" which he believes excuses his elitism. The fallacy as he explains it is, "...the notion that political and legal equality... somehow produce intellectual and aesthetic equality." Of course not everyone is equal, but elitism is only okay when it refers to something which can be measured. For example, the athletes who attend the Olympic games are the sporting elite because they are the fastest, strongest and so on. Intelligence and aesthetic sensibility, which he seems to believe go hand-in-hand though doesn't offer any evidence to suggest this is the case, are far more complex. They are both hard to measure and more importantly they both take many forms. It is interesting

to note that, almost without exception, people who seek to establish an elite in either of these spheres include themselves.

According to Mr Joshi, King is a "bad but important writer: bad in the absolute aesthetic sense." I go along with the first part of that claim, but he loses me with the second part. What is this "absolute aesthetic sense" he refers to? In aesthetics there are no absolutes. Aesthetics is all about personal taste. King is not bad in some "absolute aesthetic sense" but because of weaknesses in his thematic concerns, characterization, etc.

It is in the sixth paragraph of his letter that he launches his most puzzling argument. When I first read it I thought that he must be totally insane. He attempts to suggest that being popular is a fault.

To support this ludicrous assertion he makes a second reference to H.P. Lovecraft. A long quote which can be paraphrased as: art has suffered since the rise of the middle class with entertainment value replacing "intrinsic excellence." The quote offers no explanation as to what "intrinsic excellence" is, only to say that it can only be appreciated by "cultivated non-acquisitive persons of assumed position." Instead of offering anything of value on the subject the quote finishes with a long tirade against the middle class. This possibly tells us more about Lovecraft's preoccupations than it does about art. In *A Critical History of English Literature* David Daiches states that "The English novel... was in a large measure the product of the middle class..." Was Lovecraft suggesting that the novel as a form contains no "intrinsic excellence."

In his summary of the Lovecraft quote Mr Joshi states: "Stupid people will always outnumber intelligent people." This is very presumptuous and in my experience untrue. He then states that Homer, Vergil, Dante, Goethe and Shakespeare are the pinnacles of western art. They may well be but he gives no reason why, presumably it is because they are full of "intrinsic excellence."

In pointing out that popularity is not the criterion for literary greatness, Mr Joshi uses King, Harlequin Romances and pornography as examples to prove the point. Perhaps he seeks to incriminate King by association. Their popularity is a coincidence and no reflection on the quality of King's work. It should also be pointed out that Shakespeare and, I suspect the other "pinnacles," were very popular in their own time. Though I agree that popularity is not the main criterion for literary greatness, it can only be regarded as a positive aspect of a work and not something that would exclude it from that status.

I believe King's popularity galls Mr

Joshi for some reason. Unable to accept that whatever King's faults are he is still an entertaining writer, Mr Joshi has constructed a circular argument which he believes damns King and his readers. The argument goes like this: Most people are stupid and most people like King, therefore King is a bad writer; King is a bad writer and most people like him, therefore most people are stupid; and so on *ad infinitum*.

By no means is my letter a comprehensive survey of the problems with Mr Joshi's argument, I have merely selected the most glaring faults for the sake of brevity. As I have already stated I do not think Stephen King is a good writer but I do not like to see people insulted because of their taste. Mr Joshi should accept that people's tastes vary and apologize for insulting Mr Munro and all of King's other readers.

John L. Manuel
Belmore, New South Wales

Dear Editors:

Thank you for publishing the satirical "Epistle of St. Joshi" in the November issue's "Interaction." Rarely have I been moved from cringing embarrassment to helpless laughter with such consummate skill. As a work of experimental humorous fiction it was a corker, right down to the thoughtful inclusion of that last sentence, so the ignorant masses would know where to laugh. As a right of reply however, it was too long and too bitchy. Mr Joshi may have succeeded in turning arrogance into an art form, but I'm old-fashioned, I like a little intelligent analysis with my criticism, so let's keep the hysterical invective down to single paragraphs, from irritated readers like me, and save space for more positive contributions.

Mark Bissell
Ludlow, Shropshire

Dear Editors:

In belated response to David Alexander's letter (issue 75) concerning the standard of the art in *Interzone*. Some of Mr Alexander's comments left me so astonished I had to read them several times to get over the shock: I'm still not sure how anyone could suggest *IZ*'s "glorious technicolor cover blends imperceptibly with the glossy covers of *Cosmo* and *Hello* among the racks of W.H. Smith fodder."

First, I've never known a W.H. Smith which stocked any sf magazine apart from *Asimov's*. Second, if David Alexander really can't see the difference between the beautiful, atmospheric, haunting *drawings* which grace *IZ*'s cover, and the brash, gaudy, artless photographs of "super-models" on *Cosmo*, and the Queen Mum on

Continued on page 60

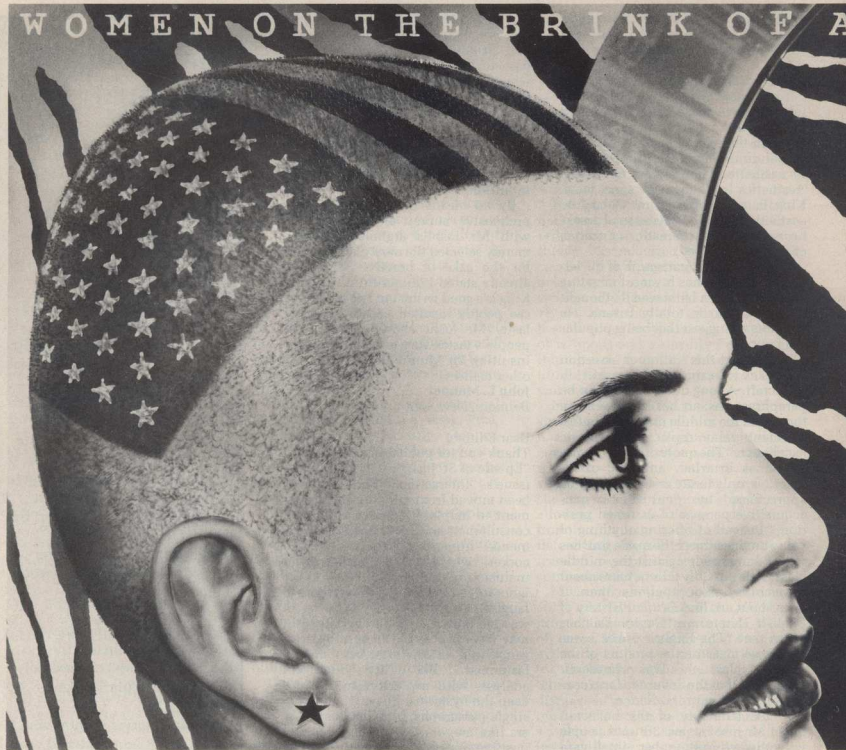
Interzone 1993 Popularity Poll

This is the January 1994 issue, mailed in December 1993. 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 67 to 78 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 1994**. 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 67-78 inclusive (i.e. those with a 1993 cover date) did you particularly like?
- 2) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 67-78 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?
- 3) Which artists' illustrations (including covers) in *Interzone* issues 67-78 inclusive did you particularly like?
- 4) Which artists' illustrations (including covers) in *Interzone* issues 67-78 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?
- 5) Which non-fiction items in *Interzone* issues 67-78 inclusive did you particularly like?
- 6) Which non-fiction items in *Interzone* issues 67-78 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?

WOMEN ON THE BRINK OF A



I felt as if I was going through a meat grinder. Then there was a blinding flash of light – bright orange – and I felt as if I was going through a meat grinder backwards. And there I was, back in one piece. Slightly dizzy, a little stiff around the joints. Swearing I'd never do that again.

The digital display inside the capsule read: **29 April 1995, 6:03 p.m., E.S.T.** If that was true, then I was furious. Toni promised she would only set the timer forward by two minutes, and I'd gone forward by a year! A whole year, wasted. Didn't she realize I had work to do? And then I thought: oh my God, the exhibition! I was supposed to have an exhibition in July, 1994 – if I've really gone forward a year, I missed my one-woman show at Gallery Alfredo!

I opened the capsule door, bent on murder. And then I froze. This wasn't my studio.

I live and work on the top floor of an old warehouse in lower Manhattan, and I do sculpture. Abstract sculpture. I take scrapped auto parts and turn them into something beautiful. I twist industrial rubbish into exquisite shapes. I can mount a bicycle wheel

onto a wooden platform and make it speak volumes about the meaning of life. I once placed a headless Barbie doll inside a fish tank and sold it for five thousand dollars, and that was before I was famous – I hear the same piece recently fetched more than forty.

I'd been working on a new piece called "Women on the Brink of a Cataclysm": an arrangement of six black and white television sets, each showing a video loop of a woman scrubbing a floor, when Toni Fisher rang the doorbell. I've known Toni off and on since we were kids. We grew up in the same town and went to the same high school before going our separate ways after graduation, in 1966. I went to art school in California, she got a scholarship to study physics at Cambridge in England. It would be twenty years before we met again, at the launch party for *Gutsy Ladies: Women Making Their Mark in the 80s*, the latest book by Arabella Winstein.

It was one of those dreadful media circuses; I remember a PR woman in a geometric haircut dragging me around the room for a round of introductions:



Illustrations by Gerry Grace

"Hey there, gutsy lady, meet another gutsy lady." I was there in my capacity as "Gutsy Lady of the Art World" and Toni had been profiled in a chapter entitled: "Gutsy Lady on the Cutting Edge of Science."

I saw her leaning against a wall in the corner: a tall, stick-thin character with spikey blonde hair, gulping champagne. I could see she was a kindred spirit – we were the only ones not wearing neat little suits with boxy jackets – but I had no idea who she was; in high school she'd been a chubby brunette with glasses. She saw me looking at her, and waved me over.

We leaned against the wall together, jangling the chains on our identical black leather jackets. "I'm working on a calculation," she said, "that will show density of shoulder pad to be in directly inverse proportion to level of intelligence. I'm drunk by the way."

"I'm Joanna Krenski."

"I know who you are. I've still got the charcoal portrait you did of me for your senior-year art project. The damn thing must be worth a fortune now; I keep meaning to get it valued."

That was the start of our friendship, the second time around.

Eight years later, I was sitting inside this metal egg, surrounded by my work and my tools and the huge amount of dust they always seem to generate, and Toni was shouting okay, push the button. Then I opened the capsule door and Toni was gone and all my work was gone and even the dust was gone.

I was in a huge, open-plan loft with floor to ceiling windows – that much was like my studio – but everything had been polished and swept and there were flowers everywhere. Flowers in vases, flowers in pots, flowers in a window-box. And then there were paintings of flowers. Dozens of delicate little watercolours depicting roses and lilies and lilacs completely covered one wall, each framed behind a pane of sparkling glass. Unframed oils on canvas stood leaning against every wall, apparently divided into categories: fluffy kittens, cute children, puppies with big sad eyes. I could have puked.

A woman was standing with her back to me, painting something on a medium-sized canvas mounted on a wooden easel. It looked as though it was going to be another puppy. The woman had tightly-permed hair cut just above the collar – mouse brown gone mostly grey – and she was wearing a white smock over a knee-length dress. I also noticed she was wearing high heels. To paint.

Oh God, I thought, just like my mother. I remembered her putting on a hat and a little string of pearls to attend her first evening art class; she was like something out of a '50s TV sitcom. And how proud she was of her little pictures of birds. My mother used to paint birds: little red robins and yellow canaries, with musical notes coming out of their beaks. She hung them all over the living room walls. It was embarrassing.

I was going to have to handle this very carefully. The woman was obviously some old dear of my mother's generation and I was a disembodied head sticking out of a metallic egg. I didn't want to give the poor woman a heart attack. I cleared my throat. "Excuse me," I said, "Please don't be frightened, I'm not a burglar or anything." Even as I said it, I realized how stupid it must have sounded: a burglar in a metal egg.

The woman swung around, and I gasped. "You again," she said, quite calmly. "I never expected you to turn up here."

I felt my mouth open and close half a dozen times, but no words came out. I just sat there, inside the capsule, gaping like a mackerel. The woman had my face. She'd let her hair go grey – something I've refused to do – and she was wearing a string of pearls just like my mother's and a dress I wouldn't be caught dead in, but based on her face – and even her voice – she could have been my sister. My twin.

There was an odd smell in the air; I'd noticed it the moment I opened the capsule door and now I realized what it was. It was bread, baking. Something very strange was going on here.

"I don't know how you did it," she went on. "Toni said we were both stuck where we were. She was very apologetic about it, of course." She put her palette and brush down on a table beside the easel, then crossed her arms and looked at me. She seemed angry. "Well, you can forget it."

I finally managed to get my vocal cords working. "Huh? Forget what?"

"Even if you've found a way, I'm not going back," she said. "No way am I going back. Ever. This is my life now, my world, and I like it. Though..." she paused a moment, and her face – my face – crumpled into a mass of lines. Oh God, I thought, I don't look as old as her, do I? She blinked hard, several times, as if she was trying not to cry. "How's Katie? Is she all right?"

I shook my head; the only Katie I knew was a drama critic, and I didn't think that was who she meant.

"The boys I don't worry about so much; they're grown up now, I know they'll be okay. But Katie... she's just a kid, isn't she?"

"Katie who? And who are you? I mean you look so much like... like my mother. Are we related or something?"

Her eyes opened wide. "You mean you don't know? But...but you've been there. Isn't that where you came from just now?"

"Been where?"

"But you must have! Or how could I be here?"

This woman was talking nonsense; I figured she must be crazy, maybe even dangerous. Maybe she was one of those fanatical fans who get plastic surgery to look like their idols. Okay, maybe a 45-year-old sculptor doesn't have that kind of fan. Even a 45-year-old sculptor who appeared in two Warhol films and has had her picture on the cover of everything from *Newsweek* to *Rolling Stone* (twice), probably doesn't have that kind of fan. I still figured the only thing for me to do was to get the hell away from her in a hurry.

I leaned forward, trying to pull myself out of the capsule, but she grabbed me by the shoulders, shoved me back down inside it, and held me there. I struggled and swore, but I couldn't get up. I don't think she was any stronger than me, but she had the major advantage of not being curled into an almost foetal position inside a metal egg.

Her face hovered inches above mine, mouth twisted with rage, eyes narrow and shining with something that might have been hate or might even have been fear; I couldn't tell. It was like looking into one of those distorted fairground mirrors.

"But you have been there," she insisted. "You arrived there a year ago today. That's when the switch took place."

"What switch?"

"This switch," she said, slamming the capsule door down over my head.

It was worse the second time. My head was pounding; my whole body ached. It took a few seconds for my eyes to come back into focus – then I saw the digital display. I was back where I started: **29 April, 1994, 6:01 p.m., E.S.T.** I sighed with relief. I was home and I still had three months to get ready for my show at Gallery Alfredo; I hadn't missed it after all.

I shoved the door open, expecting to see my studio, and Toni waiting by the capsule. I had a few choice words in store for Toni! But she wasn't there. And my studio wasn't there.

I couldn't tell where I was at first; it was dark. But as my eyes began to adjust, I saw that I was in a windowless room lined with crowded shelves.

"Hello!" I shouted, "Is anybody there?"

No answer.

"Shit." I took a deep breath, gathered all my strength, and slowly began to extricate myself from Toni's infernal machine. I never felt so stiff and sore; I could hardly move. My jeans felt tighter than usual, as if my body was swollen. And my poor legs! I had to massage them to get the blood moving again, and then there was an unbearable sensation of pins and needles. I finally managed to stand up.

The shelves around me were stacked with jars of homemade preserves and chocolate chip cookies. There were bags of flour, a tinned baked ham, fresh coffee beans, baskets of fruit and vegetables, various pots and pans. It looked like some kind of a pantry.

I reached for the door, praying it wasn't locked. It wasn't, and I stepped into a kitchen that would have been the height of technology in 1956. The brand names were all ones I remembered from my childhood, the appliances were all big and white and

clunky, except for the toaster, which was small and round and covered in shiny chrome, and the coffee percolator, which was switched on and bubbling away.

There was nothing in that room that would have been out of place when I was five years old. No microwave oven, no food processor, no espresso machine. There was a meat grinder and a coffee grinder, each with a handle you needed to crank. You needed a match to light the stove. You had to defrost the fridge. And it was all brand new.

"Hello! Anybody home?" I wandered through the dining room – a printed sign on the wall above the sideboard read, "Give us this day our daily bread" – and into a living room with a picture window and clear plastic covers over all the furniture. An embroidered sampler above the fireplace proclaimed, "Bless this house and everyone in it." I shook my head.

I looked out the window and saw women in cotton dresses hanging laundry, men in white shirts mowing lawns, kids on one-speed bikes with little tinkling bells and metal baskets. There was at least one big, gas-guzzling automobile in every driveway. It was 1950s suburbia, even worse than I remembered it. I had walked straight into an episode of *Leave it to Beaver*. I shook my head in disbelief; Toni's time machine had actually worked.

I heard a crash, coming from the kitchen. I ran back, pausing in the kitchen doorway. The back door was open. I looked around the room. There was no one there. Nothing seemed to be missing. I took a couple of cautious steps onto the linoleum floor. Then a couple more.

Everything seemed okay; the door probably wasn't properly closed in the first place, and a gust of wind had blown it open. It wouldn't be that unusual back in the '50s; we never used to lock the doors when I was a kid. I crossed the room and pulled the door shut. I realized I'd been holding my breath, and let it out.

There was a sudden high-pitched sound, and I nearly jumped a mile. I swung around, clutching my chest and cursing myself for being such an idiot. It was only the telephone.

The phone was mounted on the kitchen wall behind me, big and white, with an old-fashioned dial. I walked towards it, then decided to let the answering machine pick it up. I listened to it ringing and ringing, until it finally struck me they didn't have answering machines in the 1950s. I lifted the receiver. "Hello?"

"Joanna, what kept you so long? I was just about to hang up."

I knew that voice! "Toni? Oh thank God. How did you find me? How did you know what number to call?"

There was a long pause. "Joanna, are you all right?" "I'm stuck inside a 40-year-old copy of *Better Homes and Gardens*, and you're asking me if I'm all right?"

"Joanna, you sound a little strange. Is Bob there?" "Bob? Who the hell is Bob?"

"You're having one of your little turns again, aren't you? Now do me favour. I want you to sit down, or better yet, why don't you lie down? Take some good deep breaths, and try to relax." I could not believe the way she was talking to me, in this slow, soothing murmur, as if I was some kind of nutcase. She might as well

have been saying, "Now put that gun down, Joanna."

"You said you were going to send me two minutes forward, not 40 years back! I don't want to lie down and relax. I want to get out of here! And what do you mean, 'turns'? I do not have 'turns'!"

"I'll be there as soon as I can, okay? Just try and stay calm; I'm on my way." There was a click.

"Wait a minute, Toni! Toni?" There was no one there; she'd hung up. I leaned against the wall, rubbing my throbbing temples. Nothing made sense. If I was really in the 1950s, and I'd left Toni back in the '90s, then how could she phone me?

I heard a door open and slam shut, then a man's voice: "Honey, I'm home!"

I didn't know what to do. One half of me said I should walk right up to the man, introduce myself and calmly explain what I was doing in his house. The other half said I should hide. I heard footsteps, moving towards me. Heavy footsteps.

I decided to hide.

I tiptoed backwards into the pantry, pulling the door closed behind me, trying hard not to breathe. I turned around and saw a second metal egg.

I raised a hand to my mouth and bit it to keep myself from screaming. Where had that other egg come from? I bent down to examine it. Like mine, the digital display must have been broken; it still said 1994. But this egg was nearly twice as big, and looked a lot more comfortable. It even had a padded lining.

So that was how Toni found me; she'd followed me back into time. She'd had a second egg the whole time, and she'd obviously saved the better one for herself, the selfish bitch. But if she was here, in the same house, then why did she have to phone me? And where was she now?

I heard the man's voice again: "Joanna, sweetheart! Jo-aaanna-a!" Who was this guy and how did he know my name? "Joanna!" The voice was louder, he was getting closer. I heard footsteps moving across the kitchen floor. They stopped in front of the pantry door. I watched the doorknob turn. I tensed, unsure what to do.

"Who's there?" I said.

The voice sounded relieved. "Oh there you are! Didn't you hear me?" The door opened and I saw a middle-aged man with his mouth hanging open. "Oh my God, Joanna! What have you done?"

"Huh?"

"Your hair! What have you done to your hair? It's... it's purple!"

I couldn't believe it; this guy catches an intruder cowering in a closet, and his only reaction is to comment on her hair colour? And my hair isn't purple, by the way. The tint I use is called Flickering Flame, and the packet describes it as a deep burgundy red. The guy was so busy gawking at my hair, he didn't even notice the pair of metal ovals sitting in the middle of his pantry floor. I stepped out into the kitchen, pulling the pantry door closed behind me.

"You... you look positively indecent," the man went on, following me across the kitchen. "Look at you! Hair sticking up all over the place, like you haven't combed it in a week!" I positioned myself with my back to what I assumed was the cutlery drawer; I wanted to be within reach of something I could use as a weapon, just in case. "You look like

some kind of a . . . a . . . hussy! No wife of mine is going around looking like a hussy."

Wife? I thought, this man thinks I'm his wife?

"And where did you get those awful clothes? You look like some kind of a greasy mechanic!"

I was ready to punch the guy. First my hair, and now my clothes. There was nothing wrong with my clothes. I was wearing black designer jeans – strategically ripped at the knees – that cost me nearly \$500, and an understated, plain black tee-shirt that was a bargain at \$57.99.

Hussy? I thought. Greasy mechanic? What kind of bigoted moron uses words like that, and more important, what kind of moron mistakes a complete stranger for his wife?

The man looked normal enough – almost *too* normal. Forty-something, thinning hair, brown tinged with grey, bit of a paunch, dressed as though he just came home from an office.

"What if the neighbours saw you looking like that? And what about Katie?"

Katie. That rang a bell. "Ah," I said, remembering what the woman who looked like my mother had told me, "Katie's just a kid, isn't she?"

The man sighed and shook his head. "You're having hot flushes again, aren't you?" He touched my forehead as if he was checking for a fever. I slid my hand into the drawer behind me, grabbed hold of something I hoped was a knife, and waited to see what he would do next. But all he did was bend slightly forward, and stare open-mouthed at my feet. "You're wearing tennis shoes."

"Tennis shoes? I'll have you know these are Nikes!"

"Nikes?" he repeated, obviously confused. "But I thought you must be wearing heels..." His eyes moved upwards along my body, finally stopping at my eyes. "Joanna, I don't understand what's going on." Neither do I, I felt like saying, but I didn't get the chance because he carried straight on without a pause. "How could you possibly be taller?"

"Taller than who?"

"Than you were when I left you this morning. And you're thinner, too."

"Ha! Don't I wish." I took my hand out of the drawer. The guy didn't seem violent, just confused. And standing as close to him as I was, something about the guy was awfully familiar. I thought, I know him. If I could just see past the bald patch and the beer gut, and concentrate on the voice and the eyes, I knew it would come back to me. Then it hit me.

"Bobby!" I said, "Bobby Callahan! You took me to my senior prom."

His eyes went very wide. "Yes, dear," he said cautiously, "why are you bringing that up now?"

"I didn't recognize you at first; it's been a long time. It's gotta be 25 years. No, closer to 30. God, Bobby, I can't believe it! So what are you doing with yourself these days?" I reached out to shake his hand.

Bobby went ever so pale. "Joanna, darling, I think you should lie down."

A few minutes later, I was leaning against a stack of frilly pillows, embroidered with sayings like "I Love Mom" and "Home Is Where The Heart Is," on one of a pair of narrow twin beds, separated by a twee little night table with two separate

lamps and two individual wind-up alarm clocks, listening to Bobby clatter around in the kitchen below. He obviously wasn't used to cooking. My sudden appearance in the pantry apparently hadn't surprised him at all, but the fact that I hadn't made dinner seemed a shock beyond belief.

There was a loud crash, an "Ouch!" and a "Damn-it!," then footsteps moving back up the stairs. Bobby poked his head into the bedroom and said he was driving down to the Chinese. The last thing he told me was that I should try and get some sleep.

I jumped up the minute I heard the downstairs door close; I had no intention of hanging around until he came back. Then the wardrobe doors flew wide open, and a hand shoved me back onto the mattress.

For the second time in less than ten minutes, I found myself staring open-mouthed at someone with my face. This one was even dressed the same as me: the same jeans, same tee-shirt, same Nike sneakers. She had the same blunt haircut, the same shade of Flickering Flame. "Snap!" she said.

I raised my head and took a long, careful look at her. I noticed two slight differences between us: she had a blue canvas shoulder-bag draped across her arm, and a bad case of sunburn. The sunburn looked painful; the skin on her nose was peeling. "Who are you?" I said, "Is this your house?"

"Let me address your second question first. If this was my house, do you really think I would be hiding in the wardrobe? And as to your second: who do you think I am? I know it's a little difficult, so I'll give you a clue. Who do I look like?"

"Like me?"

"Bingo!" she said, "You got it in one." She flopped down on the other bed, stretching her arms high over her head. "God, my back is killing me!"

I swung my legs around and sat up, facing the other bed. "Let me get this straight," I said, "you're saying that you're me?"

She rolled onto her side, propping her head up with one arm. "That's one way of putting it. Though as far as I'm concerned, it's you that's me, not me that's you. A subtle distinction, I admit, but a significant one. To me, at least." There was something slightly different about her voice, too. It was a little deeper than mine, and a little harsher, as if she wanted to scream but was struggling to control herself. I guess the fact I didn't understand a word she was saying showed on my face, because she gave me a look of pure disgust. "Don't tell me you don't get it! Look, I'm an alternate you from a parallel universe, *capeche*?"

I couldn't believe what I had just heard. "A parallel universe?" I said. "Then how the hell did you get here?"

She got up and started looking through the various jars and bottles on the dresser. She opened one of the jars and spread some cream on her face. "How do you think I got here? The same way as you: inside that damn machine of Toni's. She made one in my universe as well, you know. A slightly better one, if you don't mind me saying so; I've seen yours down in the pantry, and it does look a bit poor."

I got up and stood by the window, watching wives in cotton dresses calling children and husbands in for dinner, and I knew this wasn't my universe, either. "So this is what the universe would have been like if I'd married Bobby Callahan."

"Oh get real!" the other Joanna said, disgusted. "Cultural and scientific stagnation is the basis of this type of universe, not who married Bobby Callahan."

"I don't understand how I got here. Toni's machine was supposed to send me forward in time, not sideways through space."

"That wasn't the machine's fault; it was that woman!"

"Woman? What woman?"

Her hands tightened into fists and her eyes became narrow slits. "The bitch that set the timer on Toni's machine to go backwards. Don't you see? As long as you only move forward, you remain in the same universe. But if you try to go backwards, even by a fraction of a second, you end up in a parallel world. They tell me this is to stop you murdering your grandmother so you were never born. Anyway, she set the timer backwards on purpose to get me out of the way, so she could take over my life in my universe."

"How do you know this?"

"Because she told me! I met her. I talked to her; she's living in my studio, and I tell you she's ruined it. Cleared out all my stuff, and covered every available space with pictures of flowers and kittens. Disgusting!"

I sank down onto the nearest bed. "What did she look like?"

"Like me with grey hair and a perm, dressed in my mother's clothes. She's an alternate me from one of these oppressive suburban worlds and now she's living it up in mine, spending my money, using my name and reputation to exhibit her nauseating little pictures at all the best galleries."

Suddenly it all made sense. The woman in my studio, talking about a switch. "I've met her, too. She slammed the capsule door down on my head and the next thing I knew I was here."

"Isn't that always the way?" said the other Joanna, nodding in sympathy.

"But I still don't understand. I mean, how did she get there in the first place?"

"I have a theory about that," said the other Joanna. "I think one of us – meaning one in a world where Toni has invented a time machine – pushed the wrong button and went back by accident, maybe by only a couple of seconds. She ended up in a world like this one, and came face to face with her parallel self, a housewife who always dreamed of being an artist but never did anything about it. The Joanna like us explained who she was and how she got there. The parallel Joanna saw her chance at wealth and fame and stole the machine, leaving the other one stranded. Maybe this happened more than once, and one of these parallel Joannas ended up in your world and one in mine."

"Well, Toni will know what to do when she gets here."

"Toni? Here?"

"Yeah, she phoned just a little while ago. She said she was on her way over."

"Oh, you mean the Toni that lives here. You can forget about any help from that direction. Not the right sort of Toni."

"The right sort?"

"I've met most of the Toni's you get in this sort of world. Sometimes she's a widow with a grown-up son



— usually in the army — sometimes she's a librarian, and if you're really lucky, she might be a high-school science teacher."

"You've been in other worlds like this one?"

"Sure. I've been in loads of 'em. I always arrive on the same date: the 29th of April, 1994, and the same time: just after 6 p.m. Because that's when the first switch took place — in one of this infinite number of universes. And eventually, I'm going to be there when that first switch is about to happen, and I'm going to stop it before it does, and then none of this will ever have happened."

"How will you stop it happening?"

She smiled, patting the canvas bag that still hung from her shoulder. "I have my methods."

So she was going to make everything all right again. I should have been thrilled, but I couldn't help feeling resentful; I didn't like being made to feel stupid. Maybe I hadn't grasped all the nuances of quantum theory, and instantly figured out what was going on and how to fix it, but I was still a famous artist, and very rich. Didn't that count for anything anymore?

"I'm having an affair with a 22-year-old male model," I said, leaning back on the bed. "We might even do a TV commercial together; they want him to play a gorgeous young man at an exhibition opening, and me to play myself. Then he picks up a bottle of..."

"Shut up!" she said.

"Ooh, hit a sore point, have I? In my world, I'm often seen with much younger men."

"Will you be quiet, there's somebody coming." She moved to one side of the window, flattening herself against the wall.

"Who is it?" I whispered, sitting up.

She raised a finger to her mouth to signal silence. I got up and headed for the window.

"Get back!" she hissed, then mouthed the words, "It's her."

I flattened myself against the wall on the other side of the window from her, and peered cautiously around the frame. A woman was walking towards the house, struggling with several large shopping bags. She had my face.

I looked across to the other Joanna, and saw her reach inside her canvas bag and take out a gun. She reached in again, and took out a silencer.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

She ignored me, raising the gun and taking aim at a defenceless woman. I couldn't stand by and let this happen; I picked up one of those twee little table lamps, and broke it over her head. The gun went off, missing the woman, but sending a bullet tearing through one of her shopping bags, spilling groceries all over the pavement. The Joanna that married her high school sweetheart stopped in her tracks, staring at the shredded bag. "Move!" I shouted, "she'll kill you!"

Unfortunately, the lamp didn't knock my other self out, it just made her mad. She swung around, blood streaming from several cuts on her scalp, and pointed the gun right at me. "You stupid bitch! I almost had her!"

"You were going to kill her!"

"I'll kill every one of them, until I get the right one. And no one's going to stop me."

I swung my right leg back and around, kicking the

gun from her hand just as it went off a second time, sending chunks of plaster flying from the wall beside her. I'd taken a course in Jiu-Jitsu about 15 years earlier, and this was the first time I'd ever used it. Of course she'd taken it, too, and two seconds later I was being thrown head first over her shoulder. I landed on the bedroom floor with a thud, and looked up to see my other self with a gun once more pointed at my head. She was smiling. "It isn't murder, you know. It's more like suicide by proxy."

I closed my eyes, and waited to die. There was a sound like an explosion, and I thought, is that it? Am I dead? Then I thought, that can't be it; I've got a lap full of glass.

I opened my eyes again, and saw a grey-haired woman with my face, holding what was left of the second table lamp. Bobby was right, she was about an inch or two shorter than me, and maybe five pounds heavier. She reached down and picked the gun up from the floor beside the other, unconscious, Joanna, and pointed it at me. "I think you owe me an explanation, don't you?"

I told her everything. She didn't believe me of course, until I showed her the two metal eggs in her pantry. "I'm a bit of an artist myself," she said. "One of my paintings was in an exhibition at the town hall. Maybe you'd like to have a look at some of my paintings later; they're up in the attic."

Then there was the problem of what to do with the other Joanna. When we went back up to the bedroom, she was starting to wake up. "Wha'?" she said, "What happened? Where am I?" Joanna Callahan and I stood on either side of the bed where we'd left her firmly tied down with a length of laundry-line. She looked from one side of the bed to the other. "Who are you guys supposed to be, the Bobbsey Twins?"

"Maybe I shouldn't have hit her so hard," said Joanna Callahan.

"I'd be dead if you hadn't," I reminded her.

"And so would I, if what you say is true," she sighed.

"What's going on?" said Joanna on the bed. "Who are you bozos?"

"Don't you know me?" I asked her.

"I never saw you in my life!"

"Do you know who you are?" Joanna Callahan asked her.

"Of course I do! I'm..." She frowned in concentration. "Oh shit."

"You stay with her," Joanna Callahan told me. "I'll just run and get my first-aid kit from the kitchen."

Before I could think to ask her what she had in a first-aid kit for amnesia, she was gone.

"Why don't I remember who I am?" asked Joanna on the bed.

"You've had a nasty crack on the head," I told her. "You fell down the stairs."

"Why am I all tied up?"

"To keep you from falling down again. Stay there, I'll be right back." I ran downstairs to the kitchen. The pantry door was open, and there was only one metal egg: the one I came in. Joanna Callahan had stolen the nicer one, with the padded lining. "Bitch!" I shouted, kicking the refrigerator.

Then Joanna upstairs started screaming for help.

She was making a hell of a racket; someone would call the police if she kept that up. I ran back up the stairs and found the bed tipped over onto its side, and Joanna wriggling around on the floor, trying to break loose. "Help!" she kept screaming, "Somebody help me!"

The front doorbell rang, and Joanna started screaming even louder. I stuffed a pillowcase down her mouth; that shut her up.

The doorbell kept ringing and I heard a woman's voice call my name. "Joanna! Open up! Are you okay?" Toni.

I grabbed a scarf out of the wardrobe to hide my Flickering Flame hair, then I ran to the window. "Toni!" I called down, faking a yawn. "Sorry, I must have been asleep."

A large, dark-haired woman wearing a brown cardigan sweater over a white blouse and brown skirt looked up from the street. She was wearing a pair of horn-rimmed glasses so thick they reminded me of Mister Magoo. She had "small town librarian" written all over her. Definitely not the right sort of Toni. "Joanna, are you all right? I thought I heard you screaming for help!" Joanna with the pillowcase in her mouth was trying to stand up with a bed tied to her back.

"I was having the worst nightmare! Hold on, I'll be right down." I ran down the stairs to the kitchen, then remembered something and ran back up again. The other Joanna was squirming around more than ever, making a lot of "Hmph!" and "MMMMMM!" sort of noises. I had to admire her determination. "Don't worry, Joanna, someone will untie you in a minute, I promise. But it won't be me." I put the gun back inside her blue canvas bag, and slung it over my shoulder.

I was halfway down the stairs when I heard Toni say, "Bob! Thank God you're home! There's something wrong with Joanna!" I reached the bottom just as his key turned in the lock. By the time they reached the bedroom, I was already in the pantry, squeezing myself back inside my uncomfortable, unpadded, metal egg. There was a lot of screaming and shouting going on upstairs. I heard Toni say she was calling the police, and then I heard heavy footsteps on the stairs.

I pulled the capsule door down over my head, and stared at a row of unlabelled buttons. I didn't have the slightest idea which one to press, so I pressed them all. I heard Toni's voice outside the capsule, saying, "What the..." and then I was ripped into a million pieces.

I pushed the door open and found myself staring up at a cactus. I was dizzy and more than a little nauseous; I waited for the cactus to stop spinning before I tried to sit up.

The moment I raised my head, the cactus started whirling again, faster than ever. I'd been broken down and reassembled for the third time in less than half an hour, and I didn't think my body could take a fourth; at least not yet. I pulled myself out of the capsule, fell to my knees, and vomited onto scorching hot dust. I crawled on all fours towards a clump of stunted bushes a few yards away, and rested in the tiny patch of shade they provided.

I don't know how long I was there; I think I must have fallen asleep. All I know is when I opened my

eyes again, a man was standing over me, his face a mixture of surprise and concern. "You all right?" he said. He had white hair down to his shoulders, a full white beard, a round face with chubby red cheeks, sparkling brown eyes, and an enormous belly. Santa Claus in blue jeans.

"No, I'm not all right. I feel like hell and I don't have the slightest idea where I am."

The man knelt down beside me. "My house is just the other side of that hill. Don't try to move; I'll carry you."

"No, it's okay. I can walk."

"Now you just lean on me," he said, helping me to my feet. "And don't you worry 'bout a thing, my old lady'll get you fixed up in no time. She'll be interested to see you. Real interested, I'll tell you that for nothing."

"What do you mean, interested?"

"You'll see. Believe you me, you'll see."

A pair of large dogs – one black, one brown – lunged forward to greet us as we approached a big adobe house painted in a myriad of colours. Each of the outside walls was like a mural, one side adorned with children running through a field, another with a cityscape of high-rise buildings lit by a reddish-gold setting sun, another a series of geometric shapes in primary colours. Behind the house was another building, a bright red barn almost as big as the house.

"Down Horace! Get down, Charlemagne! Down boys," the man said as the dogs leapt around us, barking excitedly. "this here lady doesn't feel too well." Then he raised his voice to a shout: "Jo-aannn-a!"

A woman appeared in the doorway. Wearing an ankle-length denim dress and a string of beads. Centre-parted, waist-length hair. Brown, streaked with grey. "Who you got there, Mark?"

"This lady's sick. Help me get her inside the house."

She ran forward, and slid an arm around my back. I closed my eyes; I didn't want to look at her face.

"Oh my God, Mark," she said.

"Yeah, I know. Ain't it the strangest thing?"

I woke up with a dreadful case of sunburn; my face and arms were bright red. I raised my head and saw the woman who had introduced herself as Joanna Hansen standing in the bedroom doorway, holding a mug of coffee. Her salt-and-pepper hair was tied back in a long ponytail, and she was wearing sandals and a cotton kimono. I looked around for my clothes, and didn't see them.

"I put them in the wash," she told me. "Borrow anything you want from that closet."

I pulled on a pair of jeans and a denim shirt, and went down to the kitchen. Mark was making hotcakes in honour of my visit. He was under the impression I was a long-lost cousin of Joanna's – at least that's what I'd told him the night before.

I'd known Mark Hansen back in 1967, when we were both art students in San Francisco. It was the Summer of Love, and he had long black hair and drove a VW van.

So there actually was a universe where I'd said yes when he asked me to go and live with him in the

desert. In his day, he was every bit as gorgeous as any 22-year-old male model. I wondered if there was a universe where he hadn't ended up looking like Father Christmas.

"I can't get over it," he said to Joanna, "all these years you had a cousin that's your spitting image and you never even knew she existed!"

"Yeah," said Joanna, eyeing me suspiciously. "I can't get over it, either."

I had told them both the most ridiculous pack of lies the night before, how I'd been on my way to visit Joanna and my rented car had broken down in the middle of the desert, and Mark, at least, seemed to believe it. I knew Joanna was waiting for the chance to get me alone; that's what I would have done.

Her chance came that afternoon, when Mark drove into town to get the shopping. We were sitting on the front step, sipping iced tea with slices of lemon, when she finally said it: "Isn't it time you told me the truth?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I don't have a cousin named Annabel." (Annabel was the first name that popped into my head the night before; I don't know why.) "Not even a long-lost one, like you claim to be. So who are you, and what were you doing out in the middle of nowhere, covered in plaster dust and broken glass? And how come you look so much like me? I'm warning you, I want the truth."

"You'll never believe it."

"Try me."

"Okay." I put down my glass of iced tea, and looked her right in the eye. "Do you ever wonder what your life would have been like if you'd made some different decisions along the way?"

"I haven't done acid since 1975," she said when I was finished. "Don't you think it's time for you to give it up, too?"

"I told you you'd never believe me. Maybe if we could contact Toni; she might be working on something similar in this world. Maybe she even got it right in this one."

Joanna Hansen shook her head. "Toni's dead. She died a long time ago," she said. "O.D.'d."

"What? She can't be dead!"

"Why not? If I'm supposed to believe you, then where you come from, my two kids were never even born!" Mark had shown me pictures of them the night before: two extremely dishy young men, one 25 years old, the other only 21. Then I remembered whose children they were.

"Oh yeah," I said, "Joanna Callahan apparently had some kids as well."

"And she just up and left them."

"More than once," I said. "I mean, more than one version of her left more than one version of them."

"How do you know I won't steal your machine, so I can be rich and famous in New York?"

"You don't know where I left it."

"You think I couldn't find it if I wanted to?" She laughed. "You ought to see your face, you've gone bright green. Well, you sit out here and worry yourself sick about whether I think being you is such an attractive prospect or not. Meanwhile, I've got work to do. Help yourself to anything you want from the fridge."

And then she left me, sitting alone on the step.

I was still there when Mark came back, two hours later. The dogs leapt out of the truck and ran towards me, barking and wagging their tails. A second later, I was on my back, having my face licked. "I've never known those dogs to take to someone as quick as they've taken to you," Mark said. "It's like they've known you all their lives."

"I noticed," I said, pushing them away.

"Where's Joanna?"

"She said she had some work to do."

"Then she'll be in her studio. Haven't you been in there yet?"

I shook my head.

"I thought she'd have given you the grand tour by now," he said. "Never mind. Help me get the groceries in, and I'll take you around."

A short while later, he led me around the back of the house to the large building I'd assumed was a barn. "Please don't think she's being rude, abandoning you like that. It's just that she's got this big show coming up in a couple of months, and she reckons she's nowhere near ready."

"Show? What kind of show?"

"Joanna's an artist, didn't she tell you?"

Of course, I thought, Mark and I had met in art school. So what was this Joanna's art like? More puppies and flowers? No, I thought, this one's an old hippie; I'll bet she weaves native-style blankets and sells them at craft fairs. Then Mark opened the door and my mouth dropped open.

This Joanna, like me, was a sculptor, and like me, she worked mostly in metal, and – this is a hard admission for me to make – she was every bit as good as me. Maybe even – this is an even harder admission – a little better.

I touched the twisted trunk of a metal tree with shiny flat leaves. Tiny men hung like fruit from its branches, each with a noose around his neck, each with a completely different and individual expression of pain or horror on his face. I wished I'd done it. Though in a way, I had.

"That one's already sold," Mark told me. "Some museum in Europe's offered her a couple million for it, and she's told 'em they can have it after the show."

At the sound of the words: "couple million," my heart almost did a flip-flop. It was all I could do not to clutch at my chest. I took a few deep breaths, counting to ten on each inhalation. "So where is this show of hers?" I asked him, trying to sound nonchalant.

"The Museum of Contemporary Art," he told me, adding, "That's in New York." As if I didn't know. And I'd been so worried this Joanna might want to trade places with me. "Didn't you see that TV show they did about her?" he asked me. "It was on prime time, coast to coast."

"I'm afraid I missed it."

We found her at the far end of the building, working on a rather familiar arrangement of six black and white television sets called: "Women on the Brink of a Cataclysm." She couldn't figure out why I thought that was funny.

Then she switched it on, and I saw that unlike mine, each of her screens showed a different woman doing a different repetitious task: one scrubbing a

floor, one doing dishes, one hanging laundry, one ironing shirts, one chopping vegetables, and one slashing her wrists, over and over again, in an endless loop. I wished I'd done mine like that – though of course I would, now.

There was nothing in Joanna Hansen's work I wouldn't be proud to call my own. If I couldn't get back to my own world – and I was beginning to doubt I ever would – then this one would suit me just fine. But making the switch might be difficult with Mark around; it would have to be done gradually.

I offered to help Joanna in her studio, and learned exactly where she kept everything. I got her to tell me her complete history under the pretext of trying to figure out just where our paths had diverged. I got Mark to tell me everything I'd need to know about him under the pretext of finding him a fascinating conversationalist, which he never was, even when we were students. I went through every photo album and every scrapbook, memorizing the details. I sat through slides and home movies. And I nagged Joanna about her hair, told her it made her look much older than she was, and reminded her of all the photographers that would be at her opening party in New York. "Just trim the ends a little," I told her. "Just cover the grey." I finally convinced her to let me cut it – a much quicker process than waiting for mine to grow – but I couldn't get her to colour it; I had to let myself go grey.

Within three weeks of my arrival, Joanna Hansen and I were indistinguishable.

One morning when Mark had driven into town, I told Joanna it was time for me to leave. I put on the clothes I had arrived in, slung the blue canvas bag with the gun in it over my shoulder, and thanked her for everything. Then, as though it were an afterthought, I asked her if she'd like to see the time machine.

I led her out into the desert, to the spot where Toni's metal egg sat hidden behind a cactus plant. "That's it," I said.

"It doesn't look very comfortable."

"Why don't you try it for yourself?" I said. "Get inside, see how it feels."

"No thanks."

I pointed the gun at her. "Get inside."

"You can't shoot me," she said.

"I can and I will if you don't do what I tell you."

"No, you can't. That gun isn't loaded; I took the bullets out ages ago."

I pointed the gun straight at her and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. "You bitch! You've been through my things!"

"Damn right. I did that the first night you turned up. You think I'm stupid or something? Now," she reached into one of the pockets in her denim skirt, "this gun is loaded." She was holding a little semi-automatic pistol. "As you were saying, Joanna, it's time you went back to your own world."

"Wait a minute," I said. "That was only a joke with the gun; I was never going to shoot you. What I was going to suggest is that we work together, sort of interchangeably. You could get twice as much done, and nobody would ever know."

"Good-bye, Joanna."

I got inside the machine, and the next thing I knew it was the 29th of April, 1994, a little after 6 p.m., and

I was back in Joanna Callahan's pantry, with swollen joints and a raging headache. As I struggled to pull myself up, I noticed another metal egg. This one not only had a padded interior, but a row of little flashing lights along the outside.

Someone was coming. I ran through the kitchen and out the back door. I crouched down outside the open kitchen window and listened to the phone ringing, then my voice: "Toni! Thank God! How did you find me? How did you know what number to call?"

I was about to go back inside and talk to this woman, when I heard a car pull into the front drive. I crept along the wall towards the front of the house and saw Bob Callahan put his key in the front door. "Honey! I'm home!"

He'd head straight back to the kitchen and find the other me cowering in the pantry, where I'd left my only method of escape. I had to get back inside the house; I reached the door just before it swung completely closed, and crept into the hallway. I heard voices coming from the kitchen, then I heard Bobby say, "I think you'd better lie down."

I ran upstairs to the bedroom. It was different than I remembered. There was only one bed, a double. I looked out the window and saw a long-haired guy in black leather tinkering with his motorcycle, watched by a bunch of kids in baggy clothes and baseball caps worn backwards. I breathed a sigh of relief. This was more like the 1994 I knew. But it still wasn't the right one; Bobby Callahan was leading one of the alternate me's up the stairs.

If this was my house, do you really think I'd be hiding in the wardrobe?" I said a short while later. "And as to your second question: who do I look like?"

"Like me, I guess. But older."

"Older?" I rushed over to the mirror. She was right. That grey hair put ten years on me, and my time in the desert hadn't done my complexion any good; I noticed several new lines around my eyes and mouth. I opened a jar of Joanna Callahan's moisturizer and spread it on my face.

"You look a lot like that woman who was in my studio," said the other Joanna – she was reaching for something inside a canvas bag just like mine, only hers was green. "Or at least I think it was my studio."

The downstairs door opened and slammed shut. Bobby couldn't be back already. I whispered to the other Joanna to stay where she was and keep quiet, then I tiptoed into the hall. A teenage girl with blonde hair, black roots, and thick black eyeliner, stomped up the stairs in a pair of platform boots. She had four or five earrings on each ear, and one through her right nostril. "Fuck off, Mom. Don't hassle me," she said, opening one of the other doors and slamming it behind her. So this was Katie. A moment later, the walls were vibrating with music by some band I'd never heard of.

I went downstairs and had another look at the house. There was a stack of videos next to the television, a microwave oven and food processor in the kitchen. All those "Bless This House" embroideries were gone, replaced by paintings of a grey-haired woman in varying states of depression. They weren't bad. I flipped one over and read the neatly-printed

words: "Number Three in a Series of Women on the Brink of a Cataclysm."

Well, Joanna, I thought, meaning both of them – the one I'd left upstairs, and the one who'd be home any minute now – you're on your own.

I opened the pantry door and sank down inside a padded machine with a row of lovely flashing lights.

The machine was a joy. I didn't feel a thing. No stiffness, no swelling, no dizziness. I opened the door and found myself back in the desert. April 29th, 1994, just after 6 p.m. New York time – the middle of a scorching afternoon out west.

I had been given a second chance. And this time I would do it right. I wouldn't let Mark see me; I'd get Joanna on her own and do the switch immediately. Then I'd have my exhibition, collect my millions, and give poor Mark an amicable divorce settlement – in this world, I could afford to be generous.

I climbed the little hill that hid the house from view and saw a shack. A dilapidated little house, like something out of *Ma and Pa Kettle*. I'm in the wrong place, I thought, I made a wrong turn somewhere out in the desert. Then two large dogs ran towards me, leaping and barking. One was black and one was brown. A man chased after them, shouting, "Charlemagne! Horace! Get back here!"

He looked at me and stopped dead in his tracks. "Joanna! Come outside!"

She appeared in the doorway, dressed in jeans and a transparent gauze top. "Wow!" she said.

They offered me a glass of home brew and a joint. Joanna told me she made native-style blankets and sold them at craft fairs.

I left after dinner.

I pushed the capsule door open, and breathed a huge sigh of relief. I was back in New York, surrounded by noise and dirt and traffic. I was home, though for some reason I wasn't in my studio. I had landed in an alley, surrounded by overflowing metal garbage cans and stacks of cardboard boxes.

I heard a rustling sound coming from one of the cardboard boxes – the closest one. Rats, I thought, cringing. I hate rats. I leaned forward to pull myself up, and came face to face with a pair of bloodshot eyes, staring through a little hole in the nearest box. My own eyes watered at the pungent, combined aromas of alcohol and stale perspiration.

"So you've come for me, at last."

Oh no, I thought. There was something horribly familiar about that voice. "Maybe," I said. "That depends on who you think I am."

"You're the angel of death, aren't you?"

"Your name isn't Joanna, by any chance?"

"You are the angel of death!" The box lid flew open and a woman rose before me. Toothless. Matted grey hair crawling with insects. Dressed in layer upon layer of dirty, ragged clothing; a winter coat over a man's shirt over a sweater over a dress over a pair of trousers. Eyes shining with madness, hands clutching a pair of heavily-laden shopping bags. "I'm ready. Take me to a better world than this one."

I slammed down the lid and pressed every button. I knew I must have arrived someplace else, but I couldn't bring myself to look. I just sat there,

curled up inside my padded metal egg, and shook.

How could I have ended up like that? Me, Joanna Krenski. Talented, attractive, intelligent. Whatever could have happened to bring me down to that level? Homeless. Penniless. Living in a box. And then I realized why I couldn't stop shaking.

I, Joanna Krenski – the Joanna Krenski – was in exactly the same position. Homeless and penniless, living inside a box – it's just that mine was made of metal instead of cardboard.

Joanna the bag lady had lost her mind; how long would it be before I lost mine? If I dared to think about it, I knew I was already on the way.

All my life I'd thought of myself as an essentially good person, but all I'd been was comfortable. The moment I realized I'd lost my place in my world, meaning my material security (not the so-called friends I'd chosen on the basis of what they could do for me, not the young lover I only regarded as a trophy), I'd been ready to lie, steal, and even kill. I had almost murdered the only alternate Joanna to treat me with any kindness. Now I thanked God the gun hadn't been loaded.

I felt disgusted and ashamed. I hated myself. Over and over again.

I didn't care where I had landed this time – the desert, the suburbs, my studio, a sewer – it didn't matter. I would stay curled inside my egg; I was never coming out again. And I wouldn't have come out, if someone else hadn't pulled the capsule door open.

"Please," a familiar woman's voice said in a whisper. "You've got to help me."

I lay back inside the egg, looking up at one of the Joanna Callahans. She was trying to squeeze into the machine with me. "Why should I help you with anything?" I said, wedging my legs across the opening. "Everything that's happened is your fault. If you didn't like your own world, you should have done something to change it from within, not try to steal someone else's."

"I know that now. I know," she whispered, leaning down over me, "and I'm sorry. Really I am. But you've got to move over. There's room in here for both of us. Please. She's killed the others, I saw her do it!"

So I had come full circle. One of me was killing off all the Joanna Callahans so the whole thing would never have happened. It didn't seem like such a bad idea to me now, and I said so.

"No, you don't understand! She's the one that started it! She's..." she looked up at something I couldn't see, a look of pure terror on her face. "Press the button," she said, slamming the lid down. "Save yourself!" Then I heard the most horrible scream: an animal sound that would haunt me forever, through every time and every universe.

I pushed the door open and raised my head in time to see a woman in a silver catsuit drag Joanna Callahan across the floor and through a giant hoop, by means of a grappling hook stuck into her back. As Joanna passed, howling, through the hoop, there was a blinding flash of light. She covered her eyes, shrieking and floundering helplessly. There was a final tug on the hook, and then she stopped screaming.

Joanna Callahan lay dead in a pool of blood at the feet of a woman with long black hair tied into a knot at the top of her head, a taut, muscular body, an

unlined face with implanted cheekbones out to there, and the cruellest eyes I have ever seen. Me with plastic surgery, a personal trainer, and an advanced state of psychosis. She smiled at me and licked her lips; I slammed the capsule door shut and carefully pressed what I hoped were the right buttons.

I didn't want to switch universes this time, I wanted to stay in this one. Whatever this me was doing, she had to be stopped.

I opened the capsule just a crack; it was dark. I opened it a little further, and listened.

Silence.

The digital display inside the capsule read: **29 April 1994, 11:59 p.m., E.S.T.** I had gone forward almost six hours. I stepped out of the capsule and examined my surroundings. I was in a large, square room with a bare concrete floor, furnished with a combination of electronic equipment and implements of torture.

The giant hoop leaned against one wall. It was about six and a half feet high, and three inches deep, lined with hundreds of tiny light bulbs. I still had no idea what it was.

I walked to the window and looked down at the twinkling lights of Manhattan. At least I assumed it was Manhattan; I didn't recognize any of the buildings. All I knew was I was very high up – at least 90 floors. I opened the only door in the room and peered down a long, dark hallway lined with doors. No lights on anywhere. It was a Friday night; she'd probably gone out.

I shoved the egg behind something that looked like an Iron Maiden with electrical cabling, and stepped out into the hall. Two Doberman Pinschers raced at me from the shadows, barking and growling. Stay calm, I told myself, dogs can smell fear. And then I remembered: smell. Joanna Hansen's dogs had taken to me because I smelled exactly like her. "Down boys," I said firmly, holding out my hand for them to sniff. They slunk away as if they were terrified.

I stood where I was, listening and waiting. Then I switched on the lights; if those dogs hadn't roused anyone, there was no one around to rouse.

I opened one door after another, peering into a seemingly endless succession of huge, opulently furnished rooms. This Joanna was seriously rich. Then I came to a door that had no visible lock or handle; on the wall beside it was a small glass plate showing the outline of a hand. I pressed my hand flat against it, a little sign flashed "palmprint cleared for access," the door slid silently open, and I stepped into an armory.

There were guns of every description, hundreds of them, lined up on racks inside huge glass cases. There was every type of sword, machete, axe, knife and razor, also behind glass. There were stacks of drawers marked "ammo." And, mounted on the wall: the grappling hook, Joanna Callahan's blood still visible on two of its iron claws.

To get into the weapons cases required a voiceprint identification. That was easy, all I had to do was say "open."

I don't know anything about guns, so I just took one that felt fairly light and easy to handle, a smallish rifle. I loaded both the rifle and the handgun I'd stolen



from that other Joanna back in the suburbs, and filled my canvas bag with extra ammunition.

I pushed the last door open, at the end of the hall, and felt around in the dark for the light switch. There was a slight humming sound, followed by a "whoosh," before the room came into view.

The walls, floor, and ceiling were velvet black; the only light came from inside the glass display cases scattered around the room. Each contained a moving, three-dimensional figure. They were better than any holograms I had ever seen; there was no angle at which they appeared to lose their definition, they were every bit as convincing from the back as they were from the front. And as I said before, they moved.

I stopped in front of one and watched a man pounding against the glass, his face contorted into a howl of hysteria. I could almost hear his screams, almost believe he was alive. I waved my hand in front of his face; he kept on pounding, his hands raw and bloody, his eyes glazed with desperation, staring at something I couldn't see. An engraved plate at the base of the display read: *Trapped*. J. Krenski, 1987.

I paused beside another case. Its occupant lunged towards me, holding a knife, and I leapt back, raising my rifle. I shook my head, cursing myself for being so jumpy, but the damn thing was incredibly realistic. The slobbering face pressed against the glass seemed to be leering directly at me. I looked at the title plate: *Slasher*.

In one display, a child was shooting up. In another, a hideous couple performed continuous sex, in another, an animal gnawed at its own foot, caught in a metal clamp above the title plate: *Trapped* 2.

There were rows and rows of cases, each more grotesque than the last. Finally I came to the arrangement of six glass cases, titled: *Women on the Brink of a Cataclysm: 6 Variations on the Theme of Suicide by Proxy*. Joanna Callahan was there, sliding across the floor with a grappling hook in her back. A version of Joanna Hansen was there, twitching at the end of a noose. A platinum blonde Joanna in a waitress uniform clutched at a knife in her chest. A brown-haired Joanna in a business suit appeared to be suffocating. One like me was in the process of being shot repeatedly, and one with black hair and fake cheekbones stood motionless, pointing a sub-machine gun directly at my chest. "Drop the rifle, Joanna," she said.

I dropped it.

"And the bag."

The bag hit the floor. "I don't get it," I said. "What's the point of all this?"

"The point?" She raised both eyebrows. "The point, my dear, is art! I brought you here to be part of my exhibition."

"But how?"

"That was amazingly easy. When Toni first came up with the idea for her time machine, she decided it was extremely likely that at least one or two parallel versions of herself might be working along the same lines, and that at least a few parallel versions of myself might have one or two fundamental character flaws. So we sent out one empty machine, pre-set to go backwards, and it took exactly ten seconds to round up half-a-dozen of you, who'd been bouncing back and forth between your various universes, doing

everything from ripping each other off to committing mass murder. And the minute you were all in one room, how you went for each other's throats! It was all Toni and I could do to keep you apart." She threw her head back and laughed. "I'd say every single one of you deserved her place here."

"You don't want me for that piece, though, do you?" I said. "I mean, you've already got one like me; I'd throw the visual balance off."

She shrugged. "You'll look different by the time I'm finished with you. Toni!"

Toni entered the room, pushing the giant hoop on a set of wheels. She had an American flag tattooed across her shaven head.

"What is that thing?" I asked.

"It's a three-dimensional camera," Joanna explained. "It photographs you from all directions at once."

The blinding light I'd seen was the flash going off. "So everything in here is just a photographic image, kind of like a 3-D movie."

"More or less, though we enhance it on a computer."

"So why did you have to kill them? Couldn't you just simulate the whole thing on a computer?"

She snorted in disgust. "That would be cheating."

I leaned against the 95th-floor lobby wall, watching Toni set up. There was nothing else I could do with Joanna pointing a machine-gun at me. As she'd already pointed out, there was no point in screaming because there was no one around to hear; this was an office building and no one else lived here but her, because she owned the entire block.

"Okay," Toni said. "It's all ready."

She had the elevator doors propped open. The 3-D hoop camera was wedged on its side inside the shaft, three floors down. The elevator car was stopped one floor above us.

"This is going to be such a brilliant image," Joanna said, motoring me towards the elevator shaft.

"How can you do this to me? I'm you, you stupid bitch! How can you do this to yourself?"

"No, dear," she said, shaking her head. "Only I am me. You are merely a variation on a theme. Now are you going to jump, or am I going to push you?"

I clung to the wall either side of the shaft with all my strength. "You're gonna have to push me."

I heard a horrible cackling laugh. That was Toni. Then I heard at least a dozen gunshots in rapid succession. I turned around and saw a bag lady holding an automatic assault rifle.

It turned out one of the other Joannas had landed in an alley and left her machine unattended for less than a minute. Joanna the bag lady turned out to be just as much a thief as the rest of us — thank God — and much better at staying out of sight, having had a lot more practice. She'd spent most of the last six hours under a stack of towels inside a cupboard, which she told me was a lot more space than she was used to.

We found her machine and the ones the others had arrived in, in a workshop behind the exhibition. They were each quite different — some weren't even egg-shaped at all. We used one of the larger ones to dispose of Joanna and Toni; we sent their bodies

three hundred years into the future.

"So what will you do now?" I asked my bag-lady self.

"Treat myself to a bath and a change of clothing," she said. "Then a long sleep, in a real bed, and breakfast in the kitchen in the morning. Maybe I'll just stay here permanently and stage an exhibition of my own. I'm a bit of an artist myself, you know. I mean, I am Joanna Krenski, and I seem to be extremely rich." She smiled and nudged me towards one of the eggs, at gunpoint.

I found myself back in the Callahans' pantry, pushing the door of my little padded capsule open just as Joanna Callahan herself was settling down into another egg directly beside me. "Don't do it," I told her. "On behalf of all your possible selves, I beg you not to do this." She ignored me.

I got up and walked through the house. The kitchen was shiny and white, the dining room decorated with watercolour paintings of daisies and the living-room walls covered in pastel sketches of guinea pigs and bunny rabbits.

I went upstairs and found one of me sitting on the edge of a narrow twin bed. Bobby was right – her hair was purple. And so was her canvas bag. "She's done it again," I said. "She's stolen your egg. Why are we all so horrible to each other? To ourselves? I don't understand it."

"What did you say?"

"I said she's stolen your egg. Though I can't say I'm surprised, I'm not surprised by anything any of us do any more."

She got up and ran downstairs. "Wait!" I said, running after her. By the time I reached the kitchen she was gone.

I stared at the empty pantry floor for a minute or two and then I sighed. "Well that's it, then," I said.

I went upstairs and put on a cotton dress, a little big around the waist and hips. "Toni!" I said when she arrived. "I'm sorry if I sounded a little strange on the phone..."

I don't check the pantry for eggs any more; if anyone was coming, they'd have been here by now.

Bob's finally getting used to the idea that if he wants a shirt ironed or the house vacuumed, he'll just have to do it himself. And the same goes for sex. I don't feel sorry for him any more; his wife walked out on him more than six months ago, leaving him with a stranger from another universe, and he still hasn't noticed.

The Katie in this world is just too sweet for words: little brown pigtailed, knee socks, freckles and pleated skirts. I preferred the other one.

Bob Junior just turned 28. He and his wife live a couple of blocks away, and he has a little construction business. He helped me convert the garage into a studio, then he gave me a complete set of tools – including a welding torch – as a "studio warming" present.

My other son, Harold, lives in New York, but comes to visit most weekends. He wants to be my manager; he says he loves what I'm doing, especially the metal tree with the little men hanging from it like fruit. He says he doesn't know where I get my ideas.

I have an appointment with one of the major gallery owners tomorrow. I'm taking my latest piece to show him: a headless Barbie doll stuck inside a fish tank.

Well, it worked the last time.

Molly Brown, who last appeared here with "Ruella in Love" (issue 76), has sold more than 20 short stories to various markets – most of them in the last 18 months or so. Now a freelance author and living in London, her first-ever job was shining shoes in a Chicago tavern.

FOR SALE

Interzone: The 2nd Anthology.

Paperback edition, New English Library.

1988. Stories by J.G. Ballard, Gregory Benford, Thomas M. Disch, Garry Kilworth, Paul J. McAuley, Kim Newman, Rachel Pollack, John Shirley & Bruce Sterling, Brian Stableford, Ian Watson and others – fine tales which the *Times* described as having "the quality of going right to the edge of ideas which can chill as well as warm." It's now officially out of print, but we have obtained some remainder copies for resale to *IZ* readers at just over half the original cover price – **£1.75** (including postage & packing; £2.75 overseas; \$5 USA).

Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard's Four-Dimensional Nightmare.

A monograph by David Pringle, Borgo Press, 1979. (Now back in stock.) Copies are available from *Interzone* at **£3.50** each (including postage & packing; £4.50 overseas; this offer not available to USA).

For either or both of these items, please send a cheque or an uncrossed postal order to: *Interzone*, 217 Preston Drive, Brighton BN1 6FL, UK. (US \$ bills accepted.)

POSITIVELY DANGEROUS TO STAND STILL



In addition to the 1987 Hugo Award for "Best Artist," Jim Burns has won seven British Science Fiction Association art awards. His large artworks at sf conventions are legendary. Born in Wales in 1948, Jim has been a professional sf illustrator since the early 1970s. Many of his book-cover paintings during the 1980s and 1990s have been for American publishers, and some of them were collected in the volume *Lightship* (Dragon's World, 1985). Unassuming and unnerveingly modest, Jim prefers to talk about his artwork rather than himself.

"This is one of the series of paintings for David Wingrove's *Chung Kuo* (Volume Three, *The White Mountain*), published by Dell in the United States. The British *Chung Kuo* series, from New English Library, is now being reissued with my American covers on. The character at the centre is not a pivotal or important character in the novel. What happened was that he committed ritual suicide on TV, so everyone could see it taking place 'live.' I just thought it was such a strong image that I had to show it. My approach is not to show the act itself, but the tension implicit in the moment that is about to happen beyond the painting. There is no actual violence, just the hint of it about to happen. He is contemplating the infinite with seconds to go before the deed. In the original text, he did not look quite so unhappy, I think he looked quite cheerful, but I thought: 'there is no way he can look cheerful in this situation!' So I tried to give him a sense of *gravitas*. This is a ritual act, filmed, and as a result he has to act well. Also I like people to look like real people with warts and all. *Chung Kuo* is particularly good for that: the novels are peopled with all manner of aberrant and altered forms. The requirement so often is to present beautiful people, superheroes or perfect physical specimens.

"I enjoyed the challenge of the *Chung Kuo* series. It was very different trying to give the series of paintings a distinctly Chinese ambience. We are told that in the Chinese future where the novels are set, the Chinese are not very good at technology – they are still using American hardware. So this spacecraft looks distinctly like the modern-day Shuttle. Also we are talking about the turn of the 22nd century, the rela-

tively near future, and technology cannot evolve into the most arcane and bizarre shapes imaginable in such a short time. Actually, I would imagine the people responsible for the design of the spacecraft of the future are probably already considering the shape and the look of the machines of 50 years from now. They are already sketched out.

"I always try to make my pictures relevant to the period. Of course, if you are talking about the remote future, your imagination can run away with itself. Near-future illustrations are that much harder because your imagination has to be kept in some sort of check. To that extent, I liked the rigid discipline of the Chinese future, not diverting from it and always trying to keep that quality of 'Chinese' without it looking traditionally Chinese... See the dragons – they are not strictly Chinese dragons. There is a slight ambiguity: are they traditional Chinese dragons or are they guardian temple lions? Or both? Or something else?"

"I use a full range of brushes of various widths – and the airbrush. You can draw with an airbrush: for instance the folds in the clothes, the details on the dragon. I just pick up the airbrush and get going. It's as if I were using a pencil by remote control, detached from the surface.

"The modern airbrush is an extraordinarily refined tool. I have got a relatively simple model called a Badger 150. A lot of people laugh at it because it is the basic airbrush for modellers, those crazy people who stick plastic airplane kits together and then want to get a nice airbrushed camouflage effect. It comes with a range of nozzles, broad through medium to very fine. Using the finer ones, you can get down to the most extraordinary detail, but it requires experience. The skill is not something you acquire the moment you pick it up, it is just not that easy. The other thing about the airbrush is the need for absolute cleanliness. You spend as much time cleaning it as using it, and you also need patience – which I suppose I have got. The thing can be a temperamental beast at times. I remember once committing an act of extreme violence on a very expensive DeVillbis Aerograph Super 63 airbrush. I had finally had enough of this damnable



Jim Burns today...

Artist Jim Burns talks to Sally-Ann Melia about his work

gadget. It refused to work at all and I just threw it, like a dagger, straight into the table top. It damaged the table and completely wrecked the airbrush. One hundred and seventy quid of airbrush gone in sheer temper! You grow out of that as you get a little older.

"To return to this *Chung Kuo* picture: the main theme is symmetry; I am drawn to symmetry, and here I have made a very deliberate exercise of it. There is a mirror image, both in the horizontal and the vertical. To be honest though, the reflection was added as a last minute afterthought. Reflections depend on the purity of the surface; most reflective surfaces have some kind of disruption or ripple. Here I basically traced and inverted the image, but I had to be aware of the relationship between the reflected buildings in the distance and the reflections of people and statues in the foreground. Whereas the character's head is actually shown against the small roof, the roof's reflection is in line with the character's legs and the head is not reflected at all. I couldn't just take

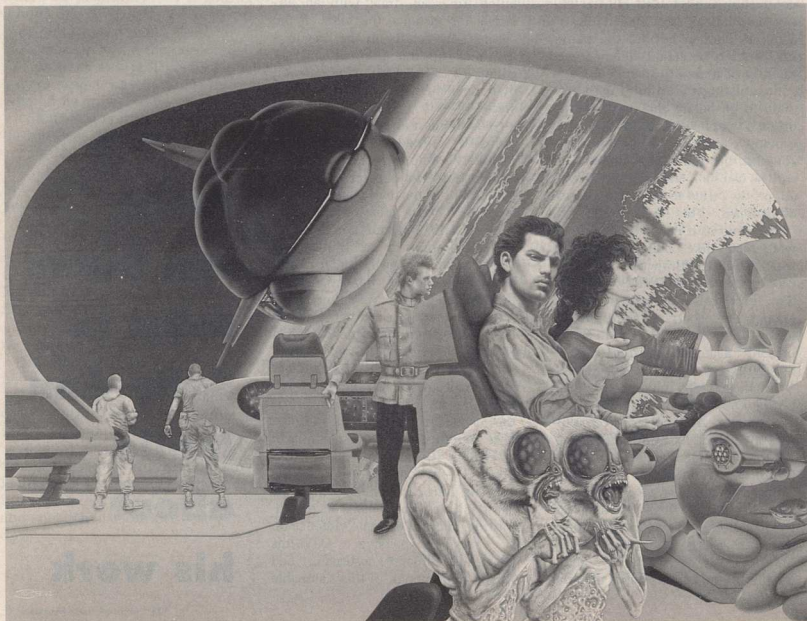
the whole thing and invert, because then it would look crazy, so I had to work it out a little. Not quite scientific principles, but the illusion of. At the same time, certain compressions occur. It's difficult but fun, almost an intellectual challenge. I like setting myself little challenges.

"I think I am a good observer. I have a visually retentive memory. I am very forgetful about a lot of things, but not the way things look or appear. I have a good natural sense of perspective as well. A lot of people have a lot of trouble creating perspectives. Others think that to make them convincing you have to construct them along technical-drawing lines, with vanishing points and all the rest of it. I just use my eye. Oh, and a big mirror — I am forever holding up my paintings in front of mirrors to check how they work in reverse. Also, it's amazing the degree of astigmatism (a slight visual impairment) that can be revealed by checking one's illustrations in reverse. It's an important corrective device, the old mirror trick! Of

course, it would not matter so much with this painting because it has a totally symmetrical theme."

"This next painting is one of my favourites at the moment. This is *Phoenix In Flight*, volume one of *Exordium* by Dave Trowbridge and Sherwood Smith. This is the kind of painting I most enjoy tackling. It is pure science fiction. It gives me an opportunity to develop hardware, alien life-forms, exotic surroundings and planetary backdrops, all in one painting. From the response of people at sf convention art-shows, it seems to be a favourite with the fans. People seem drawn to aliens — if they are intelligently depicted.

"The creatures are called 'Eya.' As I remember the plot-line, they are psychic killers, they have the ability to kill with a telepathic beam. I seem to remember these eyes, described as 'faceted,' being capable of focusing this power. Writers can get away with blue murder. Without necessarily visualizing them in the mind's eye, the writer can come up with all



sorts of bizarre physical properties and toss them into the mix of their aliens. I have to feature every detail described and make them work as a living entities. The authors mentioned huge faceted eyes, blue gums and tongue, constantly open mouths with little teeth. The aliens mimic each other closely all the time, which gives them a spooky feel. They seem to be telepathically united in every movement of their bodies. They are small, yet I wanted to make them look menacing. Look at the way they are holding their hands. It may be perfectly natural to those aliens, but for us it looks like someone in distress. A human gesture, but obviously in a different context. It is those little subtle touches, going into the minutiae, which I find very rewarding, rather than the obvious sf clichés of exploding spacecraft and the more dramatic 'alien' aliens. It is not just me who is interested in these little details, these tinier and tinier areas with yet more to discover. No, many people respond to it. People seem to like it and enjoy it."

From the tiny hairs on these creatures' arms to an incredibly smooth floor: "I am interested in the way textures and colours butt up against each other: the dramatic contrast of these colours, the turquoise colour-scheme of the bridge of the spacecraft, the subtleties of the flesh tone of the woman and a near-identical planetary tone behind it. I try for areas of great contrast, and areas of great subtlety within a single image. I am always trying to change and evolve, just to maintain my own interest. I would be most unhappy with constantly churning out variations of the same image."

And touch-screen computers? "I look at contemporary design and the way console-design, computer-design, and instrument-design move forward. I find many arcane and bizarre forms in use around us. There are fashions too, trends that have very little to do with function. It is just what people are comfortable living with. At the moment, the feeling is that objects must have a soft roundness to them. If you look at cars, for instance, they are going through a very soft, bulbous, almost organic look, which I like, and is very much in contrast with the hard-edge look of a few years ago. The same is true of computer consoles and flight-deck equipment. It is all



rounded these days, as opposed to those sharp edges of the recent past. It will change again and go back to being sharp edges, at some point.

"Actually, I think the colour is what seems so bizarre in this image. I mean no-one would actually design a flight deck so that everything was turquoise blue! For the planet in the background, I used as reference an image taken from the Shuttle on one of its orbits, as it is an earth-like planet in the book. It is a very dramatic shot of the sun reflecting off the sea. So the orange is the sun's reflection, the navy blue is the clouds casting long vertical shadows. I don't know physically or meteorologically how that operates: it's just a wonderful photograph!

"I accumulate all sorts of reference, I have masses of this kind of stuff. It is essential to any illustrator to have around him reference of all sorts. Any particular painting is a melange of sources. There are photographic references, one's own imagination and even bits of stuff hanging around the house. I think I just squirrel away images all the time, then bring them forth in a picture, mutated and modified."

Some of the original paintings from *Planet Story*, the illustrated book Jim Burns produced in collaboration with Harry Harrison in 1979, were on sale at 'Helicon,' the 1993

European SF convention, in Jersey. "I have fond memories associated with *Planet Story*: getting to know Harry Harrison was one! It was the most useful single experiment I ever undertook. I was given the opportunity in the space of two years to produce all the colour plates for a book. This was a very different way of working for me. I was paid on a regular monthly basis against royalties and invited to experiment throughout the two years with each painting. It advanced my technique by leaps and bounds. Unfortunately just as the book was published, Pierrot Publishing went bust. So the book is now scarce and collectable.

"As the years go by, I tend to look at the pictures with a much more jaundiced eye. They look... well, not terribly good. I mean, one's technique improves. All I can see are the bad bits, the faults, that which I would do differently now – which would be most of it! I will keep one painting back: 'The U.S.E. Execrable.' It is the first painting in *Planet Story*, the large spacecraft right at the beginning, and also the first I completed for the book. In subsequent years, in films like *Star Wars* and *Alien*, there was an opening shot in both of a hulking, great spacecraft looming overhead: the ship drops down with the appropriate thunder and noise. I am sure those films both appeared after I had painted 'U.S.E.

Execrable.' I am not saying there is any connection – perhaps I was tuning in on some contemporary wave-length!

"*Planet Story* is never likely to be republished. It has outlived its usefulness. My personal inclination is always to move on to something new. I don't want there to be a sudden interest in something I was doing 15 years ago. Let's move on to the next book and another opportunity to advance my technique. You occasionally need such an injection of new energy – although I have not (I hope!) reached any kind of 'plateau of achievement.' I always want to change something, for instance the style or some element of technique. Perhaps I will abandon the airbrush. Yes, I can see that happening one day. Many illustrators would throw up their hands in horror at the thought of a professional sf illustrator abandoning the airbrush. It supposedly comes with the job, a sort of permanent appendage, grafted to your hand.

"Most of my work is book covers, and the process starts when I am sent the manuscript, a series of photocopied sheets bundled together with 'Artist's Copy' stamped on the front. It means I am one of the first people to read the book, after the editors, which I always think is a bit of a privilege. I read the manuscript and come up with an appropriate sketch based on some narrative element, or maybe a series of narrative elements cobbled together to make a pictorial whole. Sometimes it is a pencil sketch, sometimes I use black-and-white marker-type pens. Occasionally I do a full-colour sketch, maybe a rough acrylic painting. It depends what the client asks for. American clients do seem to want something a little more finished. The more one works with a particular client, the more they trust you and accept fairly abbreviated sketches. I prefer abbreviated sketches because it means less time. At the same time, it is quite nice to have finished colour roughs. They themselves become collectable and saleable commodities. Rather useful to take to sf conventions because obviously I don't ask a lot of money for a sketch. I put them into the auction and occasionally they do quite well. I'm a mercenary so-and-so at heart!

"So the process starts with my reading the manuscript, noting down all sorts of possible visuals and little points of interest. I list down the page

number and the ideas. The time this takes varies enormously. Occasionally there are very bad books, which I will labour through, but a good book is a delight. Some writers are so visual themselves. For me reading is a very visual experience. When I read a book, I see it very much like a film unfolding frame by frame. I freeze-frame elements in my mind, then get down to the serious business of trying to decide which elements to incorporate in the sketch. Reading the MS takes a couple of days, I suppose. A sketch can be completed in a couple of hours, or it can take me a couple of days; there is neither rhyme nor reason to it. I like to get it right first time; I don't want a sketch to-ing and fro-ing between myself and the publishers. I send the sketch to the publisher, always hopeful of automatic approval.

"Roughs get approved (usually), then returned to me via my agent, and I set to work on the painting. In general, I work on Gessoed hard-board. I add about five coats of acrylic Gesso onto a piece of hard-board, which I then sand down with an electric sander to give it a very smooth surface. In fact there is a sort of micro-bite: you need a hint of a bite for the paint to 'take' adequately. I just sketch the thing out and get stuck into the painting. The painting itself will take anything from three days up to three weeks. I can never tell at the beginning how long a painting is going to take. Sometimes the most complex pieces of work can be done within a week, a week and a half. Others pieces seem simple, yet go on and on and on... I am very undisciplined in that respect. I am not a nine-to-five person. I start late in the day. I get up and chew the fat with my wife, Sue, until mid-morning, then saunter into my studio, after many cups of coffee, and slowly get going. I tend to work up to a bit of a peak as the day goes on. During the afternoon and the evening, I feel a lot more in tune with the process. I often work on until midnight, and often into the small hours as well. I still find myself on occasions, because of the demands of deadlines and scheduling, working all night to finish a piece of work, something I vowed I would stop doing about 15 years ago! I haven't stopped, I still do it and I suffer too: as you get older, it gets very much harder to do all-night sessions.

"My interest in science fiction



... and Jim Burns in 1966

remains as strong as ever. As the literary form evolves and heads down new, ever-stranger roads it is my concern to develop in my own artwork similar new kinds of imagery reflecting this evolution. Whilst everyone who paints has to a greater or lesser degree an identifiable style, I've always made it my business not to get rooted in a bunch of personal stylistic clichés – which is what dates the work of so many genre artists. I don't like the notion of the "plateau of achievement." For a shifting area of visual expression like sf art, it is positively dangerous to stand still. If one wants the work to keep coming, one has to continue to evolve, change, explore and develop. Constantly experiment. I manage this within the confines, if that is what they are, of an essentially realistic style (this I know is the kind of sf imagery that the fans out there like the best; certainly my publishing clients expect it of me). The areas for experiment are in the suggestion of bizarre alien forms – the products of different mentalities, strange textures, suggestive of outrageous building and construction materials, weird mechanicals, arcane science, unlikely, impossible biological forms, unknown landscapes, crazy unconventional use of colour. Otherness. The possibilities within the photo-real image are endless, but the imposition of the discipline of having to work within the severe parameters of realism are, to me, in the end liberating and extremely stimulating."

Golden Swan

Leigh Kennedy

“Look, a child,” a man’s voice said, somewhere towards the front of the coach.

I could sense many people shifting in their seats. Lucky me, I was sitting by a window on the platform side as the train pulled in. Waiting passengers, railway employees with carts and trolleys busily criss-crossed on the concrete. Standing tensely still, a woman and little girl watched us with as much interest as we watched them.

The child clutched her mother’s coat, even though linked to the woman with a soft cuff. Her pale hair, enormous eyes, broad forehead, skinny legs and tiny shoes gave me a pang of longing; I wanted to cuddle her.

Arguments about protection versus exposure flashed through my mind reflexively but I would do precisely what this mother was doing. Had I been so lucky to have had a child, I would have shown him or her the world within the limits of safety. Give the little one an interesting childhood, like the one I had nearly 300 years ago.

Our train juddered to life again; the woman and child remained waiting on the platform. Disappointed, I daydreamed what it might have been like if the child had boarded. In the 20 minutes or so before the train reached the stop where I was to go to the prison, I might have spoken to her.

“I’m Syble Hollowbee.” I would have said. Maybe her eyes would have come alive to me, maybe not. More likely, her mother would recognize me. The child might have huddled away in terror at a stranger speaking to her.

I sat back, tried to relax. I miss them, miss the world with children everywhere, a part of living. But it is wrong to treasure youth as they used to in the old days, isn’t it? We should treasure our long lives instead.

Treasuring isn’t the first thing one feels in the Humble Between stage which I have landed in again – this time sticking. I just don’t know what to do with myself.

Recently, I read that the older people get the less interested they are in what they do all day. The social authorities reckon that when people start reaching the 500-plus age bracket there will be fierce competition for the non-demanding Humble Between menial jobs.

I’m not ready to slop and scrub the rest of my life! After climbing up one of the longest waiting lists on

the jobs register, I was most recently a veterinarian for 15 years. I’ve also been an art historian, nutritional chemist, copyeditor for a military publisher, optical engineer and a designer for a jewellery company.

But my best career was as a holographic producer and adventure-playground entrepreneur: Syble Hollowbee, tamer of Martian Giraffes, Ringleader of the Interplanetary Circus.

Yes, remember now? Syble Hollowbee! I haven’t changed much in 250 years, have I?

When the train stopped at the prison station, I stepped out and immediately started looking for other children. Sometimes when you see one, you see others, then none again for months.

No children. But I noticed a group of five people – two women and three men – horribly wrinkled, their flesh sagging under their chins, hands spotted and trembling, hair so thin that you could see the sunburnt pink of their scalps through the wisps of white. They stood in round-shouldered, stooped postures as if they ached and were reluctant to move. Four of them wore coats even though it was a warmish day; the blue sky was patchy with high clouds and the breeze light and mild, smelling of late spring grass and wood.

About 20 passengers had alighted, too, as the prison wasn’t the only business of the area. I noticed people stare at the wrinklies, then glance away as if before catching an eye. I can’t help my old response of looking at spectators rather than spectacle. As one of the horrible men offered her a paper, one woman’s face showed a disgust as if she had discovered pigeon droppings on her sleeve.

I approached, curious about the half-sheets of paper they were handing out. One of the women studied my face as if trying to place a memory on me. She handed me her sheet.

It was titled, “What is Life?” and had two short paragraphs about natural life spans and a contact number at the bottom.

I smiled to myself, remembering one of our Circus natural-history slogans which answered this very question. The routine had been one of my first projects, an introduction which I still sometimes watch with pleasure.

What is Life? (The art director had made the title letters from plant stalks and animal legs.)

Two grey-brown lumps lying on the ground. A little girl in a ruffled dress squats down, prods them. She picks up one which is a stone. She picks up the other and finds herself face-to-face with a snail who has been hiding.

"This one's alive!" the little girl says.

"Of course I am," the snail snaps indignantly. "Put me down, please. I'm getting dizzy from you shaking me so."

"I thought you were a stone," she says apologetically, putting him down again. "You looked like a stone."

The snail sniffed. "You could have taken the trouble to look, couldn't you? I'm not a stone. I have baby snails—" The snail rears up and turns its head this way and that, searching for her little ones. "— somewhere. I eat when I can. I grow and grow. And I've made this beautiful house for myself."

"Oh, OK," says the little girl. She recites, "Reproduction, metabolism, growth and adaptation. But why are you sitting on this dry old road?"

"I'm going to Syble Hollowbee's Circus!"

Unable to resist answering the big question, I said to the woman, "Reproduction, metabolism, growth and adaptation."

"Yes!" she said, pleased as an auntie. "You watched your holos when young, didn't you? Well, you think about that first one, which we've had to give up in modern days. You think about it."

There was something in her watery eyes that made me understand the ancient appeal of grandmothers. Was it a tear from the breeze in her tired eyes or was it a sign of great feeling as she spoke? Eyes like drops of liquid in the sand.

I laughed a bit nervously, feeling caught out somehow. Reproduction. That means children and I do miss having children in the world.

Only later did I realize that the group of unincarcerated lifers were connected to my new job as a prison attendant in the women's wing. This was an assigned job, not requested, as I had become stuck in the Humble Between stage until I arranged for study and another career.

As Class I Educable, all I had to do was to ask for university status again but that was easier for me to do on paper than in spirit. All my early ambitions had been fulfilled by things I had already done. Nothing especially appealed to me. My father, presently an occupations lawyer, drives me mad with suggestions that all sound equally adequate but not irresistible.

A spell of ordinary work seems the best way to work it out.

My new boss showed me around the prison. Rather than the hard walls of old, this place seemed to enclose its inmate by an elastic resilience. It was quiet, carpeted, curtained, crammed with books and satellite channels and desk links to the Open University. Gentler sports entertained the players and spectators in afternoon sessions: ping pong, snooker, swimming, radio ball.

At the end of a long corridor were two rooms on either side where lived two women who had committed crimes so awful that they had been locked away and denied anti-aging treatment. One was still relatively hale; she gave me a hostile look as I was given the tour and introduced.

The other was now dying, bed-ridden and weak. I was to be her attendant.

Being a veterinarian had prepared me somewhat for this. Animals had to be supremely special to receive anti-aging injections which were licensed by local authorities. So I had treated senility, arthritis, heart disease, strokes in everything from horses to white rats.

I had seen, and occasionally caused, death.

But Eva was not a cat or a cow. What's more, she knew me. I sat down on the wooden chair beside her bed to introduce myself. As soon as I said my name the weary, distant eyes in the wrinkled face brightened.

"Syble Hollowbee!" she said in her whisper-hoarse voice. "The one with the Martian Giraffes?"

"Yes," I laughed.

Eva's smile was like an earthquake in an eroded desert—all those cracks and gullies of her skin shifted for the opening of the deep hole of her mouth. "What irony. I loved you when I was a child," she said. The last word was faint as she ran out of breath.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"One hundred and twenty-seven."

"Oh." She was not even half my age, so young!

She closed her eyes, perhaps to rest. I wished that I had a camera with me. If only I could holo that crumpled face and the shock of wiry hair on the pillow. It wouldn't have mattered whether it was a monochrome or colour, so bleached and grey it was. Her face was not human; it was an abstract landscape.

She spoke again, eyes opened, two tiny sparks of life. "I became a zoologist because I loved your animals so much," she said.

Then her name rang familiar; I had read some of her papers while studying animal science years ago. She had worked on infancy syndrome and had expressed unique views on phylogeny recapitulating ontogeny. But I couldn't remember her proposals in detail.

She whispered, "Why is a Fox Not a Plant?"

Another of my holo circuses started with that sequence. Yes, that had been a good one, if a bit didactic. Children liked it and a science teacher told me that it had done wonders for their basic understanding of classification. How did it go? A fox. A fox, planted in the ground.

Why is a fox not a plant?

Feet planted firmly in the rich brown soil, a fox sways slightly in a spring breeze. His tail and arms are stretched outward like leaves gathering sunlight. His face is an upturned blossom, basking.

"Are you a plant or an animal, Fox?"

Fox opens his eyes. "I don't know. What's an animal?"

"An animal reacts to his environment," says the narrating voice.

An apple falls on Fox's head. He slowly looks up to the nearby apple tree, rubbing his head.

"And soft body tissue."

Another apple, then another and then three in quick succession fall on Fox. He rubs his shoulders and arms where he's been hit.

"Plants can grow to many sizes depending on whether they are in good condition or not. But animals tend to grow to definite, regular sizes."

A tiny fox-like creature scuttles near. The fox bends

down and sniffs in amazement. The creature throws off the fox costume. It is an ant, giggling. Then a giant fox, as big as an elephant rolls into view. The ant plucks a thorn from his pocket and pokes the giant fox. It explodes like a balloon.

Then another fox walks past. She smiles at him and continues swishing her fluffy tail. Our fox watches, furiously trying to pop his legs out of the ground.

"An animal requires complex foods."

As a rabbit hops by in the opposite direction, Fox pulls his feet out of the ground with a loud creaking sound. At first, he can't decide between the other fox and the rabbit. "Work, then play," he says, and rushes after the rabbit. There is no mistaking him for a plant now.

"And an animal has locomotion."

I smiled fondly with the memory of those days. I had loved the work even though it was difficult, exhausting and consumed my life at the time.

"And that is also why I am dying," Eva said very gently. "I loved my work and can't imagine doing anything else. I also believe in the natural order. What irony that you should be here now."

I saw beyond the physical age as passion transformed Eva's face. Her eyebrows furrowed, the darkness of blood crept into the grey.

"I loved you," Eva said, "and felt betrayed when you stopped doing the circus and became a jewellery designer. Jewellery!" she said distastefully.

"It was the law! I wasn't allowed to do the same job any longer."

"Pah," Eva said. "You didn't have half the guts we children thought you did."

Eva ended our first meeting by rolling over and turning her back on me.

I was stunned, and walked out into the hallway which was quiet at that moment to escape her scorn. Betrayed them? I would still love to have my Martian Giraffes, my circus, my laughing children. But it's the law. That's the difference between us. The system might not be perfect, but it is the system of our society. In the old days, the young had to wait for the old to die. Now we just shuffle each other around; everyone gets a chance.

I could almost hear Eva's challenge: a chance at what, and why?

I was restless at home that evening, wandering through my house, now looking at things that I brush past daily. *Objets de la vie*: a doll from my lover in the optical engineering period, a piece of driftwood that I took from the Indian Ocean on a glorious voyage with my father, a picture painted by my mother when she was 200, a wall of holograms – most taken by me – of people I have known and loved, many far into other lives now.

Oh, my treasured holograms of the children, crowded around me and my Circus, adoring me. Many children taking in their new world and unable to stand still. Jostling, peering, laughing, pointing, nudging, waving, craning, jumping. Watching their faces and gestures as I now, so much later in everyone's lives, rocked side to side. I could almost hear their cheery, chirping voices. In my holo-circus days children congregated; it wasn't yet too dangerous for them to be exposed to thieves, perverts and

exploiters. And there were many more children then.

How I loved them! Fresh, fresh wind upon my life.

I ran some of my holo-cines on the small-scale platform, wondering if any of the dark-eyed girls was Eva. Now only barely past a century and dying of old age... I searched for a mystical, knowing face, feeling that she would emerge from the crowd. But none looked like Eva to me.

She had irritated me. How dare she suggest I betrayed these boys and girls! "We are not our jobs," as the saying goes.

Still, I know that those circus years were my happiest. Everything had been right, worthwhile, fun, good, satisfying for me and others.

But, no, I won't let that virtuous old crank get to me. Virtuous! What am I saying? She committed acts of terrorism against the state.

Besides, I've got years and years to find something worthwhile to do again.

In the following days, a man and a woman, two of the old people I had seen on the station platform, came to see Eva. They were less hideous than I had remembered but my perception may have been changed by looking at Eva, by far the most decrepit of them all. The two of them reminded me of bread pudding; complexion the colour of stale white bread with damp sultana eyes and cinnamon liver spots on their skin. Their hair appeared as a terrible patchy white mould which sprang out of their scalps.

They seemed to revere Eva, staying only briefly, and leaving with smiles turned inward like those leaving shrines. I overheard the man say, "She's lovely. She's so naturally lovely."

The woman sighed in a resigned way and said, "She'll bring on a child soon."

I hadn't heard that euphemism for death for a long time. It sounded silly at first, folksy, but it did sum up what these crippled and dried-up people stood for – bringing on children to renew the world.

"Syble," Eva said to me later that day as I wiped down her overbed table, "why are you doing this job? Shouldn't you be doing something in the intellectual category?"

I sat down beside her. "Just resting, I suppose." I knew her well enough now that it was easier to tease a bit. "Don't you like me plumping your pillow?"

"You don't know what to do with yourself, do you?"

She made me a bit uneasy with her accusatory tone, as if my present indecision was evidence that she was right somehow. After having made a resolution that I wouldn't let her irritate me again as she had the first day, I tried to be light. "At the moment, all the jobs in the careers-available list sound like refrigeration engineer."

She smiled vaguely. Sometimes I could see that the thread between this world and Eva's was very thin and humour didn't travel along that filament very well. "Why don't you ask for your holo-circus job back again? I'm sure your holograms could be updated now."

"Yes, well... You think they're old-fashioned now, too, do you?" I said curtly. It was true that they weren't watched a great deal now. Besides the scarcity of a natural audience, my beloved circus had a

certain style which was too plain these days.

"Oh, I didn't mean..."

I laughed, not too hollowly. "That's all right, Eva. The truth is that I did ask about 50 years ago and they tactfully said 'never again.' Had my go."

I stood and fussed about the room, pouring her juice, pulling the curtain so that the afternoon sun didn't fall directly on her face. Something in me wanted badly to go away from her and something else within wanted to sit by her bed and hold her hand.

"Would you like me to read to you?"

"Oh, yes, please."

I read to her from the poetry anthology which was her book of the moment. She seemed to sleep after a few minutes. I put the book down and rose.

"Syble, don't go."

I sat.

"Talk to me for a bit," she said, her eyes still closed, her claw-like hands trembling on the quilt like two water-starved sea creatures. "Or let me talk to you."

"I'm here."

"You've never asked me about..."

"No, I haven't," I said, remembering how irritated she had made me on our first meeting. "I know the facts of the destruction and sabotage..." The sentence hung. Did I want to know more?

She released a breath as if she had been waiting days to talk to me about it, and began to talk.

"I have a son. He was lovely when a child, very bright, very sweet, as children are. I adored him, still adore him. Being with him in his early life was the happiest time of my life."

A twinge of envy passed through me. I had been excluded from the parental lottery because of working with children in my prime bearing years.

Eva continued. "I did a lot of educational demonstrations for schools in those days. Volunteer projects, you see. One day, I had a countryside set up. Not anything as lovely as your holos, but little model cows, sheep and trees on a board with a blue painted river. I had worked very hard on it. My son watched me with great interest, making suggestions and helping when he could."

Eva paused, the most beautiful smile lit her face.

"In the end, I looked at it and said, 'If only I had a swan.' My son looked into our little handmade world for a moment and then left the room. I thought he had lost interest because we were finished."

The room was so quiet and warm. Eva's story so peacefully domestic, that I became sleepy and leaned against her bed in a near trance as her voice whispered on.

"He came back in a moment and said, 'We have some golden swans, Mum. Look.' And he led me to my bedroom and pointed to the back of the door, to the plain brass hook where my nightgown usually hung. And, he was right. It was a beautiful golden swan."

Her story came to me in vivid dream as I sat so close, so relaxed. The little boy pushing the brass swan on the blue paint of a river. I knew children, too, and how they seemed to have a magical insight to certain problems, how they still saw, felt, heard and tasted the world in a raw state. As we grow, we learn and our knowledge makes us rigid. A hook is a hook, not a swan.

I knew then that Eva's convictions included the idea that the longer we live and learn the more calcified becomes our thinking. This topic has been covered in the social-science journals for well over a century. It is a philosophical question of epistemology, therefore a question that will never find an answer.

"But, Eva..." I murmured, rousing myself.

She didn't answer. She was asleep, mouth slightly open, breathing softly, perhaps dreaming of her son.

Later, that evening, Eva died. I was out of her room, folding laundry.

I have returned to technical college to study Paper Technology. It's really very interesting.

I sometimes look at the brass hook on the back of my bedroom door. It does look a bit like a swan. But that's no reason to die, is it?

I want to live on and on.

Leigh Kennedy is the author of the novels *The Journal of Nicholas the American* (Cape, 1986) and *Saint Hiroshima* (Bloomsbury, 1987). Like Molly Brown (and Lisa Tuttle), she is an American—born Denver, Colorado, in 1951—who moved to Britain. She lives with her family in Hastings, East Sussex, and the above is her first short story for *Interzone*.

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The Pale Spirit People

Kim Newman

It was a perfect circle, such as might be drawn in dirt with a stick and a length of twine. Less broad than the span of a man's hand, the spirit object was thin yet resilient, fashioned of stuff unknown to the True People. Hawk That Settles understood from one of Two Dogs Dying's followers that the object could sing, but he did not understand how this could be so. Since taken from its place of concealment, it had been silent.

Hawk That Settles had found it supple as a good bow; now, he watched Sky Buffalo tap, taste, shake, strike and scratch. The circle would not be hurt, though, in truth, neither the young man nor the shaman put it truly to the test, throwing it on a fire or hammering it with a rock. To destroy a spirit object was to invite ill fortune into the lodges of the People.

As Sky Buffalo turned the singing circle over to sniff its underside, the silver mirror caught light, holding rainbows to itself. The edge was sharp enough to draw blood. At the centre was a hole through which the shaman poked his forefinger to the first knuckle. On one side were tiny scrawls in black, scarring the almost beautiful surface.

"Two Dogs Dying found this in the burial ground?" the shaman asked. The lines about his mouth and eyes were grooves worn in old leather and he had fewer teeth than fingers.

"It must be so," Hawk That Settles replied, "for it was hidden near the lodge Two Dogs has built among the dead."

"Hidden?"

"Two Dogs hides many objects, as one would hide a shameful thing."

"Objects?"

It seemed to Hawk That Settles that to be a shaman mainly required the repetition of odd words with a questioning inflection. He did not share his fathers' reverence for the storied wisdom of the aged. After 42 summers, the song of Sky Buffalo was sung. The shaman had built his last lodge far from the encampment and refused to hunt, sustained in his dying days by the superstitious kindness of old women.

But here was Hawk That Settles – who argued that food left after young men and women had fed was better stored against winter than wasted on those grown old and useless – sitting at the last fire of Sky Buffalo, asking for help.

"There are other objects," Hawk That Settles explained. "Not like this one. Some have seen them,

though Two Dogs and the others waste effort building invisible lodges for their concealment."

"Invisible?"

The shaman was doing it again. Swallowing impatience along with smoke, Hawk That Settles continued, "lodges made to seem like solid stone or patches of ground, like traps made for men of the Other People. He has built many such in the burial ground."

Sky Buffalo coughed wisely.

"Some of these spirit objects make noises like animals or men wounded in battle," Hawk That Settles said, remembering with a spear-thrust of fear the horrible yammering he had heard.

"These things are troubling," Sky Buffalo said, hardly great wisdom. "There is a great disturbance in the Ghost Lands."

That also was something Hawk That Settles could have told the shaman. Every child of the People knew the Ghost Lands met the World Around like one track crossing another, and that sometimes objects were found at the crossings of the paths. The more spirit objects migrated to the World Around, the more disturbance there was in the Ghost Lands.

"You must carry me to the burial ground, Hawk."

The young man had been afraid of that. With no complaint, he turned his broad back so the shaman could climb upon it, arms around his neck, knees gripping his waist.

As he stood, Hawk That Settles grunted. The old man was surprisingly heavy, as if his breechclout were stuffed with stones.

"You have often thought of carrying me to the burial ground," Sky Buffalo said, not chuckling. "Those who make fervent wishes often regret them."

Hunched over like an old man himself, Hawk That Settles walked towards the lodges of the People.

In seasons at the old encampment, the young men of the People hunted game and made war on the Other People. As brothers, they honoured the dead with the songs of their fathers.

Hawk That Settles and Two Dogs Dying were born of the same woman. In their time, they fathered babies for women of their generation. When Spotted Water birthed twins, one resembled Hawk That Settles, the other Two Dogs Dying. Among the People, such things were without strife. No man claimed ownership over a woman or a child, just as one thought to

keep for himself a particularly sturdy spear or sharp knife. If there was water enough to quench the thirst of all or fire enough for the warmth of all, why should any hoard such things for his special comfort? "We are not the Other People," the fathers said as the sons learned, "and that is the strength of our spirit. No thing or person is slave to us, as we are not slaves to any thing or person. This is the path of the True People and it is as it should be."

Then they made the encampment by the river. It was a site with good game, plentiful water and many trees. Hawk That Settles wondered why the Other People had not claimed it in earlier seasons. There was no trace of past encampment; thick grass grew where no fires had ever been set, unscarred trees grew tall, deer did not flee the approach of a hunter. The land was fresh.

The People cut down trees and made lodges. Fires were set and songs were sung. From that day, the place was the encampment of the People. If the Other People came for it, they would be met with arrows. The place by the river would be good for many seasons, maybe for all the seasons of Hawk That Settles and Two Dogs Dying. Maybe for all the seasons of the sons of Spotted Water.

That was before the trouble in the Ghost Lands.

From boyhood, Two Dogs Dying was drawn to the dead. He made himself a bonnet like that of Horn Knife, the Custodian of the old burial ground. He helped Horn Knife through his dying days, chosen by the old man to end his uselessness with a loving thrust. When Horn Knife joined those whose path to the Ghost Lands he had eased, Two Dogs Dying led the song.

When an encampment was built, a sacred area, somewhat removed from the lodges, was set aside for the dead. By tradition, it was first chosen and last prepared. During the days of building, a tree fell on Angry Bear. The crushed body was tethered in the fast-flowing waters until, after the day of dedication, Two Dogs Dying could sing the song of Angry Bear. He carried the cold corpse to a bier fashioned of branches and stones and laid Angry Bear out. The young man lay with a warbonnet on his head and an axe in his hand, lest he encounter the spirit of the murderous tree in the Ghost Lands.

It was a considerable thing to be Custodian of the burial ground. Hawk That Settles was glad his brother should rise to such a position and was less saddened now when one of his brothers was killed in battle or by sickness. Two Dogs Dying would see to the care of their spirits. The sign of a good Custodian was that he could open the throat of an unwanted girl baby or an old person whose song was sung with honour and respect. Never did any such cry out under the keen knife Two Dogs Dying wore on his belt, the knife that had been passed to him by Horn Knife himself.

After a season marked by an outbreak of the coughing sickness and skirmishes with the Other People, the burial ground was properly settled and Angry Bear's spirit did not walk alone in the Ghost Lands.

Though it was difficult to talk under the weight of Sky Buffalo, Hawk That Settles, at the shaman's insistence, told again of Two Dogs Dying and the burial ground. He was ashamed to

remember fear, certain the shaman must notice his prickling skin and chilled sweat. Hawk That Settles was brave in battle and the hunt but trouble in the Ghost Lands frightened him.

He first realized something was wrong when, after bringing two deer to the fires after a day's hunting, he had a yen to take pleasure with Spotted Water. She must be ready to swell with child again, having birthed three weeks ago – a girl, but these things happen – and Hawk That Settles always found her enthusiasm for coupling most stimulating.

With a leg of cooked deer, he called on the women's lodge and was told Spotted Water was in the burial ground with Two Dogs Dying. Not thinking to be disappointed, he presented the greasy meat to Red Doe. Only after they had coupled did Red Doe tell of the strange behaviour of Two Dogs Dying and Spotted Water.

It seemed that two days earlier, Two Dogs Dying visited the women's lodge and bore Spotted Water away. Hawk That Settles's first thought was to grin at his brother's appetite: any man who could couple for two days without tiring was worthy of his own song. Then Red Doe told him Two Dogs Dying had also taken Spotted Water's children, the twin sons and even the infant daughter. She said Two Dogs Dying had built his own little lodge, like the lodges of the dying, and lived there alone, with only Spotted Water and her children about him. As Red Doe said such an unthinkable thing, Hawk That Settles realized he had indeed not recently seen his brother in the men's lodge.

Among the People were men who chose to live in the women's lodge, offering themselves for the pleasure of other men. Hawk That Settles had, for the experience, pleased with several and, while confirming his preference for women who might bear sons, had to concede such couplings were not unenjoyable. Hawk That Settles and Two Dogs Dying had shared pleasure of live goats and killed deer, for such was the right of the hunter.

Hawk That Settles thought himself untethered by the ways of the People; he accepted what was good of the wisdom of the fathers but did not let tradition bind him to stupidity. Yet, he could not but feel disgust at the perversion of which Red Doe accused his brother.

Unable to believe Red Doe more than a lying gossip, he took a green stick and bear he. To suggest Two Dogs Dying might hide Spotted Water away for himself, that he might wish to hoard her children as a bear hoards food, was an obscenity he would not believe. If Red Doe repeated such lies, he would cut out her tongue.

Thinking of it made Hawk That Settles sick. One man, one woman, children! Yet, Two Dogs Dying and Spotted Water were gone from the lodges. And the children of Spotted Water too.

He must go to the burial ground and see his brother. Two Dogs Dying must be told of the lies before Red Doe spread them further.

Sky Buffalo clucked as if the story were familiar. To the fathers, no land was ever fresh. The warrior of the Other People killed in battle by Rock Garden was hardly as fearsome as a warrior of the

days of the fathers' fathers. The bear bested by the young men was considerably less ferocious than the long-ago bear whose skin, visibly smaller than the fresh skin, decorated the lodge. The flock of pigeons which filled the skies for three days was a passing cloud set against the great mass of wings which brought darkness for a whole season in the days of the fathers of the fathers' fathers. This trouble in the Ghost Lands was meagre compared with the Great Trouble of many seasons gone. Each time the shaman clucked, Hawk That Settles had a yen to pitch him into the river, yet he continued with the story of Two Dogs Dying.

Red Doe had not lied about the lodge Two Dogs Dying had built. She had not even told the worst of it. The burial ground was covered with strange little lodges. All the biers were under lodges, the dead improperly covered from the skies. The spirit of Horn Knife must wail in the Ghost Lands. The lodges were identical boxes, arranged in a disturbingly regular pattern. Around the boxes were barriers, too low to keep away animals or enemies, interrupted by neat gaps and beaten paths. Lodges filled the burial ground; they seemed to spread across the world, crowding out everything else.

Hawk That Settles felt spirit presences. Not the natural spirits he had known all his life, but pale cloth-wrapped ghosts. If he shut his eyes, he saw their shadows moving awkwardly like wounded men. Alone in sunshine, he wanted to return to the men's lodge and speak no more of Two Dogs Dying. But the Custodian was his brother, as were all the young men of the People; it was his duty to watch his brothers' backs in battle, and there was a great spirit battle in this place.

He knew which was the lodge of Two Dogs Dying; it was more finished than the others, the thing itself rather than an image. The path was more elaborate, the barrier less flimsy. Enclosed grass was shaved as close to the earth as the men of the Other People shaved their hair to the skin. There was a doorway; wood hung over it, like the boards which kept out snows in winter or the Other People in attacks. He could not imagine why a man would make such a thing in summer at a time of peace. When he touched the wood, fixed to the doorway by strips of leather, it swung inward. The arrangement was ingenious if peculiarly repulsive.

Stepping into the lodge, he was assaulted by a horrible hammering. He drew a knife, prepared to fight the evil ghost that had maddened his brother.

No attack came, but the noise continued.

There was a box in one corner, making the noise. Bright lights burned on its face, hurting his eyes. The box sang the song of a young girl taking pleasure for the very first time. Knowing the object to be unnatural, Hawk That Settles killed it.

Another doorway was before him. He knew evil was here, for the inside of the lodge was much smaller than the outside. Pale spirits had lured him in, now walls were contracting to crush him. He began the song of his dying.

The situation was stranger even than that. The walls were not moving; inside the lodge were divisions, walls between poles, splitting space into smaller

spaces. For a moment, such an arrangement made sense: young men need not be troubled by the night-noises of the old, food might be stored away from hungry animals. Then, laughing, Hawk That Settles realized how impractical this truly was. With no centre, the lodge could have no fire; without a fire, a lodge was just a cave of wood, not a fit place for People.

He shoved aside the barrier and passed into an area walled by stout, defensible barricades. It was a lodge with no roof. Above was unclouded sky. Two Dogs Dying stood by an unnatural fire, grinning as he manipulated hunks of cooking meat with a short spear, singing an unfamiliar song of yellow ribbons and old trees. Clearly an evil thing, it was an obscene chant. The fire was elevated in a dish of black stuff. There was too little smoke for the meat to be healthy.

Spotted Water was nearby, body indecently covered. Confining hides were uncomfortably taut about her, as if she had been sewn into a wet leather shroud and left in the sun. She was tethered like a dog, a rope about her ankle fixed to a stake hammered into hard earth. Her children clung to her, too frightened to speak.

"Hawk," Two Dogs Dying said, smiling, "good to see you, brother. Just in time for food."

Hawk That Settles cringed.

"Be-Be-Cue?" Two Dogs Dying asked, licking his lips and prodding meat.

The Custodian had mutilated and adorned himself. His hair was hacked short and the rings were gone from his nose and nipples. He wore a strange apparatus of twigs around his eyes, over his nose and hooked onto his ears. Instead of the breechcloth and paint of the People, he wore skins sewn together, like those he had forced upon Spotted Water. His arms and legs were trapped in tubes of soft leather. His bonnet had a bill like a duck's and an evil totem: a grinning rat with black circular ears.

Spotted Water whimpered, fearing for her boys. Even the infant girl was too frightened to cry.

Hawk That Settles backed away. Two Dogs Dying's mad smile filled the sky. Behind twig circles, his eyes were large. Around him were pale spirit people, their faces like bone. They wore shirts of fire and rainbow. Their feet were trapped in thick white moccasins like fungus tied with twine.

His foot touched a patch of ground that snapped. He looked and saw a depression that had been covered over. It was full of objects that clinked and swished: sparking thin round pebbles, flimsy oblong leaves. Trinkets suitable only for ornamenting young women.

"Get away," Two Dogs Dying said. He advanced. In his hand was a spear upon which were impaled hunks of meat and chunks of vegetable.

"Two Dogs, you need help."

"Get away," his brother said, evenly. "You who have pleased with your mother..."

"Yes of course, in the manhood ritual..."

"...stand away from my riches."

Hawk That Settles moved away from the trap. Like a snake, Two Dogs Dying was on it, covering over his useless hoard.

He looked up at Hawk That Settles and, voice like death, spat "this is mine!"

“Mine?” Sky Buffalo repeated.
“As if things were his alone, like a part of his spirit. As if he were the People all by himself, and all the things of the People were his...his possessions.”

The shaman clucked.

“The next day, Crow Foot and Rock Garden went out to the burial ground to see the madness of Two Dogs Dying for themselves. On his return, Crow Foot took White Cloud for himself and built his own lodge beside Two Dogs Dying’s. Others have joined them.”

Sky Buffalo groaned.

“Each night, more leave the lodges of the People and join the madness of Two Dogs Dying.”

That night, as he slept in the men’s lodge, Hawk That Settles was visited by Angry Bear. The dead man spoke of the Pale Spirit People and of how they filled the Ghost Lands with Moving Lodges and Be-Be-Cues and Wide Stone Paths. Angry Bear told of hunting grounds like huge lodges where game was already killed and smoked, stacked for women – not hunters, women! – to pick like fruit from a tree. Of dark caves where children were fixed to boxes that buzzed and flashed lights and sapped their spirits in battles without honour. Of piles of oblong leaves for which the Pale Spirit People cut each other to pieces with knives that had moving edges. Of boxes that sang, that danced, that told stories, that held fires, that lied. If a man of the People were to take his pleasure with a woman of the Pale Spirits, her brothers would use moving knives on him for all that they were unable themselves to give pleasure. The spirits of the People were outnumbered by the Pale Spirits as trees outnumber deer.

When he woke, Hawk That Settles told his dream to Sky Buffalo, who nodded wisely, repeating the occasional word, clucking that things were as bad as he had feared.

The remaining men of the People listened as Sky Buffalo spoke, nodding at his wisdom. Some fathers muttered that things had not been as they should be since the shaman removed himself to the lodge of his dying, and that the young would do well to remember the strengths of the old. Hawk That Settles, remembering Two Dogs Dying’s mad song, kept quiet.

“The Pale Spirits are insects,” the shaman said, holding the singing circle like the hair of an enemy, “once let into your lodge, they breed and infest. Worse even than the Other People, they are a sickness to be cut out. We must pity them, for they are mad not truly evil, but we must not let our sorrow at their sad condition stay us from making war.”

“How can we make war on spirits?” Rock Garden asked.

“We can not,” Sky Buffalo said, “for spirits are strong. But these are not true spirits, merely ghosts. Spirits endure, flowing like a river or the wind, but ghosts simply pretend things are as if they were alive. The strength of the True People is in our spirits, but the strength of the pale people is in their things.”

“Things?” Hawk That Settles asked, feeling like a shaman.

“The things they delude themselves are theirs.

They waste strength on getting and keeping things which cannot be got and kept. They try to swallow sunlight with their throats and keep water in their hands. Their men have only one father, their women only one man. They are many, but they do not act as the People but as many Other Peoples.”

Some of the young men laughed. Sky Buffalo smiled, showing his few teeth, his eyes sharp.

“This is one of their things,” he said, holding up the singing circle. “See how pleasing it is to the eye. Yet it cannot be eaten, it cannot harm an enemy, it cannot cut through the bark of a tree. This is not a true spirit object, this is merely a thing.”

He threw the thing into the fire. It melted like ice, colours joining the smoke and passing up through the hole in the roof.

“The Pale People have put their spirit in their things. Every time one of their things is destroyed, their spirit leaks away. And their things have no true existence. They are the ghosts of those who have never been born.”

“How can we save Two Dogs Dying and the others?”

“Find the objects they have hidden, the things found or made in imitation of the spirit objects, and destroy them. As they are broken, so the Pale Ghosts grow weak.”

Together, by night, the men went to the burial ground. Some were struck helpless with fear to see what had been made of it and could go no further, but Sky Buffalo was resolute. He decreed the sham lodges be torn down and burned, and the men of the People set to work with fire and spears.

Hawk That Settles saw the Pale Spirits, watching impassively. Most lodges were affairs of reed and sticks, flimsily built and already tattered by rains and winds. The men sang war songs as they destroyed things. The men who had joined Two Dogs Dying stood by and watched as their lodges came apart, some joining their brothers in pulling down the things they had made. There were shrill noises in the air, but Sky Buffalo told the People to take no notice of them. They were ghost noises and could harm no one.

Two Dogs Dying came out of his lodge and watched, making no effort to save the other lodges. He stood behind his barrier, a strange branch in his hands, singing a song of small dogs and windows and tails. He wrenched his branch, and fire exploded from one end, opening a red wound in Rock Garden’s leg.

Sky Buffalo decreed the branch be taken from Two Dogs Dying and thrown into the river.

“You’ll take my fire branch from me only by wrenching it from my cold, dead fingers,” Two Dogs Dying shouted as his fire branch was taken away from him and thrown in the river.

The men fell upon the lodge of the Custodian, hauling its timbers apart and scattering them.

Two Dogs Dying shouted strange words and was held down. “Believers in communal property... poorly-educated men of dark skin colour...”

Hawk That Settles dug through the soft earth of the lodge and hauled out a white box with a grey ice face which sprang to life, containing tiny people and many fires. He looked into it as he would look into the eyes of a snake, fascinated but resolute, fearful yet aware of beauty. The box sang the song of an unskilled

hunter unable to feed his people, whose arrow unloosed black water from the earth and whose new lodge was built in hills of plenitude. With a gathering of the strength of his arms and a scream that came from his stomach, he hurled the box high, between trees, and heard it splash into the waters of the river to be borne away and dashed to pieces on the rocky bed.

They found many strange things – some that Angry Bear had spoken of in his dream – and all were destroyed by fire or water as Sky Buffalo sang the True Song of the People over them.

Two Dogs Dying cried like a baby as he was rescued from the constricting skins. Hawk That Settles used a knife-point to pick apart the stitches that fixed the torturous things to his brother's body, trying to draw as little blood as possible.

Spotted Water, torn from her leather and properly exposed, snatched the twigs from Two Dogs Dying's face and snapped them to fragments. When this was done, the Custodian lay exhausted.

The men of the People backed away from their fallen brother. Sky Buffalo stood over Two Dogs Dying, examining him. Hair would grow again, Hawk That Settles supposed, and a breechclout could easily be found. Two Dogs Dying tried to sit up, but collapsed. Dazed, he sang to himself. It was one of the songs of the People. His spirit had returned, dispelling the influence of the Pale Ghosts.

"There are things in the earth here," Sky Buffalo said, "like seeds. They come from the Ghost Lands. We must not trouble them, lest they sprout flowers of sickness. This was caused by tampering with spirit objects."

"Must we find another burial ground?" Hawk That Settles asked.

The shaman rattled his medicine bag. "No, we must fill this one up with our dead, sons upon sons. We must sing the songs of their dying so their spirits seed the earth, make this place a part of the Ghost Lands. Our spirits must stand here close as blades of grass on the plain. The Pale People are weak and can be driven from this place as we have thrown their things into the fire or the river. If we resist their madness, their seeds will never sprout. This is the burial ground of the People and always has been so. Nothing else has ever been here and nothing must ever come here as long as the grass grows, the river runs and the sun crosses the sky."

Hawk That Settles supposed that after this they would have to take Sky Buffalo back into the men's lodge.

Kim Newman remains prolific (another talented author of lower productivity said to us lately: "I wish I could have an infusion of Kim Newman glands"). He has completed a new novel, *The Quorum*, which will be published by Simon & Schuster in March 1994. About the same time, a new "Jack Yeovil" novel, *Route 666* (expanded from the earlier novelette of that title), should be out from Boxtree Books. Also due out soon thereafter is Kim's first collection, *The Original Dr Shade and Other Stories*.

MILLION

Some back-issue highlights:

No.1: James Ellroy interview (Paul McAuley); Kim Newman on gangsters; Stan Nicholls, Brian Stableford, Mark Morris & many others

No.2: Kurt Vonnegut interview (Colin Greenland); Joan Aiken, Sherlock Holmes, P.C. Wren; plus Wendy Bradley, Nick Lowe

No.3: Anne McCaffrey interview; Angus Wells, Fu Manchu; Stableford on Rider Haggard; plus John Christopher, Dave Langford & others

No.4: Ellis Peters interview (Mike Ashley); Andy Sawyer on Virginia Andrews; Stableford on James Hadley Chase; plus Langford, Byrne, & much more

No.5: Terry Pratchett, J.G. Ballard, Anne Rice & David Morrell interviews; Stableford on ERB (this is the same as *Interzone* no.51)

No.6: Dorothy Dunnett interview (Lisa Tuttle); Mary Higgins Clark, Thomas Harris; Stableford on Robinson Crusoe's children

No.7: Campbell Armstrong, Hammond Innes & Norman Mailer interviews; Mike Ashley on the *Strand* magazine; Stableford on Hank Janson

No.8: Stephen Gallagher & John Harvey interviews; Sawyer on "slaver" novels; Stableford on Hammett & Chandler; much more

No.9: Geoff Ryman interview (Newman); Doc Savage; historical mysteries; sequels & prequels; Hollywood novels; etc., etc.

No.10: Peter Lovesey on Leslie Charteris; Andrew Vachss & Jonathan Kellerman interviews; Elvis Presley; Rex Stout

No.11: Garry Kilworth on animal fantasy; Michael Crichton, James Herbert, Peter Tremayne; Andrews on Richard S. Prather

No.12: S.T. Joshi on Robert Aickman; series characters, Fay Weldon, Robert Graves, Rupert Bear; Langford, Nick Austin & many more

No.13: Clive Barker interview (Nicholls); Newman on Dracula; Joshi on Stephen King; Stableford on Shangri-La; Bradbury comics

No.14: Patricia Kennealy interview; Jack the Ripper, John D. MacDonald, Dorothy Sayers; Ian R. MacLeod on Gerald Seymour; & much more

All available from *Interzone* – see page 3.

Ansible Link

David Langford



I don't go a bomb on computer humour ("And when I spellchecked your name the program suggested LANDLORD, ha ha!"), but this batch of software-generated anagrams arrived from a cowardly reader who refuses to be named. We knew about Rabid Snails; the same author also gives Bald Raisins, while his old pal Brian Stableford is a Rabbit Of Slander, inclined to Narrate Bold Fibs. Ian Watson is Now A Saint, Lisa Tuttle wrote A Lust Title, Bruce Sterling does an alternating Bluster-Cringe, Piers Anthony may have A Thorny Penis, Norman Spinrad is fond of An Innards Romp, Michael Crichton writes for Rich Catholic Men and this column, as usual, Sank In Libel.

The Marching Morons

Barrington J. Bayley (Benign Royalty Jab) has excitingly completed a very short synopsis for a new Jasperduo the Robot novel – said his agent, legendary London bon-vivour Gamma before being thrown out of a William Gibson signing owing to being barred from the pub. "It'll be really good," he added later, and was thrown out again. Ah, metropolitan life.

John Clute was swept north in a whirlwind: "About 4,000 books were donated recently to Friends of Foundation for the SF Foundation library, now settled into the University of Liverpool. Roger Robinson and I drove them up in a van and saw the library precincts: which was like seeing Oz after half a lifetime blinded by the institutional torpor and (in recent years) active hostility of the lugubrious University of East London (Kansas [failed]). There is now space for books, and administrator Andy Sawyer has a brief to catalogue and restore the collection; and the University has hopes for its MA in SF Studies. I kept looking for a Wizard behind an arras, but in the event I never had to wake. For the moment, the dream holds." The anagram program could make nothing of the Clute name: "Perhaps it was scared?"

William Gibson (Low Malign Ibis) traversed Britain with his *Virtual Light* autograph roadshow: "I've been signing this fucking thing for weeks." He was rewarded by a perceptive *Independent* on Sunday review beginning: "The American writer Ian Gibson has been a name to watch in science fiction

for the past decade..." Meanwhile, *Neuromancer* joined Mills & Boon and Jackie Collins in the much-publicized list of set books for the University of Salford's English course. Fame at last.

Colin Greenland (Non-Lilac Gender) reveals where he gets his crazy ideas for weird sf science! On receiving some – fairly trite – suggestions purportedly from a 10-year-old schoolgirl with leukaemia, he wrote a nice letter back and was not best pleased when further, similar instalments arrived from a "physics student," and then an "engineering student," all with different female names and (invalid?) addresses but the same handwriting and York postmark. "It's getting a little annoying, not to say insulting," sniffed Colin.

Chad Oliver, fondly remembered pioneer of anthropological sf and latterly chair of the University of Texas anthropology department, died of cancer on 9th August 1993, aged 65.

Terry Pratchett was bemused by a *Business Age* magazine survey ranking him 451st of the 500 richest individuals in Britain, with a personal fortune of £26½ million. Having looked under the bed and failed to locate this wad of cash, he learned that "It's all potential – like value of existing copyrights over time, value of other stuff like film rights, value of books I haven't written yet, value of body mass of family and pets if rendered for soap and so on, plus wild guesses at how much I must have made already... Just when I think I understand the kind of Discworld logic by which they arrived at it my brain sags. Apparently my annual income is seen by them as a kind of dividend paid by a conceptual Terry Pratchett PLC. The Society of Authors treasurer chuckled benignly and told me, "You can get tax relief on guard dogs..."

Infinitely Improbable

World Fantasy Awards. The novel shortlist comprises *Anno Dracula* by Kim Newman, *Last Call* by Tim Powers, *Fairies* by Geoff Ryman, *Photographing Waxies* by Steve Szilagyi and *Briar Rose* by Jane Yolen. James Blaylock's *Lord Kelvin's Machine* reads like a fix-up novel to me, but is mysteriously shortlisted under Best Collection.

SF Image of the Month. "Her very

existence made his forebrain swell until it threatened to leak out his sinuses." (Nancy A. Collins, *Sunglasses After Dark*.)

Martian Splurge. HarperCollins spent a fortune on a full-page *Guardian* ad for Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* – though with a slightly unlikely caption. "Are they promoting this as a comedy?" asked David Garnett. "Welcome to Mars... Please Drive Carefully" sounds very much like the cover of *Red Dwarf*: "Infinity Welcomes Careful Drivers." What will Gollanz do for the paperback of *Red Dust*: "Take Care: Ride on the Left?"

Hair of the Dog. This may not be sf but it ought to be. Famous sf editor David Hartwell sends a true interoffice memo from St Martin's Press: "We will be publishing in March of 1995 a new trade paperback title called *Knitting With Dog Hair*. The two authors [...] are busily making dog hair bookmarks, which will be used by colleagues in subrights and in publicity, but demand for the bookmarks has been so great that we are now facing a serious shortage of dog hair. This is no joke!" Perish the thought. All employees are duly exhorted to "place dog hair in a zip-locked plastic bag," labelled with the breed ("Mutts are fine"), but not to raid the vacuum cleaner ("This is not bona fide dog hair, since it has been combined with other dirt"), and to bring all bags to the Official St Martin's Dog Hair Depository. It'll be even more fun when they publish *1001 Uses for Dog Turds*.

Barry Pulls It Off! More epoch-making news from Barry R. Levin's US catalogue of awesome, mindboggling sf prices: the British BCA book club version of Asimov's *Forward the Foundation* is the world first edition, by about three weeks. I do not know how the feeble human intellect is able to contain such excitement.

Language Lessons. Correspondents rushed me news clippings about a Klingon Language Camp in Minnesota which stirred the media to the extent of 75 interviews (of 12 camp attendees). Exciting etymological information was revealed: for example, that 'iw – Klingon for blood – is rooted in the audience noise made during the big *Star Trek VI* bloodshed scene. "Eeeeeewwwww!" Thanks a lot, champs.

The Tyranny of Numbers

William Spencer

“Quick!”

Dr Helen Furbis sank backwards on to the flat slab of a stone tomb, drawing her assistant on top of her. A light was flickering towards them through the crosses and catafalques of the burial ground.

Amazed, Belmont felt her jerking down his zip, then yanking his jeans to half-mast.

“Hey... steady on!” he protested.

“Shush.” She slid a hand over his mouth. “Pretend we’re making love.” She bit his ear playfully. “Come on.”

The Italian policeman swung the beam of his torch towards them as he got nearer.

Two pale female thighs rose from the folds of an upflung skirt. Between them, a slim male pelvis rocked in slow rhythm.

“Bene, bene,” muttered the policeman. “Avanti, *piu caldo! Forza! Coraggio!*”

He allowed the beam of his torch to linger appreciatively on the glimpse of naked flesh. Then he moved away into the shadows. Let them get on with it, he thought. It was not his job to be a guardian of public morals. But still... in a graveyard...!

After a decent interval, Dr Furbis pushed Belmont off her, and stood up.

“Phew. That was a close call,” she whispered, disentangling a dead leaf from her hair.

Belmont searched for the right blend of gallantry and flippancy. Simulated sex with his employer was not part of the normal duties of a postgrad. “The things we do for England,” he joked.

“All in the cause of science, my son. This will be a worldwide knockout, if we succeed.” She smoothed her skirt. “Lucky I wasn’t wearing any. All adding to the realism. It gets so flaming hot in Italy in July, doesn’t it?”

Belmont blushed retrospectively. He’d kept his jockey shorts in place, and hadn’t noticed how close he’d come to the real thing. But no... his employer’s tastes were well known round the lab. They didn’t extend to young men.

“To work,” she said shortly, as if dismissing an unimportant incident.

Taking the cue, Belmont retrieved his rucksack from behind a tomb. He drew out a laser rangefinder and handed it to Dr Furbis. Then out came two sonar transceivers – squat little devices with parabolic reflectors mounted on sturdy tripods.

He began to position the transceivers on the ground, their dishes pointing slightly downward. Dr Furbis checked the locations with the rangefinder, taking bearings from the corner of a building, verifying co-ordinates from the data on a clipboard.

When they were satisfied with the position of the gear, Belmont retrieved a flat metal box from the rucksack and handed it to Dr Furbis. Finally he took out a dark cylindrical object the size and shape of a dead rat. This he placed carefully on the ground at their feet.

Dr Furbis fingered the metal box, checking the controls. The rat-thing whirred briefly, nosing left and right. Then it scurried forward and began to nuzzle against a leaf-strewn bank.

“Check the readings,” said Dr Furbis softly, indicating with a sideways nod of her head the clipboard lying on an adjacent tomb. She nudged the controls, and the rat-thing buzzed as it began to drill its snout into the soft earth.

Soon it had disappeared altogether, and Dr Furbis quietly read out a series of co-ordinates, as they appeared in groups of three on the read-out of the control box.

“That’s good,” said Belmont. “You need to head three degrees to the right, and down by one degree.”

Underground, the mechanical mole was making slower progress, as the earth it tunnelled in became more compacted. There were longer intervals now between successive co-ordinates. Patience was the name of the game.

Belmont ran a finger round the neck of his shirt. “Truly it is hot,” he admitted. “Like being in an out-of-control sauna. So why did we have to come to Italy in July.”

It was not really a question. But Dr Furbis took it, ever so slightly, as a criticism of her planning. “You know why. We had to have some progress to report to the funding panel by next spring.”

“But why Sansepolcro, of all places? Why choose Piero, out of all the multitudinous ranks of the dead?”

“Think of it as a way of celebrating the five-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of his death. Some people consider him to be the greatest painter who ever lived. But I value him because he was also a distinguished mathematician. He brought mathematics into his art, you know. He combined both sides of culture. That’s why we need him.”

“One degree up,” warned Belmont. Then, when Dr

Furbis had made the course correction, he asked. "But why couldn't we simply apply for an exhumation? Save ourselves all this hassle."

"Oh, come on!" Dr Furbis was indignant. "You must be joking. It would take months, if not years, to clear that sort of thing with the authorities. There'd be a public outcry. Desecrating the dead, they'd call it. And anyway, all we want is a tiny specimen of DNA. A few crumbs of bone. We're not really disturbing Piero's last rest."

They went on with their task of making minute course corrections, as the mole neared its ultimate target.

"**T**here's something else," Dr Furbis confided. "Piero della Francesca was originally buried in the Badia. That would have made things much more difficult for us. But a researcher of antiquities came across a secret journal, indicating that his body had been removed to this less distinguished graveyard."

"Why?"

"To make way, obviously, for more important bods. The work of Piero was neglected after his death. He was eclipsed by Raphael, and some of his frescos were painted over. "Luckily for us the people who moved him were very precise about the new location. In case of any comeback from higher authority, I suppose."

Twenty minutes later, Dr Furbis had steered the mechanical mole back along the tunnel towards the point where it had first burrowed. It broke the surface a couple of metres from their feet.

Belmont stooped to pick it up. But as he did so a light flashed once more in their faces.

"*Me l'ha fatta! Smettila! Finiscila subito subito!*"

The Italian policeman was clearly annoyed. He realized he'd been duped in some way.

"Scuse?" said Belmont. "*Non parlo Italiano.*" He looked sheepish, like a schoolboy discovered in some silly misdemeanour.

Meanwhile Dr Furbis, with tiny movements of the controls, was steering the mole towards the cover offered by a pile of dead leaves. Luckily Perrin, the wayward technician who had crafted the mole, had decided to add a touch of authenticity. He'd given the thing a plushy coat of black velvet. In the poor light, it really did look like a small animal.

Across the gulf of language, Belmont and the policeman stared at each other. A large moth, attracted by the policeman's powerful lantern, blundered round them.

This gave Belmont an inspiration.

"Motho," he said hopefully, jerking his forefinger towards it. "*Insetto.*"

Dr Furbis caught on quickly and came to his aid. "We count. *Contare.*" She waved her clipboard. "*Università.*" She showed the policeman the crest of arms on the notepaper.

"*Ebbene, non uligani... dall' universita,*" said the policeman, impressed by the splendour of the coat of arms.

He paused. Should he report what he had found going on to his superiors? A tricky question. He was not supposed to be in the graveyard at this time. He had taken a short cut and surprised this couple apparently making love. But something in their manner

had excited his suspicion. He had come back to check on them again, suspecting that they might be drug-traffickers or other undesirable characters. But it turned out that they were harmless academics.

The policeman saw the flag stitched to Belmont's rucksack.

"*Inglese?*" he queried.

"*Si, inglese,*" said Dr Furbis. She pointed a finger at Belmont. "*Il grande professore. Multo accademico. Multo sapiento.*"

"*Bene, bene,*" said the policeman. He turned to go. Mad foreigners! The "professor" seemed scarcely old enough to have left school. With an assistant, he now saw, almost mature enough to be his mother. Let them get on with their harmless games with moths and numbers!

He trundled off down the path.

More cautiously now, after this disturbance, Dr Furbis steered the mole out of its hiding place.

"Get the torch, and give me some light," she said peremptorily to Belmont. Ordinarily, he would have resented her tone, but he realized that her nerves were taut to breaking point. Much now was hanging on the results of the mole's hidden foray into the charnel world beneath the tombs.

Carefully Dr Furbis snapped open the mole's hinged upper jaw. There in its maw were the yellow fragments of bone, shining like gold-dust in the beam of the torch. With a sigh of relief she closed the jaw and eased the mole into a heavy-duty polythene bag, which she sealed and stowed in a secure pocket of the rucksack.

"Time to go," she said.

They sat on the terrace of the taverna in the velvety Italian night. The oppressive heat of early evening had now moderated, and a cool breeze came from the hills. This would probably be their last night before departure.

Dr Furbis was in a near-euphoric mood as she recharged her glass with wine, and then, after a nod of assent from Belmont, filled his to the brim.

"So, Piero is in the bag, so to speak."

"You were saying about the marriage of science and art — and how Piero managed to encompass both."

"Yes."

"But what about Leonardo da Vinci?" Belmont queried. "Wouldn't he have been a much more notable example of the same aptitude?"

"Perhaps. I tend to think of him more as a high-grade technologist. But you're overlooking one important fact."

"What's that?"

Dr Furbis looked round to make sure no one at the other tables was near enough to overhear, then lowered her voice. "Leonardo's tomb was in the Church of St Florentin in Amboise."

"In France, you mean. But we could have made it to France."

"No point. The grave disappeared during the French Revolution."

"I see. That does create a bit more of a problem."

They sipped their wine. Coloured lights fringing the edge of the loggia nestled in the leaves of an ornamental vine. Beyond the terrace, the valley fell away into impenetrable gloom, with the faint outlines of

the hills picked out against the skyline.

"A month," Dr Furbis mused, "running the computers flat out. Then we should have the complete read-out of Signor P.'s entire genome. Then comes the interesting bit."

"You're not going to try to re-create Piero della Francesca physically, are you?"

Dr Furbis looked shocked. "For God's sake, David, keep your voice down." She seldom used his first name. "That's out of the question. We would need a surrogate mother for that."

David Belmont regarded her levelly across the candle flames that formed the centrepiece of their table.

"You're not looking at me are you? My womb is off-limits as far as this project is concerned! Anyway it would take far too long. Nine months' gestation followed by 18 years or so to maturity. What kind of a project is that? And who would fund it?"

"Quite. But how did you manage to get funds in the end?" Belmont was becoming bolder, influenced by the wine, to the point of indiscretion. "I've heard the Board can be pretty sticky."

Dr Furbis didn't seem to mind the question. "Oh – it came out of the computer graphics budget, in the final submission. I put up the idea that there must have been something very special about Piero, to enable him to blend art and mathematics in such an intimate way. If we could see a hint of that in his genes, we would have a sure-fire way of pre-selecting computer graphics personnel. Then the training funds could be concentrated on people who had an inbuilt aptitude in the first place – as a result of their genetic make-up."

"And they swallowed it?"

"Completely," Dr Furbis paused. "I didn't reckon they needed to know the full scope of the project."

"Which is?"

Dr Furbis took a swig of her wine. "Do you need to know?" Her eyes flashed for a second with metallic hardness.

"Oh come on, Helen. You can trust me – your closest colleague."

Still she hesitated. Then the wine gained the upper hand.

"The aim is to make a complete reconstruction of Piero della Francesca – after five and a half centuries. We shall have a full readout of his genome – I trust – in the bone samples. Anything which is lacking in one cell, as a result of decomposition, will be supplemented by the readout from DNA in another cell. In the end we should have dozens of redundant pieces of information – an embarrassment of data!"

"So. You've got the genotype. But what about the phenotype?"

"Think of the standard theory. The phenotype emerges as a result of interaction between the genotype and its environment. Nature is shaped by nurture – to use the old terms. Right?"

"Right."

"So what we shall do – what I've already put in hand, in fact – is to create a complete environment, equivalent to quattrocento Italy, within the computers."

"Isn't that a tall order?"

"No, it was quite easy and straightforward. There's so much documentation and graphic material available



Illustrations by Rob Mooney

already in digital form nowadays. It was mainly a question of selection."

"So you had to turn yourself into an expert on Renaissance Italy?"

"No way. What I did was to hire a bunch of post-grads during the last vacation. These arts types come pretty cheap." Helen Furbis was perspiring now, her face flushed carmine, glowing with the wine and her own burgeoning sense of triumph. "Experts come a dime a dozen. One for Renaissance culture on the visual side. One for 15th-century maths. One for a suitably ancient version of the Italian lingo – plus Latin of course. It was simply a question of identifying appropriate bodies of data, earmarking them to be fed into the computer's memory. Where we had to, we used an optical scanner, which is much clumsier of course. You know that a decent processor will devour the entire *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in ten seconds flat."

At the far end of the terrace, an itinerant violinist had begun to saw out a tune, some heart-rending melody from the depths of the Tuscan soul.

Helen Furbis looked at Belmont, across the candle flames. He was not such a bad young chap. Good hearted. Thoroughly trustworthy, otherwise she wouldn't have employed him. Sometimes a bit sluggish and ponderous in his thought processes.

"Only one thing," she said. She was beginning to slur her words slightly. "When Maestro P. speaks..."

"Maestro P.?" Belmont's eyes had taken on a kind of glaze.

"Signor P....Piero della computer. The reconstructed Piero that will exist within the matrix of neural networks, inside the computers. When he speaks, he'll speak in modern English. We'll make him effectively bi-lingual. I couldn't stand all that struggling with dictionary databases. Languages have never been my strong point..."

It was late when they got back to the hotel. He was surprised when she invited him into her room, on the pretext of sampling some Tia Maria which she'd bought earlier in the day.

Belmont sat uneasily on the edge of her single bed, while she fussed about the room. The wine had evidently changed her nature – plus the effect of the smoochy music and the soft Italian air. Or perhaps the gossip round the lab had been misplaced? But a kind of nervousness gripped him. How do you set about seducing your employer – even if she so obviously invites your advances?

She made it easy for him by starting to undress in a vague abstracted way, then coming over to him and beginning to undo the buttons of his shirt. They were both in a pleasantly relaxed alcoholic haze, the kind of mood when everything seems to be floating slightly above the ground, and people act completely out of character.

But the wine had a predictable effect on Belmont. Before she could get his shirt off his back, or even fully undone, he had slumped down on the welcoming bed and was soundly asleep.

She tucked him up in her bed, and felt gently in his pocket for his key. With this, she let herself into his bedroom. Even in her drunken state she could appreciate the benefits of a sound night's sleep, before they tackled the journey home tomorrow.

The decoding of the genotype went smoothly. The specimens of ancient bone were in better condition than they had any right to expect. Something to do with the acidity of the soil...

Perrin was happy with the performance of his mole. But the handling of the computer environment for Piero proved a worry. It was straining the resources of their computers to the limits. This remained true, even though far less was known in the 15th century – the world was in effect a smaller place then. And that was not simply because Piero's life predated the discovery of the New World by Columbus. There was an entire continent of knowledge which science had not yet dreamed of, much less discovered.

In the event, Perrin had to devote some of their precious funds to buying an additional hard-disk unit, a cool ten terabytes of extra storage, on which the data could be loaded while the phenotype development was proceeding.

He explained to Dr Furbis that, to get the project up and running, it would be necessary to link all five computers together, in order to handle the huge masses of data in real time. In effect, all their available processing power would be functioning as one large computer.

Using this method, it took only six months to reach the stage of the first "run" of Piero.

Of course, the construct within the computers which represented Piero would be shown as equivalent to a mature young man whose education was all-but complete. They were by-passing the baby babble and childish prattle stages of development.

Nevertheless, Dr Furbis thought it best to limit the audience to an inner circle of viewers – herself, Belmont, Perrin and his deputy, and just one other academic – a Dr Scriven on whose discretion she felt she could rely.

Piero appeared on the screen dressed in the finery of a quattrocento Florentine. The buildings in the background had been the graphics handiwork of Belmont. He had done his homework, and they were closely based on the architecture shown in the famous "flagellation" painting by Piero.

Piero addressed them from the VDU. There seemed to be some important truths which he urgently desired to communicate to them. His accent was standard computer-speak. But the ideas he presented were alien to them:

"The world, as the sage Pythagoras has revealed, is made entirely of numbers. Numbers are the substance of the food we eat. They make up the air we breathe and the very ground we walk on. Our bodies are composed of numbers, and our every thought is made of multitudes of numbers.

"You may ask how this can be – since it is solid ground we tread, and palpable food we eat, and our flesh is dense to the touch?

"The later wisdom of Plato laid bare the key to this apparent enigma. The numbers so beloved of Pythagoras may be shown to compact themselves into regular solids – the cube, the tetrahedron, the icosahedron, and so on. These solid forms of perfect regularity are, to the higher mind, of unspeakable beauty.

"Such regular forms, the Master Plato averred, are the very basis of all that is, all that ever was, and all that shall be.

"But because these forms are in themselves so beautiful – they are indeed Beauty Itself made manifest – we may have faith that all that ever shall exist is founded upon Beauty as its very being and substance."

Dr Furbis shifted uneasily in her chair and glanced at Belmont. What utter bilge, she was thinking.

Piero went on, oblivious to any reaction from his audience. "I may modestly seek to add an iota of further insight to the truths revealed by these great sages of the past. I have discovered this: since God Himself is the Highest Form of Beauty, God Himself must be made of numbers. These numbers are of two kinds only, the existent on the one hand, and the non-existent on the other. Therefore God Himself may be said – with equal truth – both to exist and not to exist. And as the numbers pass from Zero to One, and back again, we may see God the Manifest and God the Unmanifest revealed to us – a perpetual coming into existence and dissolving back into nothingness. The eternal process of Creation is revealed, which is the fount and source of endless Beauty."

"Perrin, do we have to go on with this?" Dr Furbis was coming close to losing her cool.

"He's talking about binary numbers," put in Belmont.

"Er, I say Piero, that's probably enough for today." Perrin addressed the VDU. "You have to understand that our minds work slowly, much more slowly than yours. It takes time for us to digest new ideas. Interview is closing now."

Perrin moved a control in his hand, and the image faded from the screen.

"Bloody hell," said Dr Furbis, "I hadn't bargained for all this God stuff."

"Have you read the literature of the quattrocento?" asked Dr Scriven, her elderly colleague, in magisterial tones. "Those who constituted the informed section of the population were as much a part of the Middle Ages as they were firstlings of the modern age."

"I suppose so," admitted Dr Furbis, visibly crestfallen.

"Just think of the paintings. Almost all on religious themes. And of course the pervasive influence of Neo-Platonism. That was just beginning to be felt, particularly in Renaissance Florence."

"He's got the idea that binary numbers are the be-all and end-all of everything," said Belmont. "Don't you see that, existing within a computer, he must think that everything is a stream of binary data."

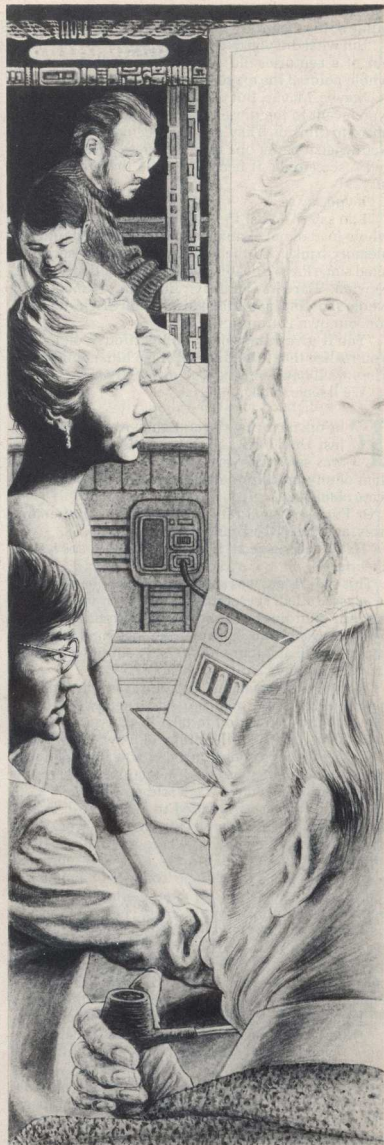
"Jesus Christ," said Dr Furbis.

"No, not so much our Lord and Saviour," said Scriven, who hadn't caught the last remark, lost in some reverie of his own on quattrocento mysticism. "More the influence of Plotinus and other Neo-Platonists. It's all there in the paintings, for those who have eyes to see."

"No two ways about it," said Dr Furbis. "We have to update his knowledge somewhat – and more than somewhat."

She was talking to Belmont after they'd got rid of the other spectators of that first run of the Piero construct. Together they were mulling over the upshot of what they had seen and heard.

"All his ideas are totally out of date. You can almost



smell the thick accumulations of dust on them, the mildew, the centuries of cobwebs."

"But what did you expect, Helen? You've lifted him out of a centuries-old past. I thought that was the whole point of the exercise."

"Maybe. Maybe. But what he tells us now has got to be relevant to the present day. We have the funding board to think of. They're not going to appreciate this Neo-whatsit patter one little bit. Piero has to be dragged – screaming, if need be – into the present century."

"If you say so."

"I do say so. What I intend to do is to arrange for a whole load of new knowledge to be dumped into his memory banks. All the knowledge that has accumulated since Piero's death. Copernicus. Galileo. Kepler. Newton. Darwin. Faraday. Einstein. Planck. The whole shooting match. Not to mention Crick and Watson, our own patron saints."

"You'll give him mental indigestion – or worse. You realize that this could unhinge him completely. Then we'll have nothing to show the Board..."

"We'll have to take that risk."

For the next run, the audience was restricted to just Dr Furbis and Belmont. They decided it was safer that way. They saw now the unwisdom of any premature disclosure of the results they were obtaining.

Dr Furbis juggled rather inexpertly with the controls, and the VDU sprang to life.

"Hello there, Piero. How are things?" she asked cheerfully.

This time, Piero was standing against a background of glass-walled skyscrapers and other identifiably modern buildings. He wore a loose-fitting polo-necked sweater and a pair of baggy jogging slacks. The vapour trails of a four-engined jet could just be seen crossing the sky behind his head.

"This is truly amazing," he said. "I feel as though I have wakened after a sleep lasting many centuries. My mind has expanded to take in the vast scope of more than half a millennium of new knowledge. There are wonderful new insights now unfolded into the nature of matter and the interactions of energy."

"And how do you see the world now?"

"I see all things as founded in beauty still. Everywhere I discern the ordered patterns, at the very heart of all we experience. Everywhere the mathematical intervals, strung out like notes of a well-tempered scale, which govern the inner structure of matter and the ceaseless pulsations of energy all around us. In many ways my views have scarcely changed. The vibrant shells of energy which encircle the nucleus of each atom are at least as beautiful as anything we formerly imagined. They far outshine the crystalline spheres which were once believed, following Claudius Ptolemy, to be poised at intervals around the earth's dull globe, chiming together in sublime harmony."

"Hmm. Many people see these new facts just as facts, not as specially beautiful or unbeautiful."

"But how can you say such things? Physics is founded upon mathematics, is it not? But mathematics is founded upon beauty. Do not mathematicians choose their theories according to their intrinsic beauty? Do they not say, 'This is an elegant theorem,

we will adopt this one. This on the other hand is crude, cumbersome, unlovely. This one we reject?'"

"I suppose you're right."

"Science, too, is surely founded upon beauty. Thus we reject Ptolemy's view of the universe. Why? Not because his interrotating epicycles do not correspond to the observations. No. We scorn them because they are cumbersome. We prefer Kepler's ellipses because they are so much simpler, that is to say more elegant, that is to say more beautiful."

"Perhaps you're right. So half a millennium of new knowledge hasn't changed your fundamental belief in the primacy of beauty?"

"You are correct. But one thing is new – very new."

"What's that?"

"I used to believe in eternal verities. Behind the flux of passing phenomena, I thought I discerned a timeless world of unchanging realities. That was the message of the Master Plato. Now all that is swept away by new knowledge. I see the glorious uncertainty of it all. This man Heisenberg really shifted the solid ground from under our feet, in a way that not even Copernicus could do. Now, all is at hazard, thanks to the devastating force of the Uncertainty Principle..."

"Quite, quite," muttered Dr Furbis. "I say, Piero, could you do something for me?"

"Of course. Subject to the whim of chance, which must govern all our existences."

"Could you write me a thesis? Nothing too long – eighty thousand words will do. On the transformation of our knowledge from the days of your past life to the understanding of the present day."

"A huge theme."

"Yes, but keep it brief and pithy, as you did in your treatise on perspective. Good practical stuff."

"Of course."

"Goodbye for now, then."

"Goodbye."

The image on the VDU faded.

Dr Furbis had hoped to see some progress in the first week, but there had been hiccups. Perrin reported that a message had been put out by Piero on the printer, requesting a link-up to all major telephone networks, so that he could access the public databases. A satellite link-up would be useful too. A dish was duly installed on the roof of the building. Piero needed to plumb the depths of all the great libraries, both here and abroad, to assemble the matrix of facts on which the thesis would be based.

By the end of the first fortnight nothing had come off the printer beyond a few introductory paragraphs, couched in the broadest and most generalized language.

"He's using fantastic amounts of computing power," Perrin told Dr Furbis.

"Presumably trying hard to integrate all the information. A bit of a struggle."

"I don't know. He's got a security shield round a whole section of activity. It seems to involve a great deal of satellite communication, with data streams proceeding in both directions 24 hours a day."

At the end of the third week, a terse message emerged from the printer.

"Cannot proceed. Satellite link cut off. P."

Dr Furbis and Belmont stood by while Perrin probed the computer system to locate the cause of this breakdown in communication.

The satellite link was indeed dead, but he got through on the conventional transcontinental phone.

The satellite company's response was clear: "It is our policy to discontinue our service when an account is more than five days in arrears."

Belmont and Helen Furbis exchanged glances. Of course, they should have been monitoring the financial side more closely. But then, it was all routinely handled by the computer system. No one had thought to request financial print-outs on a day-to-day basis.

"We've been paying for the satellite link exclusively out of the project budget. I take it," Dr Furbis said to Perrin. "Surely all the funds can't have been exhausted at this stage."

It was worse than that. Perrin got a readout from the computer.

"Phew!" he said faintly.

The entire finances of the lab were in the red. It was not just the project budget that had gone. The entire kitty had been drained of all resources by Piero – all the monies that were responsible for paying their salaries and the overheads of the Centre.

Colour drained from Helen Furbis's cheeks as she realized the enormity of the disaster. They were broke.

"But how on earth did Piero manage to run through all that money?" she asked. "Even operating the satellite and all the telephone links for 24 hours a day, he'd scarcely be able to. It just doesn't add up."

"Or subtract down, you might say," ventured Belmont.

Dr Furbis glared at him. This was no time for hair-splitting witticisms.

"Get me a full print-out of all financial transactions," she snapped at Perrin.

Concertinas of folded paper began to spew from the laser printer as Perrin fed in the necessary instructions. After a short time they were practically knee deep in the stuff. Then the printer bleeped and stopped. "Out of paper," said Perrin. He went to get a fresh stack.

Dr Furbis, who had been examining a wadge of print-out, held up her hand. "Hang on. There's only about three days' worth of transactions here, but it may be enough to give us the general picture. Have a look at this, David."

The print-out showed an endless stream of sums of money flowing to an address in Las Vegas. At first the sums involved were fairly small, and there was some counterflow of monies in the other direction. Then the sums increased exponentially. They became huge, and the flow was largely one-way.

It was horribly clear.

Piero had gambled away their entire finances. Within the computers, he had found ways of draining off their financial life-blood – and his own – in some crazy scheme he had hatched.

"Get him up on the screen," raged Dr Furbis. "Let's hope there's some rational explanation of all this."

The image of Piero showed no sign of contrition.

"What else did you expect?" was all he offered in the way of apology.

"Don't you realize I had to give myself some kind of enlivening stimulus, some kick of motivation? You failed to provide me with a body, and all the thrills that the body offers to the psyche. As a disembodied ghost, what other form of excitement was open to me?"

"And this in a Universe where the Goddess of Nature herself plays dice..."

Dr Furbis gazed wearily at the VDU. "What kind of crazy scheme were you operating?" she asked. And then in an aside to Belmont, "As if it matters now."

"I used an idea from a fellow-countryman of mine. The Fibonacci series. It yields, as you know, a diagram of great beauty, not unlike a sea-shell such as Botticelli might have limned.

"Instead of doubling up on each loser, in the conventional way, I went to the next term of the series. In this way I could sustain a longer run of losers."

"Not long enough," said Dr Furbis.

Somewhere on a lab shelf a stack of discs lies inert, collecting dust on its plastic cover.

Piero lies sleeping, awaiting a further incarnation, after his long oblivion of more than five centuries.

Until funds permit...

Or until another researcher, as bold or as foolhardy as Helen Furbis, looks back over the Centre records, and finds an interesting passage, partially deleted.

It could be a long wait.

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William Spencer wrote "Striptease" (*Interzone* 72). For further details of his interesting life and intermittent writing career see the interview with him which follows.

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The Sonic Sculptor

William Spencer interviewed by David Pringle

A former advertising man turned college lecturer, now living in Sussex, William Spencer wrote and published about a dozen science-fiction stories between 1960 and 1970. Since retiring from teaching a few years ago, he has taken up writing again, has sold two stories to *Interzone* and has finished an as-yet unpublished novel. He visited the magazine's office in Brighton in July 1993, and talked to me about his life, his writing, his acquaintance with science-fiction editor Ted Carnell and his friendship over many years with novelist J.G. Ballard.

"I was born in Nottingham in 1925. I was lucky enough to get a scholarship to Cambridge from my local state school, but because the war was on I couldn't go there immediately. Instead I was called up, joined the RAF and found myself doing a six-month course in basic radio at Bradford Technical College. (I'd had an interest in radio as a teenager, and I'd built a couple of one-valve radio sets and that sort of thing.) After this course in radio, I went on to a radar establishment to train in radar equipment. Then I was shipped out to India for the rest of the war – and a bit more, because not everybody got out on VJ Day. The units I was posted to were mainly in Bengal, and the main problem was surviving the heat and the incredibly high humidity. I think there were a few Japanese raids on Calcutta, but they were before I got there..."

On the face of it, this experience in the RAF and India would seem to have given Bill Spencer a certain amount in common with Jim Ballard, who, although five years younger, had grown up in the Far East and was later to serve in the Air Force himself. Bill said: "I don't think that was the trigger which started the friendship, but we certainly had a bond of somewhat similar experience. The streets of Calcutta, with inert beggars lying there apparently in the process of dying, were very like the streets of Shanghai that Jim Ballard describes in *Empire of the Sun* – when he used to be chauffeured to school in his father's limousine."

Despite his technical background, when Bill eventually arrived in Cambridge in 1947 it was to read English. "Although my main passion has been literature and the arts, I've always had a considerable interest in science and technology. When I was at Cambridge I was experimenting with various forms of writing – poetry and a bit of drama, and I wrote some attempts at science fiction then. I was there three years, and I think I met Jim Ballard (he was always known as "Jimmy" then) in my second year at Cambridge – it may have been his first year. It was either at the Cambridge film society or some literary function. I don't know what drew us together, but we did find a good deal to talk about and we met regularly after that. My college was St Catharine's and Jim Ballard's was King's which was next door, so it would happen that I'd walk over to see him or he'd walk over to see me, or we'd occupy a good many mis-spent hours in the Copper Kettle drinking coffee. There was a Cypriot restaurant which we favoured for meals (at the end of the meal we'd often finish with a mysterious dish called yoghurt which was a near-eastern delicacy we'd never heard of – we little suspected it would be on every supermarket's shelves in 30 years time!). And on sunny days we'd go walking by the river, or take a punt upstream in the direction of Grantchester. I had a girl friend at the time who was a nurse, and because Jim was a medical student they would get involved in these highly anatomical discussions that would leave me feeling distinctly ill. I think Jim, probably like most medical students, often discovered in himself the symptoms of the latest dread disease he'd been studying, so there would be discussions with my nurse friend about this.

"He must have had some literary inclination in his first year at university, and I think that was partly what made the friendship work. I imagine after a morning spent in the dissecting laboratories – the sort of thing he describes very vividly in his novel *The Kindness of Women* – it would have been a relief to come and talk about

books and art. Also, we were quite big on Freudian and Jungian psychology. (This was one of my approaches to literature, because certainly Marxism didn't appeal to me as a way of profiling literature.) His approach to lots of things was via physiology, and this again was a thing in which we were rather complementary, because I tended to shy away from the physical aspects of existence, I suppose, and go off into some rarefied upper atmosphere of aesthetic discussion. Jim would have much more the physiological understanding of the human brain: the body as a physical reality with lots of tubes and organs running through it and blood pumping around it. I think there is this element in Freud – I mean, Freud himself was a medical man, and he was inclined to relate his findings to a physical basis.

"And of course Jim was already showing some mastery in writing – he won the *Varsity* story competition the following year. We maintained friendly contact after we left university. I was working as an advertising copywriter for an agency in London, and he was doing various jobs. Later on he became part of the editorial staff of a professional journal, and it was then that he knew Ted Carnell who was editing *New Worlds SF*. Jim told me that Carnell was on the look-out for new material. I think he told me this because he remembered the stuff I'd written years before at university. So I set to work and produced a fairly long first story called "The Watch Tower," which was 8,000 words – it was the longest complete story in that particular issue of *New Worlds*, in August 1960."

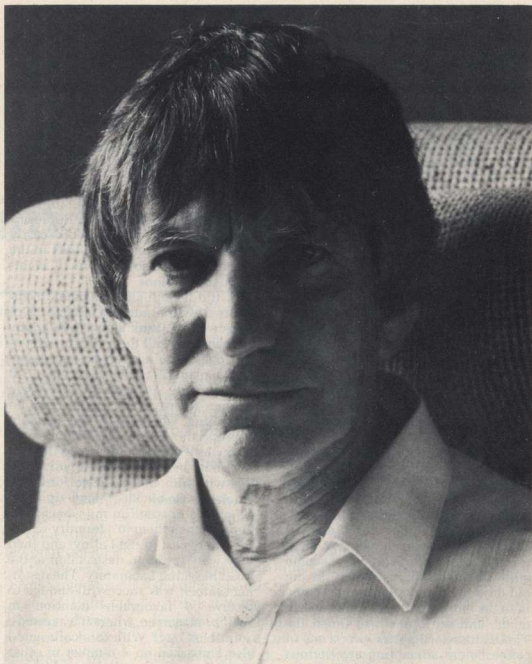
That was William Spencer's first published piece of fiction. His earlier writing at Cambridge had been "experimental work, almost as part of the course of study I was on – not a formal part of it, but my tutor did encourage people to produce pieces of writing. I think I would have done so anyway, but there was that encouragement." He continued to write after university: "I wrote a tremendous amount of stuff but I was remiss about submitting it to publishers, and a lot of it was poetry,

which was difficult to find a market for. I think I was looking for some form of expression which would be me, so to speak, and I don't think I particularly found it.

"It would be nice to think that I would have written science fiction anyway, but there's a lot in having a target market. In the 1960s sf was much more of a limited world, not so much in terms of the readership but from the point of view of the people who thought they could write sf – not many people thought they had the background, or perhaps the right kind of imagination, to write it. I suppose this is what motivated me, as well as the encouragement I got from Carnell, because there had been all sorts of episodes in my life up to that point which had centred on technological things. For example, I've maintained an interest in electronics right from the 1940s onwards. When I finished the third year at Cambridge I knew at that time a man doing a doctorate in engineering and he invited me to work as his assistant for a few weeks while I was waiting for some firm job prospects to come through the university appointments board. So I worked with him at the Cambridge Engineering Laboratory on a piece of research he was doing in magneto-hydrodynamics. I was able to go on a visit to Harwell nuclear research establishment with him; and although that was quite a brief experience I think one gains a lot from meeting people who are at the cutting edge of science and seeing pieces of equipment being used for real.

"Ever since boyhood I'd been tinkering with electromagnets and homemade gadgets of all kinds and any piece of equipment I could get my hands on. It's hard to explain why this was only a secondary thing, but the essential point was that I wanted to pursue something where I felt the whole of experience could be brought in – the whole of reality, if you like – whereas science has always seemed to me to be like a cone opening on a limited segment of reality. The arts have always seemed to go much deeper and to have the potential to bring in everything one knows. I suppose if you look at it in physiological terms, all the levels of the brain and perhaps the internal chemistry of the body are involved in artistic expression, and in the appreciation of works of art, whereas technology is a fascinating thing but when you stop doing it you have still got to start living, as it were."

Apart from his friendship with J.G. Ballard, Bill Spencer had few contacts with people in the sf world. But he did meet his editor, Ted Carnell (who died in 1972). "He had an office in fairly central London, and I was in



William Spencer, 1993

walking distance. I suppose there was no particular need to go and see him in the flesh, but it was often convenient to do so and I found him very affable. He had a gentle, considerate manner. He wasn't a very big chap; he was rather slight in physical stature and he had an unassuming manner. If he'd stood next to you in a bus queue you wouldn't really have noticed him. His voice was quiet, but it was nicely modulated. It often seemed to me that when he was talking to writers he spoke to them in this reassuring tone as you might speak to a nervous horse, a wild horse that might at any moment kick up and gallop off into the distance. I hope he wasn't making a special exception in my case! – but his manner was almost as if he was close to and quietly conversing with a rather dangerous maniac who might suddenly burst out into some unpredictable behaviour. It was part of his character really, but I think he realized that writers are often rather nervous people. With some editors and publishers, I sometimes felt that they want to browbeat the writer because they

have this suspicion that he has an ego the size of the Royal Albert Hall and at all costs it must be damped down if there's to be any hope of dealing sensibly with this terrible person... But Ted Carnell had an encouraging manner. Also, he did quite a lot in the way of getting overseas sales and so on. One of my stories was read on German radio, which would never have come about unaided.

"Later on Ted moved out of central London to Plumstead, which is still very much in greater London as far as I'm concerned. I never went to see him there, but when I spoke to him on the phone he seemed to feel it was an idyllic retreat (certainly by contrast with central London it would have been). It's nice to think of him in what were in fact the final years of his life having this relaxation and lowering of tension and so on. One thing that he did in *New Worlds*, which got lost in *New Writings in SF*, was that it was a two-way thing, a link between the author and the reader. He had these author profiles, and letters and Guest Editorials. (This is also the good thing,

I think, about *Interzone*: it has the feeling of being a forum, a two-way traffic of ideas.) This is quite important for writers, to feel they are in touch with an audience, to get feedback. But this element unfortunately got lost in *New Writings* because that came out as a hardcover book, and though it had an editorial by Ted Carnell it was purely a stiff-backed anthology of stories. If I'm clutching at straws to answer why I stopped writing science fiction this might have come into it a bit: it was very much a take-it-or-leave-it activity, it made little difference to one personally whether one wrote stories or not."

Bill worked in advertising from 1950 to 1964. "When I first joined this particular firm the department I was in had been known as the Literary Department until a few years previously. Dorothy L. Sayers had been a copywriter there. It was S.H. Benson, which no longer exists as a separate firm, but it had a great history: it had been founded in 1893, and it had some very major accounts like Guinness – we had been responsible for producing all those posters: 'My Goodness, My Guinness' and so on. While I was there a man called Julian Yeatman joined, who was the co-author of *1066 and All That*, and another man who was there was Gavin Ewart, who has become quite distinguished as a poet. In the old days the copywriters would come in in the mornings in a rather leisurely mode, and settle down to finish the *Times* crossword-puzzle over a cup of coffee before attempting any serious work. Things had become a little bit crisper and more utilitarian by the time I joined, but it was still a business of sitting in a room with a pencil and pad of paper and maybe hacking out a hundred words in a day; you would write and rewrite those hundred words in every conceivable fashion. So it was a great place to polish one's craftsmanship as a writer.

"In the early 1950s, Jim Ballard had a succession of jobs which were quite bizarre. One of them was as a Covent Garden porter. That one sticks in my mind because it was rather unexpected (although he was an athletic young man; I imagine he could lift up whatever they lift up in Covent Garden with no trouble at all). I think he started at four o'clock in the morning and, having finished his day's work, he would come into my office at about 10 am, gasping for a cup of coffee. It seemed to me this was completely the wrong job for him to be doing. I knew there was a copywriting job going in a neighbouring agency and I encouraged him to apply – but this proved to be quite the wrong thing, almost a total disaster in that he didn't find it suited him at all and he handed in his notice almost immediately and disappeared from view.

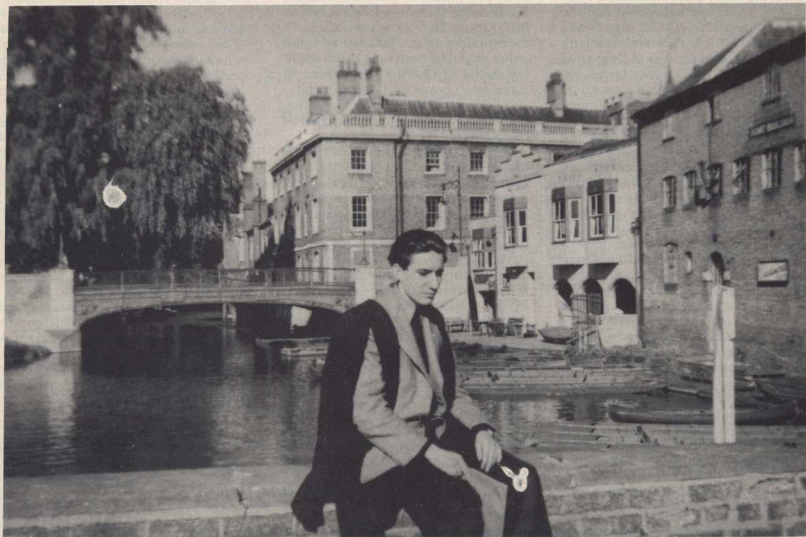
"But one has to give all due respect to the trade of the advertising copywriter. I got into it as a young man, and it is very much a young man's career in that it's stimulating and a lot of the people involved in it are lively. I also enjoyed the fact that one was working very closely with artists, people who had been to the Slade School or the Royal College of Art, and because of my keen interest in the visual arts I enjoyed talking to them about the latest pieces of art on view in the little galleries near Bond Street. Because I worked in Kingsway, I could easily travel over towards Bond Street in the lunch hour and see all sorts of avant-garde productions.

"I did eventually become disenchanted with a number of features of agency life. I think almost everybody* on what they call the 'creative' side of an advertising agency has got some escape plan. It's rather like Stalag 13-B – everybody is working on some scheme to leave advertising and do something which they feel is more appropriate. There was a colleague who was working in his spare time on car safety belts, and I got involved in this with him and designed for him a quick-release buckle. I made up models of this in wood in my garage, and then we took them to a foundry where they were cast in light alloy, and then they were tested to destruction at the Road Research Laboratory. The resulting seatbelt was successful enough to receive a favourable mention in *Which?* magazine, where it was rated a 'joint best buy.' With this colleague I also embarked on a number of other projects: one was a lightweight boat, made of rigid foam plastic for putting on a car roof-rack – one person could heft it into position. I remember testing this on the local duck pond on a freezing cold winter's morning. All these were part of the escape schemes, I suppose."

Given the subsequent interest shown by the author of *Crash* in cars, seatbelts and the Road Research Laboratory, I asked Bill Spencer if Jim Ballard had known about his design for a safety-belt buckle. "I'm not sure; I may have discussed it with him. But about the same time (when I was in 'manufacturing mode') Jim mentioned to me an idea of his for counting words on a typewriter, and I produced on my own typewriter a mechanical contraption using this principle he'd enunciated which did approximately count the number of words you'd typed. Then I spent quite a long time in the Patent Office trying to determine whether or not it was worth pursuing a patent on it. But the problem was that you couldn't really produce a universal model which could be clamped onto any typewriter – it would have to be specific to each model of typewriter.

"I think that was the only technical idea Jim Ballard suggested to me. Going back earlier into the 1950s – this was when I was first married, and it was a happy time, but I didn't much like the daily commuting that was involved (I lived in Surrey) – I took up painting and sculpture as a way of unwinding. I attended the St Martin's School of Art in the evening on a part-time basis for a while, and my tutor was a man called Eduardo Paolozzi – oddly enough, some of his sculptures at that time had a rather science-fiction look to them, they were like giant alien frogs or something that had just landed. My young wife was making portrait heads, and she was in the next room at St Martin's under the tutelage of Elizabeth Frink. So it was quite a strong tutorial team we had. This was about 1956. I attended Paolozzi's classes, and I had an idea based on my electronic tinkering (because all this time I was building various contraptions as another of my so-called relaxations) for what I thought of as Sonic Sculpture. I'd heard of a device called a 'theremin,' a kind of early electronic musical instrument, which you played without any physical contact – by moving your hand nearer or further from a metal rod. My idea was to incorporate something like this into pieces of sculpture, which would then emit varying sounds as the spectator moved around them. I mentioned this project to Jim Ballard and he said that he thought the sculpture should be at least six feet high and of a menacing appearance! Unfortunately, I couldn't get this theremin to work because it demanded the winding of some rather specialized coils which you couldn't wind by hand. I produced a thing called 'The Gates of Time,' which was about a foot high, and it flashed and made a ticking noise rhythmically; and also an inert sculpture which was called 'Moonflower' which had huge upturned petals like an aberrant radio telescope. Both of these I did actually sell, but they didn't lead to any developments in sculpture for me."

In 1964 Bill left the agency. "Finally one of the escape plans worked. This was to take the post of lecturing in English at a College of Technology, and I moved out of advertising altogether. Then I decided I'd like to do a doctorate in English, and as I was within travelling distance of the University of Sussex, that's where I went." It was around 1970, when he was a part-time postgraduate student at Sussex University, that Bill stopped writing sf. "I think there could be cause and effect there, because I did have to produce for my supervisor fairly hefty screeds on a regular basis towards this thesis, which was on the writings of Aldous Huxley. Two of his works I suppose are science fiction – *Brave New World*, of course, and *After Many*



William Spencer in Cambridge, 1950

a *Summer*, a less well known work which is based on the idea that man is a kind of foetal ape and if he lived long enough his simian characteristics would emerge in more explicit terms. The other thing which attracted me to Huxley was his interest in oriental philosophies, which had been another preoccupation of mine in the 50s and 60s. When I got the DPhil, I did part-time lecturing at Sussex University for about five years, from 1972 to 1977."

He eventually returned to sci writing after a gap of some 20 years. "I'd been busy doing other things. Also, there'd been a big movement towards sword-and-sorcery writing, which was a genre that didn't appeal to me – that was a factor. I think I can only write when I get a starting idea which intrigues me and opens up some sort of vista. I did in fact jot down ideas during the 70s but they never got written. When I took early retirement, I started writing some non-fiction and my thoughts turned again to science fiction as a medium. (It's about five years now since I retired.) I've been working on a science-fiction novel which is pretty well ready to send to publishers, but I want to make a few amendments before I send it off."

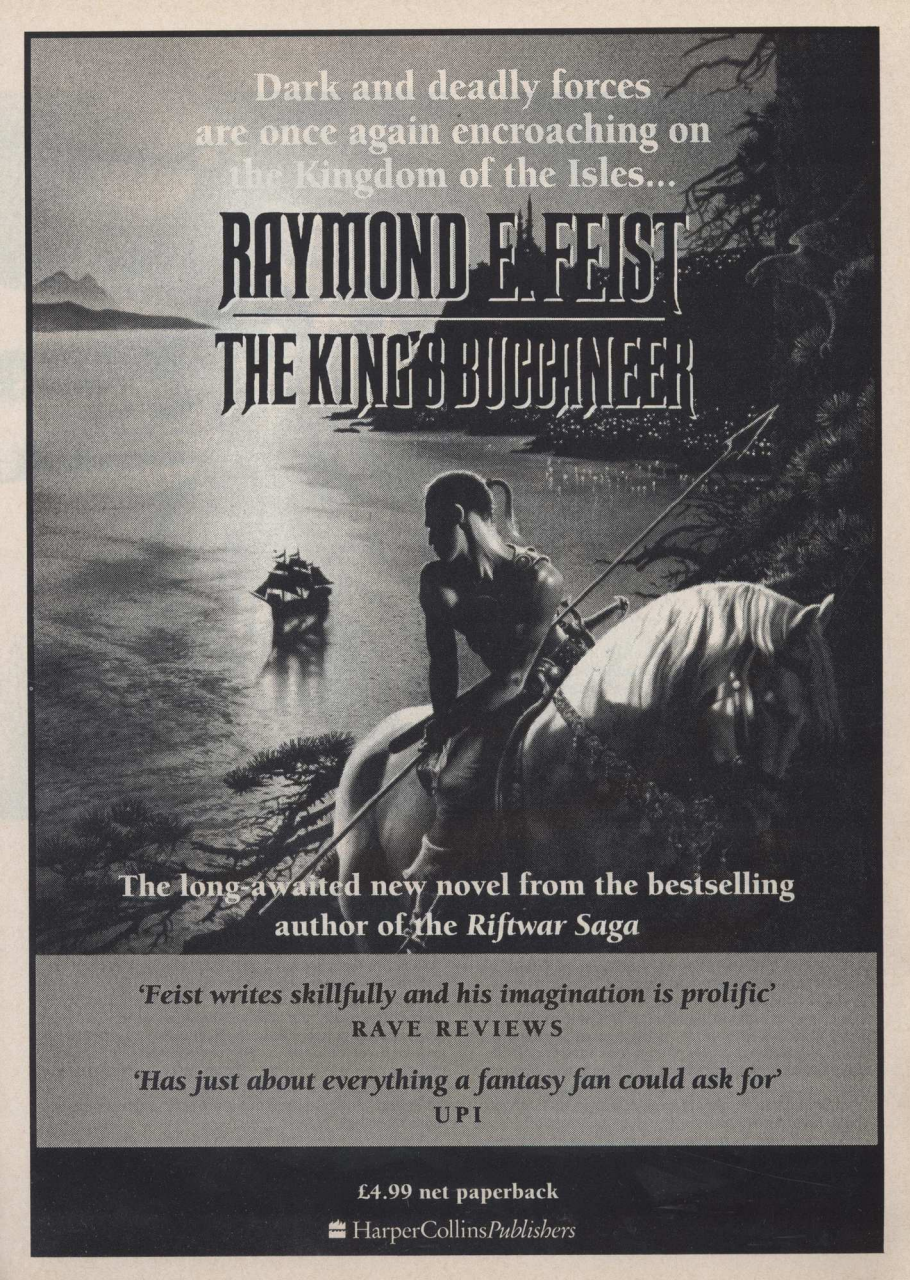
Returning to the subject of his early years at university, Bill Spencer added: "A point that I haven't made about Jim Ballard and myself at uni-

versity is that there was a great deal of rather orthodox thinking going on at Cambridge in those years immediately following the Second World War. A lot of people saw the university as a place where you went to learn some specific body of knowledge, almost by rote, and you got a qualification and you ended up with a job. But Jim and I tended more towards the unorthodox in our thinking, we were slightly out of alignment with the general current of thought. Certainly I myself, and I think this would be true of Jim, saw the years at Cambridge as an opportunity to explore areas of thought and reach out to all sorts of horizons of understanding. I suppose one mustn't make too much of this, but there seemed to be an awful lot of people around who were content to cling to a fixed set of ideas which they were very reluctant to question.

"There were two or three people who I used to be friendly with who were also ill at ease with the general current of thinking. A place like Cambridge is so steeped in history, you're moving among medieval buildings. It was bad enough in my college, where the chapel sits at the end of three sides of a square and many of my fellow undergraduates would go on a regular basis to take part in religious services. And in the case of Jim's college, you would come out into the quadrangle and there was this enormous and very

magnificent building, King's College Chapel. It dominates the whole of that bit of Cambridge, which is probably the most typical bit. So, while one appreciated all the music and the other cultural offerings that were going on in Cambridge, there was this constant ringing of bells summoning people to worship, which was distinctly jarring. There was also a hidebound quality in a lot of the mundane details of life, you had to be in your rooms by a certain hour and all that kind of thing. I don't want to suggest that we went round waving banners or tying tin cans to things, or whatever else one does to protest: there was no outward expression of this disquiet other than in discussion, but I think we just felt that much of the mainstream of Cambridge life was happening in some other universe. It was another dimension of activity which as far as I was concerned was not what I was there for anyway. I was there to explore ideas and to meet interesting and often very able people who were often quite many-sided – the engineering post-graduate I mentioned earlier could play the piano almost to concert-pianist standard for instance.

"Another point that perhaps I haven't got across is that my life really has been haunted by a sense of enigma – that there is something to be solved, as it were. Perhaps people who can get on with everyday activities without



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Off Nicholas Royle

I'd been aware of the Ukrainian woman for some time, obviously, but it was only when I gave my paper entitled "Exploding the Myth of Air Travel and Manned Flight" that I finally met her.

"And this is Inna Gerashchenko," the official said, introducing the leader of the Save Our Skies (SOS) organization to me and a group of other delegates.

"I'm very pleased to meet you," she said with a slightly unnerving stare and a surprisingly firm handshake. I expected her to add "in spite of what you stand for" or something similar, but she contented herself with a little glint in the eye as she looked away. When the group broke up for coffee and those trays of cakes the organizers of these events always seem to produce from out of nowhere, Inna and I bumped into each other at the glass doors that led out to the hotel terrace.

"Please," I said, opening the door for her and speaking with the fragile politeness you try to maintain even for your enemies.

"It's pleasing to know the great iconoclast still believes in good manners," she said as she walked

through, and although she didn't hesitate or look back, I found myself following her out into the sunlight. The morning's rhetoric and speeches delivered in the stifling glare of television lights had made me long for some fresh air.

"Should we really be seen together?" I asked her to her back.

She didn't turn round until she reached the low wall that marked the edge of the terrace.

"What a strange thing to say." She leaned back against the wall, the silk of her blouse stretched momentarily across her body by the April breeze. I looked away, feeling a little uncomfortable, and realized she was smiling. "Your speech was entertaining," she added in a slightly mocking tone.

"Paper," I said pompously. "I give papers. You make speeches."

"Of course," she said. "The great philosopher. You have a reputation to create."

"I have lives to save," I retorted, raising my coffee cup from its saucer.

She snorted and turned to look out over the reser-



Illustrations by Russell Morgan

voirs. I saw her head turn as she watched a flock of shellduck scoot over the water's surface. Behind us I heard the drone of a jet beginning its descent towards Heathrow. I turned and looked up, as I always do, and called to Inna to do the same. I touched her arm and persuaded her to turn round and watch the plane.

"Forgive me," I said, watching the winged fuselage flash in the sunlight, "but you should always look up."

"Why?" she asked, looking down at my hand on her sleeve.

I let my arm fall. "Always look up," I repeated. "Three planes have come down over the last two months. That's a fact. You agree?"

"As you say: fact. Two here and one outside Paris."

"And in all three cases the cause is unattributable. Correct?"

"The investigations are not finished, Professor."

I ignored the ironic reference to my media nickname. "But you know the black boxes have been recovered in all three cases and they reveal nothing. Those three planes simply fell out of the sky."

"Human error," she said.

"Clearly," I said, "in allowing the damned things to take off in the first place."

She looked down, pulled her jacket tighter and took the last little cake from my saucer.

"Shouldn't we be getting back?" she said, looking directly at me. "You wouldn't want the debate to start without you. Not that it could, anyway, given that as long as you're not around, there is no debate."

I smiled at her and thought I saw her eyes widen ever so slightly as she returned my gaze. We made our way back into the hotel.

"Three planes have come down in two months," I said into the microphone at the lectern, holding up three fingers for emphasis, "and there has been no explanation for their failure." I looked across the debating chamber at Inna Gerashchenko and caught her eye. She pursed her lips and looked down at her nails.

"Those planes came down," I continued, fired up by that small victory, "those three planes crashed, killing everyone on board and substantial numbers of

people on the ground, because in the first place we are not meant to be up there. Man cannot fly. And it's about time we realized it. Building planes and attempting to fly them is the most outrageous folly and the most striking example of man's arrogance and stupidity."

There was a general murmur in the chamber. Delegates rustled papers, chewed the ends of their spectacles, toyed with cigarette lighters. Reporters' hands flew across notebook pages. Inna was watching me again.

"The old science is dead, ladies and gentlemen, the old laws and assumptions all have to be called into question. The rule book has to be torn up and thrown away. People ask me *why? what has changed? was there a revolution? I didn't see a revolution.* There has been no revolution, ladies and gentlemen. The laws have never applied. We just thought they did. We were foolish ever to believe in flight. Those planes." I paused for effect, holding up one finger as a focal point (I knew all the tricks and I enjoyed nothing more than milking an audience, even if most of those sympathetic to my point of view were at home watching on television rather than in the room with me), "those planes crashed because no one on the ground looked up as they went overhead."

With that I stopped, resting both hands on the lectern. Out in the rows of seats heads were shaken, looks exchanged. Although they wouldn't admit it, all the major airlines had representatives tucked in among the scientists and politicians. They knew their days were numbered.

"These are exciting times. Even those resistant to change are constantly dropping apples to the floor for reassurance and grabbing hold of the solid world at every opportunity. Politics is finished, a spent force. The New Science is all. You either embrace it or lose your grip. Those planes came down because no one looked up.

"Why do you think we look up whenever we hear a plane overhead? We know what the sound is, we've heard it a million times, but still we look up. Why? We look up because we're frightened in case something goes wrong. We look up and we think of those hundreds of poor souls held captive in that thin-skinned flying cigar; we hope they won't crash. We reassure ourselves that the plane will stay aloft. We believe in it. And that's what keeps it up there: passengers in the plane believing it can take off, and fly, and land, without killing anyone. And people on the ground who look up instinctively when they hear the engines. They bear it up.

"And if no one looks up? If everyone hears the sound of the engines and takes it for granted that it's a plane and it can fly without crashing, then it comes down. And I put it to you, ladies and gentlemen, that that's what happened with these three planes that have come down in the last two months. No one looked up.

"We must look up. Look up at every plane you hear, because that way you might just save several hundred lives. That's how aircraft safety operates, ladies and gentlemen, and anyone who believes otherwise is a fool, and a dangerous one. That's why we have to ban all air flights now and for ever."

I thumped the lectern on "now" — and then crumpled

up my notes in my fist and flung them into a corner as I strode from the dais, ensuring that every single person in that room was watching me and hanging on my last words. Although I kept my eyes straight ahead as I regained my seat seven rows back, I could see Inna bristling out of the corner of my eye. Was there just a little awe mixed in with her anger? I hoped so.

There was a knock on my door that night. The organizers, though not overburdened with funds, had offered to provide overnight accommodation in the hotel for any speakers who required it and I made a point of never refusing such offers, as they came up so rarely in the miserable economic climate of those exciting days.

I was sitting by the open window with a cigar, watching the reflections of landing jets in the inky reservoirs and thinking about my parents when the knock came.

"Come," I said, not yet fearing attempts on my life by airline industry assassins, and the door opened to reveal the impressive silhouette of Inna Gerashchenko, silk blouse now hanging loosely undone over a Lycra body and short black skirt.

I don't mind admitting I was surprised.

"It can wait until tomorrow if I'm disturbing you," she said from the doorway.

"No, I'm just watching the planes," I said limply, rising to my feet and tossing the unfinished cigar out of the window, my parents forgotten. My trousers were rather crumpled and my tie and top two shirt buttons were undone. "Come in. I'll order some drinks."

"Not for me, thank you."

She spoke English well, with only a slight accent, which she no doubt resented but I found beguiling. I picked up the phone ordered a bottle of Stolichnaya and two glasses anyway and hoped she wouldn't think the choice too subtle.

"Won't you sit down?" I offered her the chair I'd been sitting in by the window and I went to get the other chair from under the fitted desk. My eyes fell on the letter from my parents in which they'd written about the tests they were due to have in a day or two. They'd had tests before. It was no big deal.

Inna was carrying something which she placed on the window ledge next to her: papers, I thought, but I couldn't see what was on them.

"So have you decided to join my campaign?" I asked impudently. "Did I win you over with my arguments, my appeal to reason, my watertight logic?"

I found myself reaching into the pocket of my jacket, which was on the back of the chair, for my small tin of cigars, wondering why I'd thrown one away unfinished. I was just opening the tin when there was another knock on the door and I fumbled the lid, dropping the tin and scattering the contents on the peach carpet.

"I'll get the door," she said, getting to her feet and crossing the room with short, fluid steps. I collected up my cigars and tried to grind stray scraps of tobacco into the carpet with my shoe. Inna accepted the drinks tray from the waiter, tipped him with a handful of coins she scooped up off my desk, and shut the door. She deposited the tray on the bed — having to my considerable embarrassment swept aside a discarded

pair of boxer shorts – and sat down, waving my hand away when I held out the tin of cigars and carpet fluff.

"I prefer not to risk my life for a cigar, flying or otherwise," she said, neatly throwing back at me the cigar image from my speech.

"A drink then?" I suggested.

She didn't say no, so I unscrewed the chilled bottle and poured two generous measures of vodka.

"You take it neat, I trust?" I offered her the glass and she took it, sipped once and poured the rest down her throat.

I raised my eyebrows, conceding her some kind of point, whatever she thought she deserved for downing the Stolichnaya in such a way.

"Use fingers," she said suddenly as I was pouring her another glass.

"I'm sorry?"

"Use fingers. Three planes. Two months. Stress the three."

It sounded familiar.

"Your notes." She picked up the the pages from the window ledge. She'd straightened them out pretty well. "It's all very well throwing them away for effect, but only if you throw them where no one can get at them. Use fingers." She shook her head.

I tried to remember what other embarrassing details the notes would have contained, but she was talking again. It was easier to drink the vodka and sit back and listen.

"You know what the worst thing about all of this is? OK, you want to take us back a hundred years, slow the whole world down and put millions of people out of work, but do you know what the worst thing is?" I drew on my cigar. "The worst thing is you're enjoying it. You're excited by the fact that three planes went down killing hundreds of people because you think it proves your insane theories."

Her piece delivered, she remained in the same position, sitting on the edge of the chair leaning forward, as if waiting for a response.

So I gave her one.

I got up and walked out of the room.

I could almost hear her incredulous sigh coming from the room behind me as I headed for the lifts at the end of the carpeted corridor. We all have our ways of coping with confrontation, and that's mine. Stick me on a stage in front of a hundred baying opponents and I'm fine, but shut me in a room with just one of them and it's like, excuse me, where's the way out? Especially – and it niggled me to accept this – if there's a personal element.

I went straight down to the bar and took a large whisky out on to the terrace, where I sat for half an hour watching the lights of the planes. I wondered what I would do when the conference was over. I had allowed myself to construct various fantasies during the day involving Inna Gerashchenko and what we might possibly do together, despite our differences, over the coming weekend. I was sure I hadn't imagined the charge between us. After all, I couldn't see why she would have come to my room so late in the evening, even to attack me, if she didn't also want something to happen.

When I returned to my room it was, of course, empty. I noted with some surprise that the Stolich-



naya bottle stood empty on the floor.

I saw Inna at breakfast in the hotel dining room. Wearing dark glasses, she turned away when she noticed me, so I sat several tables away and opened a newspaper to read an account of the talk I'd given the day before. The news story just presented the bare bones of what I had been saying, but an accompanying comment piece suggested it wasn't actually all as mad as it seemed, though they did satirize me as a sartorial professor type, a sort of 90s equivalent of the leather-elbow-patch and corduroy-jacket wearer. When I put the paper down Inna had gone.

In the morning session she delivered a blistering attack on the so-called New Scientists and Rational Cynics (loose formations of interested folk who followed my regular pronouncements and attended lectures which I gave whenever the money was good enough), saying they were no better than the traditional rubbernecker who slows down on the motorway at the scene of an accident to look for blood.

"Indeed," she shouted into her mike, "they're worse than that. They watch the planes go down, look for the scattered corpses, and dance among them in excitement. When I was a student, my tutor taught me a definition of tragedy. Watching tragedy is like standing on a clifftop, high and dry, watching a ship go down in the sea. Seeing the lives wink out like so many candles. And enjoying it."

"That's tragedy, he told me. Well, these people are tragic. They say they care about the loss of life, that that's what it's all about, preventing further deaths. But in the meantime they're getting off on death. How would they feel if they knew someone on the next plane that goes down?"

By mid-morning the conference had been wound up, without any real conclusion being reached, of course, and I was handing my key in at reception when Inna appeared by my side.

"Share a cab into town?" she suggested, pulling her dark glasses down her nose.

I couldn't say no.

"Enjoy my speech?" she asked, once we were on the M4. "I meant it, you know. How would you feel if your parents were on the next plane to go down?"

I found her approach—the combination of intellectual confrontation and heavy sexual suggestiveness—disconcerting: she'd put her foot up on the seat in front so that her split skirt fell open along her thigh. Her left hand rested on the seat between us, ringless fingers splayed, the longest one tapping the seat fabric in time to the *ch-chunk* of the cab's wheels hitting the motorway's deck sections.

"My parents listen to me," I said, placing my right hand on her leg. "They never fly."

She made no response to my hand, which I withdrew, until she made a signal to the driver and jumped out at the Chiswick roundabout.

"I could never sleep with a man who wears cotton underwear," she said from the pavement, leaving me feeling like a loser with a hefty fare as the cab rejoined the stream of traffic. I resisted the temptation to turn and snatch a last glimpse of her through the rear window.

I spent the rest of the week neglecting everything except my new goal: pursuit of Inna Gerashchenko. Letters lay unopened on my desk, messages waited in limbo on the answering machine while I rang and faxed all over London trying to trace her. I began to wonder if she'd gone back to Kiev, though as long as I laid low her SOS organization could get on with winning the PR war in the headlines, so it made sense for her to stay around. I devoured news reports of the SOS campaign, searching in vain for a profile or a personal piece from some journalist who might let slip where she was staying. But I drew a blank on all fronts. Just about the only thing I remembered to do was look up each time I heard a plane.

I don't really know what it was about her that had ensnared me so efficiently; possibly just the fact that no one had come on to me quite so strongly before and then made themselves completely unavailable. It was enormously effective and I made a mental note to remember the technique, though I wasn't sure it would work the other way round.

I woke up Saturday morning feeling I'd exhausted all possibilities for the time being, so I decided to drive up to my parents' place and see how they were getting on after their tests. I like driving. You feel safe. I don't care what the statistics say; the fact is, as long as you're driving, you're so much more in control of your fate in a car. You can drive carefully, avoid hazards, do your best to take evasive action if the driver coming towards you suddenly goes on mind vacation at the wheel of his car, none of which you can do if you're strapped into an aeroplane seat, at the mercy of some naive foolish pilot.

As I cruised at around 80 I thought about my parents and what they'd be doing as I arrived. A jet coming in to land at the regional airport rumbled overhead and I took my eyes off the road to follow it down through the sky. My father would be in his garage working on one of his machines, his lawn mower or hedge trimmer. He was forever sharpening the blades and improving the performance of the motors. When he heard my car he would wander out of the side door, his white whiskers like tufts of summer thrift in the sudden light, and he'd wipe his hands on an oily rag as I parked in the drive. Then the two of us would walk in the house, finding my mother in the kitchen where she'd be preparing vegetables or sliding a baking tray into the oven.

It was always the same, almost as if they slipped into familiar roles when they knew I was coming. It was reassuring; but weird also, in the way that, say, the streets you use always have the same number of people on them at the same time every day. If someone takes a day off sick they never seem to leave an empty place in the world. You might think the chances against everyone getting sick on the same day are phenomenally high, but in fact it's far stranger that the world remains so constant. I had no doubt, with the way things were going, that before long there would be a day which would break the rules. Either everyone would stay at home, or instead they would all go in to town, even the sick and infirm and those looking for work. The transport services would be unable to cope and the authorities would be surprised. They would talk of unforeseeable demand.

Well, I don't know. Perhaps my own powers of foresight were waning that Saturday morning.

I pulled into my parents' drive and switched off the engine. I sat there for half a minute but still my father didn't appear from the side door, so I got out and strolled down to the garage. There was a square of glass through which you could just about make out the interior of my father's hallowed workshop.

There was some kind of machine upended on the workbench but no sign of my father.

Slightly strange.

I turned and moved towards the kitchen door, but when I twisted the handle the door failed to open. I tried again. Locked. There was a panel of frosted glass in the door which I attempted to peer through. Because I knew the layout of the kitchen pretty well I was able to make out the shapes of the appliances. My mother, who should have been right there standing by one of them, was nowhere to be seen.

I swallowed.

With a growing sense of unease I wandered round to the back of the house and shaded my eyes to get a good look through the living-room window.

When I saw them my hand fell away from the glass and I felt instantly nauseous. My body went cold, then flushed and my skin prickled. I took another look through the window, hoping it had been a trick and they weren't actually sitting there on the sofa in the dimness staring into space.

But it wasn't a trick.

They sat a few inches apart, not exactly straight-backed but neither relaxed. My mother's hands were clasped in her lap, my father's rested on the sofa like gloves. They didn't look petrified, or asleep, or even dead.

They looked switched off.

It was the only way I could describe it. I stayed and watched them for about five minutes, hoping they might move, but they didn't and eventually I walked back round to the front and got in my car. The house was locked and I didn't have a key.

I only drove about a mile and a half, stopping at the nearest phone box. As I rummaged through my pockets for change a jet roared over the rooftops. I watched as the plane and its shadow rushed to meet each other beyond the estates. Countless times I'd asked my parents if it was worth the money they'd saved, buying a house right next to the airport, with all the obvious disadvantages. My father would usually cup his ear and ask me to repeat the question.

I dialled their number.

"9862," said my mother's voice, taking me completely by surprise by answering after only one ring.

The phone at my parents' house was in the hall, some 15 yards from the living room and the sofa where they'd been sitting.

I said nothing about what I'd seen, just told my mother where I was and she said that in that case they'd see me in a few minutes. I hung up and stood in the kiosk a further minute or two staring out at the planes drawing white lines across the sky. How long before one of them fell on the estates? The Amsterdam disaster was still fresh in many people's minds, fresh enough, I hoped, to keep them looking up whenever they heard the drone of engines.

I drove back to my parents' house and as I pulled

into the drive my father's head appeared around the side of the garage, white hair blowing in the warm breeze. Why then did I feel so cold?

I went to shake his hand and saw he was still wiping it with his oily rag.

"Just a moment, son," he said, turning to toss the rag back into the garage. Sitting on the workbench next to his current project I saw his old red oilcan, a greenish droplet stretching from its spout. He'd been busy. "We saw you on the television the other day, your Mum and I," he said, putting his arm round my back as walked towards the house. He opened the kitchen door and there was my mother bending down to slide a tray into the oven.

"Hello, son," she said, turning to offer me her cheek.

I looked into the corners of her eyes for traces of sleep but she looked as wide awake as my father. Just then I heard a plane going over.

"Must just have a look," I said, moving to the window.

"What was that, son?" my father asked.

"The aeroplane, John," my mother said. "We have to watch it, otherwise it might crash. He doesn't remember anything," she added, turning to me and brushing a hair off my shoulder as the three of us watched the DC10 swooping down to land. I wondered briefly if they were humouring me, or even making fun, but my mother's concentration as she watched the plane descend looked quite sincere.

"Well," she said, breaking up the little group, "you must be tired after your drive. I'll make a cuppa." I smiled as she turned to unplug the kettle, but my smile was quickly wiped off my face when she suddenly slowed right down and froze in position, kettle in hand. Her skirt continued to sway then hung still in the silence. I looked at my father. He was half-smiling at me but he looked grotesque, caught between expressions.

They'd switched off again.

I passed my hand slowly in front of their eyes but there was no reaction.

It felt very cold in the kitchen. I crossed to the oven to see if my mother had been sliding in an empty tray, but on the tray were a dozen splodges of my mother's secret mix which would soon become the lightest, most delicious cakes in the world. Despite the heat wafting out of the oven I still felt cold. I had a thought and looked at my wrist but for some reason I had forgotten to put on my watch — my distraction over Inna had been causing me to neglect little things as well as, for example, my parents. I hadn't even asked them about the tests. They were still frozen. I ran out into the hall and went through into the front room to check the clock. I didn't know if I was relieved or even more frightened to find it still ticking.

Before I had chance to get back I heard noises from the kitchen, then my mother's raised voice: "Where's he got to? Son?"

I ran back and met my father's full smile with an open-mouthed look.

"You're getting too old to be running around like that," my mother said as she filled the kettle under the cold tap. I just nodded.

It was only ten minutes or so before it happened again. We were sitting in the living room. I was on the sofa next to my mother, and my father had taken the armchair nearest the television. My mother was in the middle of pouring me a second cup of tea when I noticed the trajectory of the tea begin to dip away from my cup. I moved my cup to catch the last of the tea then gently unfolded her fingers from the handle and sat the teapot down on the mat.

My father looked unchanged and for a moment I wondered if perhaps he hadn't gone this time, but when I moved out of his line of vision and his eyes stayed still I felt sure it was something that affected both of them at the same time, which was the only thing about it that seemed reassuring. For some time they'd not been getting on very well together. I, of course, had stayed well clear, believing, or at least telling myself, that they would solve their problems more easily without any interference from me.

After we'd moved through into the living room and sat down I'd asked about the tests. That's when my father had delivered his bombshell. In fact, my mother dropped it for him.

"Your Dad's got a lymphoma," she said in a slow, measured voice which seemed calculated to make me feel better about the news than I should. I burned with shame for not having asked days ago. My father nodded slowly as my mother outlined to me the details of his treatment, which had in fact already started. If I looked carefully I might see a slight reddening of his nose. I stared hard, feeling pressure building up in my head, and said I couldn't see it though I obviously could.

"We go to the hospital every day and your Dad has the treatment," my mother was saying. "It's over in a couple of minutes. It's wonderful really." Then she picked up the teapot and began to pour me a second cup.

This time I sat and waited for them to come out of it so they wouldn't get a shock to find my seat empty. A plane went overhead and I turned to watch through the window, willing it to stay up as emphatically as I wished my parents out of their trance. They might not have been my loved ones on board that plane, but they were all somebody's.

I sat and waited, feeling responsible and stupid. I was watching my father, chilled by the vacant, glassy look in his eyes, when I heard the tinkle of my mother's gold charm bracelet and I jumped. How long had they been back? My father's expression gave nothing away. Had I been staring into his eyes like that while he'd been awake, even for a couple of seconds?

"What about you?" I heard myself asking my mother.

"It's just the arthritis," she said. "They've given me some pills but I've stopped taking them. There's no point. They don't cure it, only stop me feeling the pain."

Another plane went over. We all turned to watch its slow graceful arc towards a safe landing.

"Switch the telly on, love," my mother said. "It's time for the news."

My father punched the control unit and a familiar newsreader's face filled the screen, but then I started taking in what he was saying.

"...Minister is said to be extremely concerned about the reports. The group of 144 so-called Rational Cynics chartered the plane using the name of a fictitious company and took off from Heathrow at 17.07..." I glanced sharply at the clock on the mantelpiece—an hour ago. "...and although their destination was listed as Stockholm, they seem not to be sticking to the expected route. There has been no radio contact with the plane and air traffic controllers are following its progress by radar. Emergency services at Stockholm and other major airports in northern Europe are standing by. Reports that Inna Gerashchenko, the leader of the Save Our Skies campaign group, managed to board the flight incognito in a desperate attempt to stop the plane from going down have yet to be confirmed, as Jackie Rose now reports from Heathrow..."

"That's that woman," my mother said, pointing at the footage of Inna speaking at the previous week's conference.

"Shh," I snapped, then realized my mistake and touched my mother's arm. "I'm sorry," I said. "Yes, it's her."

"Why's she on the plane?" my father asked.

"They don't know she is," I said anxiously. "But if she is it's because she wants to use her faith to keep it in the air. That group, the Rational Cynics, they follow my papers and talks. Like me they believe air travel is unsafe and now they've chartered a plane to put it to the test. According to what I've been preaching, and what I believe, their cynicism will cause the plane to crash. Their rationality, as far as they're concerned."

"They must be mad," my mother said.

"To go so far, yes, perhaps," I said, fidgeting on my cushion, feeling sick.

"And that woman's trying to save them?"

"She believes it's safe to fly, but she's obviously been listening to what I've been saying. She doing this in case I'm right and in the hope that her faith will keep the plane in the air. *Oh God, why did she do it?*" I got up and paced up and down. Just for something to do with my hands I lit a cigar, forgetting my parents' disapproval. "I've got to do something. What can I do?" I said, as much to myself as to them. I was churning up inside.

"Listen," my mother said, looking at the screen.

The newsreader had gone back to the top story: "We're just receiving reports that the chartered plane en route for Stockholm is deviating wildly from its course and alternately losing and gaining altitude. We'll keep you informed as soon as more news comes in."

"You see," I said, "the fight between blind faith and real knowledge. It's one against 144. How can she possibly keep it up?"

"Don't take on so, son," my mother advised.

"Mum, I've caused this. It's my fault those people are going to die. And Inna."

I turned to the window in despair and just caught the tailights of a plane coming in to land.

"How well do you know this woman?" my father asked, concerned.

"Not as well as I thought," I said, chewing my cigar. "I've got to go. I'm sorry. I've got to get back, see if I can do anything."

"What can you do?"

"I don't know but I've got to be by my phone."

I kissed them both, wished my father all the best for the rest of his treatments, and said I'd come back soon. I ran out to the car and saw their worried faces appear at the front door as I backed out of the drive, the wheels of the car spitting gravel over the tulips.

Driving back, I searched the airwaves for news flashes. They still couldn't confirm that Inna was on the plane, though efforts to reach her on the ground had failed. *Tell me about it.* The news flash was replaced by "Medical Matters" and I suddenly had a lump in my throat thinking of my father struck down by the cancer he'd feared all his life. I just hoped to God he'd get through the treatment and that the tumour would respond to radiation, and that it hadn't spread throughout his lymphatic system. And there was my mother, suffering herself, but giving him everything.

I had to stop and take a ten-minute break on the hard shoulder.

I lit a cigar and got back on the road, wondering what the off switch would hit on next. Air travel. My parents. What next?

Maybe Inna and I were both right: keep those planes flying but *believe* in them; battle on through life but love a little, and don't forget to show it.

I inhaled deeply on my cigar, something I only do very rarely, and at the same moment breathed an exhilarating rise in the mounted section of the motorway. My head spun and I saw something over to my left that wasn't there, or shouldn't have been: a long bridge that swooped gracefully up out from under the motorway deck and climbed into an unbelievably soft and rich yellow light. There were cars on the carriage-ways, barely touching the tarmac as they flew over the top, and on the footpath to the left, having just reached the crest and appearing to pause momentarily before walking on down, my mother and father, molten gold dripping through the gaps of their intertwined fingers.

My head cleared, the road swung round to the right and my rearview mirror reflected only the full-beam headlights of the car behind.

I had a package waiting for me when I got back. I took it upstairs and placed it on my desk while I replayed the day's messages: several calls about the charter flight but telling me nothing I didn't already know, and no confirmation of Inna's presence on board. I poured myself a vodka, dropped in a couple of ice cubes and called my parents.

"Hello, son. Did you get back all right?"

"I'm fine, Dad. How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad, son. I'll put your Mum on."

I knew they'd be all right, but I guess I phoned just to make sure. After I'd hung up I refilled my glass and sat down in front of the television. No news on any of the channels. Nothing new on Ceefax. I reached behind me for the package and inspected the address. I didn't recognize the handwriting. There was no stamp; it had been delivered by courier. The paper fell away under a few twists of my tired hands and suddenly I was holding a pair of silk boxer shorts, impossibly smooth and light. I held them up to my face and



sniffed. The fine material filled my nostrils. Something pushed for release at the corners of my eyes.

I swallowed the rest of the vodka and settled deeper in the leather sofa.

I relived part of my drive home: the strange bridge from darkness to light, the image of my parents walking hand in hand, my sense of well-being, that they'd be all right, as the road carried me back round to the physical world, and the car phone rang.

Except I didn't have a car phone.

I jumped and spilled my vodka but got to the phone in time. I fumbled the receiver sleepily.

"Hello?" I said, hardly recognizing my own voice, heavy with sleep, as I peered at my watch in the dim light from the desk lamp: 4.22am.

The operator's voice: "Will you accept a reverse-charges call from Stockholm?"

"Yes, of course," I said, rapidly coming to my

senses. I waited for the transfer to take place. It seemed to take for ever.

The operator spoke again: "You're through, caller."

"Hello?" I said as I reached the top of my own bridge and felt the yellow light wash over me.

"Hello," she said. "Did you get my present?"

Nicholas Royle wrote "Flying Into Naples" (*Interzone* 77), which we published alongside an interview with him that gave details of his recently-released first novel, *Counterparts* (a snip [ouch] at £4.99 from Barrington Books). Just lately, he has popped up as a novel-reviewer in the *Guardian* newspaper.

Keith Laumer

An Annotated Bibliography

Graham Andrews

John Keith Laumer was born in Syracuse, New York, on 9th June 1925. He died at his home in Brooksville, Florida, during the night of 22-23rd January 1993, from an apparent stroke.

Résumé: attended Philips University (Enid, Oklahoma) and Coffeyville Junior College (Kansas); joined U.S. Army in August 1943 (Allied occupation of Germany); studied architecture at University of Illinois (1946); earned his B.Sc. at University of Stockholm (1952); first lieutenant in U.S.A.F.; switched to U.S. Foreign Service (mainly Rangoon); rejoined U.S.A.F. in May 1960, as a captain; served with Third Air Force H.Q. in London.

Laumer's first published story was "Grylorn" (*Amazing*, April 1959). Two stories appeared in 1960: "Diplomat-at-Arms" (*Fantastic*, January) and "Combat Unit" (*F&SF*, November). "D-a-A" introduced Jame Retief – feiter, backwards – of the Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne.

Retief is Laumer's *alter ego*, getting his own back on the hidebound U.S. Foreign Service. He never actually says "Am I surrounded by fools?" but the implication is clear. Quangos abound: MEDDLE (Motorized Equipment Depot, Division of Loans and Exchanges); MIDDLE (Manpower Utilization Directorate, Division of Libraries and Education); SCROUNGE (Special Committee for Rehabilitation and Overhaul of Underdeveloped Nations' General Economies).

Laumer shit-damn-and-blasted the actual U.S. Foreign Service in *Embassy*, a mainstream novel published by Pyramid (1965). He claimed that Lederer &

Burdick's *The Ugly American* "was a piss-poor book, whereas *Embassy* was a marvellous book, and if *The Ugly American* hadn't come out right ahead of it [seven years!], it would have sold twelve zillion copies" (*Dream Makers II*, edited by Charles Platt, p.119).

Deadfall (Doubleday, 1971) was a tongue-through-cheek P.I. novel. A film version followed four years later; retitled *Fat Chance*; re-retitled *Peeper*. But – to borrow from Sam Goldwyn – people stayed away in droves. "Tepid takeoff of 40s detective dramas with [Michael] Caine becoming involved with a weird family while trying to locate the lost daughter of his client" (*Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide*).

Laumer fared much better with TV tie-in novelizations. First *The Invaders* (see below). Then *The Avengers*, where he sent up sf something rotten. Berkley published all three titles (*The Afrit Affair*, *The Drowned Queen* and *The Gold Bomb*) in 1968.

For about ten years, few sf writers could match Laumer in quantity and quality, even if he didn't produce one indisputably classic story/novel. Retief kept on keeping on, while other series came into being: Imperium; Lafayette O'Leary; Bolo. Short stories proliferated. He wrote many well-received singleton novels (see below). Not forgetting *How to Design and Build Flying Models* (Harper, 1960).

Then, in 1971, Laumer suffered a near-fatal stroke. Or, as he explained it to Platt: "Everybody has a tight muscle representing some experience that you subconsciously shunted aside... And little by little you

get an accumulation of these things...I got an accumulation of them that finally crossed a threshold – and something said ‘Okay, execute Plan A.’ And Plan A was to go – crrrkkkk. And there I was, all fucked up” (*ibid.*, p.115).

For whatever reason, the fanatically keep-fit Laumer became a virtual invalid. Most work published during the next decade was either written before the breakdown or amounted to reshufflings of older material. *The Ultimac Man* appeared in 1978, followed (after a four-year gap) by *Star Colony*. Tor and Baen then issued several reprint/original titles, to no-little success.

But, like Sherlock Holmes after he’d narrowly escaped death at the Reichenbach Falls, Laumer was never quite the same man again. The once-stylish Retief stories grew ever more perfunctory, with the alien life-forms turning into crosses between Stepin Fetchit and Little Plum (Your Redskin Chum).

“Alternatives to Intelligence” (introduction: *Alien Minds*, 1991) shows Laumer in rare non-fictional mode: “Thus, we see there are invertebrates which do very nicely using something other than intelligence to carry out some rather complex tasks. And there are people who function without any active use of brain power” (p.3).

Apart from the Bolo series, Laumer treated military subjects without becoming too militaristic. Generally speaking, violent situations are resolved more by brain than brawn. The hero of the regiment is rarely a hero to the regiment. Nor was he a libertarian à la Poul Anderson. From *Dream Makers II*:

“...Poul Anderson doesn’t know shit from wild honey. People who express approval of [libertarianism] aren’t thinking in terms of, all of a sudden, no more TV, no gas in the gas station, no groceries in the grocery store. All of that is the product of a fantastic network of cooperation. If everybody just said ‘Fuck it!’ it would all stop. You could take off your clothes, go off into the woods, and start looking for nuts and berries” (p.120).

But enough sociopolitical analysis. The plain fact remains that – like Mr Kipling – Keith Laumer wrote exceedingly good stories. Beginning-middle-end stuff, with every character getting exactly what he/she/it deserves at the final fade-out. As in the three-volume novel of Miss Prism (*The Importance of Being Earnest*): “The good ended happily and the bad unhappily. This is what fiction means.”

Worlds of the Imperium (Ace, 1962; doubled with *Seven from the Stars* by Marion Zimmer Bradley)

Novel; magazine version: *Fantastic*, sr 3, February-April 1961. *Imperium* No. 1. “For Brion Bayard, the discovery of an alternate world to Earth where history took a different turn in the road was not a pleasant experience...Here was a world in which appeared identical doubles of famous personages – including a dangerous and hated dictator named Brion Bayard!” (blurb).

Sequels:

The Other Side of Time (Berkley, 1965). Novel; magazine version: *Fantastic*, sr 3, April-June 1965.

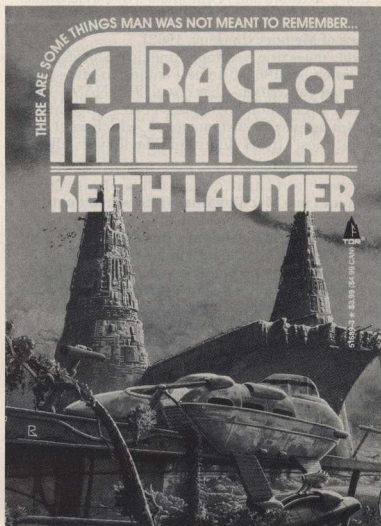
Assignment in Nowhere (Berkley, 1968). Novel.

Beyond the Imperium (Tor, 1981). Omnibus: *The Other Side of Time and Assignment in Nowhere*.

Zone Yellow (Baen, 1990). Novel.

Envoy to New Worlds (Ace, 1963; doubled with *Flight from Yesterday* by Robert Moore Williams). Expanded as *Retief: Envoy to New Worlds* (Baen, 1981).

Retief: Book the First. Collection (outstanding stories marked *): “Protocol”*; “Sealed Orders”*; “Cultural Exchange”*; “Aide Memoire”; “Policy”*; “Palace Revolution.” Splendid Emsh cover. *Après ça le déluge...*



Sequels:

Galactic Diplomat (Doubleday, 1965). Collection: 9 stories.

Retief’s War (Doubleday, 1966). Novel; magazine version: *If*, sr 3, October-December 1965.

Retief and the Warlords (Doubleday, 1968). Novel.

Retief: Ambassador to Space (Doubleday, 1969). Collection: 7 stories.

Retief of the CDT (Doubleday, 1971). Collection: 5 stories.

Retief’s Ransom (Putnam, 1971). Novel.

Retief: Emissary to the Stars (Dell, 1975). Collection: 4 stories plus excerpt from *Retief and the Warlords*.

Augmented edition: Pocket Books, 1979.

Retief Unbound (Ace, 1979). Omnibus.

Retief at Large (Ace, 1979). Omnibus.

Retief: Diplomat at Arms (Pocket Books, 1982). Collection: 7 stories (including 3 reprints).

Retief to the Rescue (Baen, 1983). Novel.

The Return of Retief (Baen, 1985). Novel (plus novelette, “The Secret,” from *Retief: Diplomat at Arms*).

Retief and the Pangalactic Pageant of Pulchritude (Baen, 1986) Collection: title novella plus *Retief’s Ransom*.

Retief in the Ruins (Baen, 1986). Collection: 3 novellas.

Reward for Retief (Baen, 1989).

Retief and the Rascals (Baen, 1993). Novel.
HONOURABLE MENTION: **Retief! The Graphic Album** (Apple Press, 1990). Comicizations: "Policy"; "Sealed Orders"; "Protest Note"; "Saline Solution"; "Ultimatum"; "The Forest in the Sky". Adapted by Dennis Fujitake (also artwork) and Jan Strnad. Introduction ("Extraordinary Diplomats") by David Drake.

A Trace of Memory (Berkley, 1963)

Novel; magazine version: *Amazing Stories*, sr 3, July-September 1962. The best amnesiac-into-superman novel yet written – bar none. "HIS NAME WAS LEGION... A millionaire named 'Foster' hired him to help him recover his lost memory... which went back for centuries" (from blurb to Mayflower edition, 1968).

The Great Time Machine Hoax (Simon and Schuster, 1964)

Novel; magazine version: *Fantastic*, sr 3, June-August 1963, as "A Hoax in Time." Computer + time travel = hilarity. "The Generalized Non-Linear Extrapolator (G.N.E. for short, sometimes known as Genie) seemed useless..." (from blurb to 1965 Pocket Books edition).

A Plague of Demons (Berkley, 1965)

Novel; magazine version: *If*, sr 2, November-December 1964 as "The Hounds of Hell." Arguably Laumer's best novel in fast-action mode. "– trapped in a vast robot war machine on the moon – only by an immense act of will-power can [John Bravais] give humanity a future" (from blurb to 1967 Penguin edition).

The Time Bender (Berkley, 1966)

Novel; magazine version: *Fantastic*, sr 3, November 1965-January 1966, as "Axe and Dragon." Lafayette O'Leary No. 1. Laumer pokes gentle fun at his Imperia series. "Lafayette discovers (slowly) that Artesia is really a fault in the Probability Fabric that only he can mend..." (blurb).

Sequels:

The World Shuffler (Putnam, 1970). Novel.

The Shape Changer (Putnam, 1972). Novel.

The Galaxy Builder (Ace, 1984). Novel.

Earthblood, with Rosel George Brown (Doubleday, 1966)

Novel; magazine version: *If*, April-July 1966. Roan, a pure-strain human, is born on a zoo-ship, turns pirate... "Here is, friends, an Epic of the Spaceways if you ever saw one; a story to make on dream of *Planet Stories*" (Algis Budrys: *Benchmarks*).

Catastrophe Planet (Berkley, 1966)

Novel. Earth is ravaged by (a) volcanic eruptions and (b) alien invaders. Reprinted as *The Breaking Earth* (Pinnacle Tor, 1981), with *Afterwards* (sic) by G. Harry Stine ("This Dynamic Planet") and Frederik Pohl ("Shaking Up Space").

The Monitors (Berkley, 1966)

Novel. North America is dominated by the Monitors: "...strangely polite yellow clad beings whose power was such that they could render everyone helpless – without shedding one drop of blood!" (blurb). Filmed in 1969, with Guy Stockwell, Susan Oliver and Alan Arkin: "Great cast wasted in this failed attempt at science fiction satire" (Leonard Maltin's *Movie and Video Guide*).

Nine by Laumer (Doubleday, 1967)

Collection. Introduction ("The Universe, According to Laumer") by Harlan Ellison. Contents (outstanding stories marked *): "Hybrid"*; "End as a Hero"*; "The Walls"; "Dinochrome" (formerly "Combat Unit")*; "Placement Test"; "Doorstep"; "The Long Remembered Thunder"*; "Cocoon"; "A Trip to the City" (formerly "It Could Be Anything")*.

The Invaders (Pyramid, 1967). U.K. Title: *The Meteor Men*, as by Anthony Le Baron (Corgi, 1968)

Novelization of now-cult TV series, starring Roy Thinnes. Superior tie-in novel – which could be damning-with-faint-praise, but isn't. "The *Invaders* must be stopped! But only one man – [architect] David Vincent – even knows they exist!" (blurb).
Sequel:

Enemies from Beyond (Pyramid, 1967). Novel.

Planet Run, with Gordon R. Dickson (Doubleday, 1967)

Novel. Corazon has been thrown open to cosmic prospectors – and claim-jumpers, dadburn it! "The hero is a crusty old star-frontiersman who knows all the tricks and uses them" (*Publishers' Weekly*).

Galactic Odyssey (Berkley, 1967)

Novel; magazine version: *If*, sr 3, May-July 1967, as "Spaceman." Johnny Danger finds himself stranded on a planet with the beautiful Lady Raire, who – one massacre later – is abducted by bat-like aliens. "She was my charge – I was responsible for her safety, and I meant to find her..." (blurb). Full speed ahead – and damn the photon torpedoes!

Greyloren (Berkley, 1968). U.K. Title: *The Other Sky* (Dobson, 1968)

Collection. Contents (outstanding stories marked *): "Greyloren"*; "The Night of the Trolls"; "The Other Sky" (formerly "The Further Sky")*; "The King of the City". Variant edition: *The Other Sky*, including *The House in November* (Tor, 1982).

The Day Before Forever and Thunderhead (Doubleday, 1968)

Collection: 2 novellas. (1) *F&SF*, July 1967: Steve Dravek vs. ETORP (Eternity, Incorporated), which seems to be headed by... Steve Dravek. (2) *Galaxy*, April 1967: "...an excellently told, unexceptional story about a man who does his duty" (Algis Budrys: *Benchmarks*).

It's a Mad, Mad, Mad Galaxy (Berkley, 1968)

Collection (outstanding stories marked *): "The Body Builders"*; "The Planet Wreckers"*; "The Star-

Sent Knaves"*; "The War With the Yukks" (formerly "The War Against the Yukks"; "Gooberreality."

The Long Twilight (Putnam, 1969)

Novel. "THE IMMORTAL DUEL... Grayle and Falconer clashed first in the dark times before History began – and their meetings over the ages were the stuff of bloody legend" (blurb to 1970 Berkley edition). What you see...

The House in November (Putnam, 1970)

Novel. The town of Beatrice, Nebraska, has been occupied – but by whom/what? "To [partially amnesiac!!] Jeff Mallory... the invaders were ALIENS... To the bizarre Russo-American army... the invaders were CHINESE... To the strange old man who lived in the Old House... the invaders were the MONE..." (from blurb to 1971 Berkley edition). Short and bitter-sweet power fantasia.

Time Trap (Putnam, 1970)

Novel. "Something was badly wrong with Time – but Roger Tyson didn't know it until he met the lovely agent from elsewhere and started on a mad chase through the dimensions, plagued by a motley bunch of temporal castaways, and pursued hotly by Oob the Rhox!" (from blurb to 1970 Berkley edition). Funnier than *Time Bandits*.

Sequel:

Back to the Time Trap (Baen, 1992).

Five Fates (Doubleday, 1970): editor

Anthology/collection/"shared" novel. Five writers take off in five different directions from one establishing scene – the death (?) of William Bailey: Poul Anderson ("The Fatal Fulfillment"); Frank Herbert ("Murder Will In"); Gordon R. Dickson ("Maverick"); Harlan Ellison ("The Region Between"); Keith Laumer ("Of Death What Dreams").

The Star Treasure (Putnam, 1971)

Novel. The paperback blurb (Berkley, same year) declared: "THE STAR LORDS WANTED HIM [Ben Tarleton] DEAD..." Make it so. Not an unclaimed treasure.

Dinosaur Beach (Scribner, 1971)

Novel; expanded from "The Timesweepers": *Analog*, August 1969). The titular *plage* is a Nexx Central station located in the Jurassic Age. "Laumer has a gift for time travel. The technology in this novel is fascinating" (*Riverside Quarterly*). Updated blurb: "Before Jurassic Park there was... Dinosaur Beach!"

Once There Was a Giant (Doubleday, 1971)

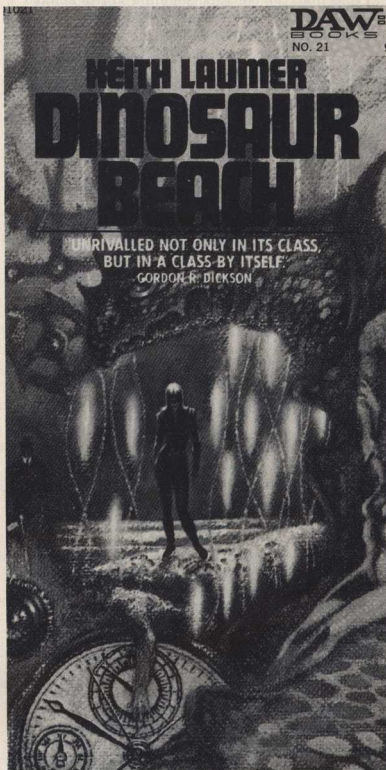
Collection. Title novella (F&SF, November 1968) and 7 mostly familiar stories. Variant edition; Tor, 1984: title novella plus "No Ship Boots in Fairyland" (original) and "The Long and Short of It" (critical essay by Sandra Miesel).

The Infinite Cage (Putnam, 1972)

Novel. "Adam is what we'll call him. Adam Nova. In the morning we start parlaying this poor drowned rooster into a million dollars cash" (from 1974 Berkley edition, p.40). Famous last words.

Night of Delusions (Putnam, 1972)

Novel. "Florin's own mental faculties are not in terrific shape... So it may not be such a smart move, becoming bodyguard to a Senator whose mental state is utter chaos" (from blurb to 1974 Berkley edition). Zelazny's *The Dream Master*, with muscles. Variant edition; Tor, 1982: *Knight* (sic) of *Delusions* plus "Thunderhead" and "The Last Command."



The Big Show (Ace, 1972)

Collection. Contents (outstanding stories marked*): "In the Queue"*; "A Relic of War"*; "The Big Show"; "Message to an Alien"; "The Plague"; "Test to Destruction"*.

Timetracks (Ballantine, 1972)

Collection. Contents (outstanding stories marked*): "The Timesweepers"*; "The Devil You Don't"*; "The Time Thieves" (formerly "The Star-Sent Knives")*; "The Other Sky" (formerly "The Further Sky")*; "Mind Out of Time."

The Glory Game (Doubleday, 1973)

Novel. "Except that it happens way out in space and centuries from now, the central situation of this taut, fast-moving novel very much resembles the Tonkin Gulf incident" (*Publishers' Weekly*). You said it, buster.

The Undeclared (Dell, 1974)

Collection. Contents (outstanding stories marked*): "World-master"; "The Night of the Trolls"; "Thunderhead"; "End as a Hero".

The Best of Keith Laumer (Pocket Books, 1976)

Collection. Introduction by Barry N. Malzberg. Contents (outstanding stories marked*): "The Planet Wreckers"; "The Body Builders"; "Cocoon"; "The Lawgiver"; "Thunderhead"; "Hybrid"; "The Devil You Don't"; "Doorstep"; "A Relic of War".

Bolo: The Annals of the Dinochrome Brigade (Berkeley, 1976)

Collection. Introduction: "A Short History of the Bolo Fighting Machines." Contents (outstanding stories marked*): "The Night of the Trolls"; "Courier" (Retief!); "Field Test"; "The Last Command"; "A Relic of War"; "Combat Unit" (a.k.a. "Dinochrome"). P.S. The literal translation of dinochrome is "terrible colour."

Sequels:

Rogue Bolo (Baen, 1985). Novel.

The Compleat Bolo (Baen, 1990). Omnibus.

The Ultimax Man (St. Martin's Press, 1978)

Novel; magazine version: *Analog*, sr 2, September-October 1977, as "The Wonderful Secret." "Damocles Montgomerie, a pathetic small-time criminal, covers... in a darkened alley... [Then] Dammie is whisked away to a fantastic alien complex hidden deep in the Arctic" (from blurb to 1980 Sidgwick & Jackson edition).

Star Colony (St. Martin's Press, 1981)

Novel; related to "Greylorn." First volume of a Trilogy That Never Was. After the (well-named) colony ship *Omega* crash-lands on Colmar... Remember *Lost in Space*? "The old pulse-pounding stuff!" (*F&SF*). It didn't take much to set that reviewer's pulse pounding.

Chrestomathy (Baen, 1984)

Collection – sort of. Chrestomathy is a literary term meaning "sampler." Or is it?... Go ask John Clute. Bits-and-bobs from just-about-everything, with Forewords.

End as a Hero (Ace, 1985)

Novel; stretch-marked expansion of 1963 short story, readily available elsewhere. James Blish made the same mistake when he force-fed "Beep" (1954) into *The Quincunx of Time* (1973). For completists only.

The Stars Must Wait (Baen, 1990)

Novel. Before leaving Earth for space, [Lieutenant Commander] Jackson will be placed in a state of suspended animation, and will be awakened on arrival at

Callisto – unless something happens to the Primary Navigator..." (blurb). *Déjà vu*, all over again.

Judson's Eden (Baen, 1991)

Novel. "When Marl Judson, fleeing a rapacious government... crash-landed on an uninhabited planet..." (blurb). Don't go away! It isn't like that. Really! Judson & Co. must contend with hallucinogenic flora and a "field effect" which plays odd tricks on merely human senses. There is more than one snake in this Eden.

Alien Minds (Baen, 1991)

Collection; mostly past blasters. Introduction: "Alternatives to Intelligence." Contents (outstanding stories marked *): "The Propitiation of Brullamago"; "Reverse English"; "A Trip to the City"; "The Exterminator"; "Dinochrome"; "Hybrid"; "Greylorn"; "The Time Thieves"; "Doorstep"; "Test to Destruction".

More Keith Laumer works are in the publication pipeline: *Retief at the Rainbow*; *The Ice King* (a "nearly complete" Imperium novel; *Fort Ancient*; *Cop Trouble* (mystery); "Affinities" (short story). Baen has initiated a series of sharecropping Bolo anthologies. "Pace Sullivan: Retief will live on, but so will the rest of Laumer" (Malzberg: *The Best of Keith Laumer*, p.8). Well... at least 50%.

(Graham Andrews)

Interaction

Continued from page 5

Hello, then I'd suggest for his own safety an immediate check-up at an optician.

I certainly don't consider the art in *Interzone* a "slur against everything bearing the title 'science-fiction' – including those who read and write it." But I am rather offended that David Alexander feels able to make such a sweeping and ludicrous statement, as if he were somehow empowered to speak for the entire sf community.

Personally I feel most of the art in *IZ* is excellent. I particularly enjoyed SMS's covers for issues 58 and 76 – the "Priest of Hands" art, especially the illustration on page 61, beautifully evokes Storm Constantine's story with images akin to Leonor Fini, while the cover of 76 skillfully echoes the dead and dreaming cities of Paul Delvaux. Gerry Grace's work for "The Ragthorn" in issue 74 and "The Green Calling" in 73 was likewise very effective; less you imagine I'm completely sycophantic I will add that most of Russell Morgan's work leaves me cold.

The only changes I would like to see are the cutting of the cover text to the absolute minimum so as not to intrude on the artwork, and the disposal of the ugly and intrusive bar code. I suppose commercial realities make this latter impractical, but perhaps you could move it to the masthead? At least when you buy a book the horrible thing is hidden away on the back. I don't know how other readers would feel, but I wouldn't mind paying a little extra for a splash of colour inside the magazine.

Gary Dalkin
Bournemouth

Iris Hog, Hidden King, Poop

John Clute

There's not much point in beating dead panels, unless you're in used cars. It may therefore be time to stop talking about the 1993 Arthur C. Clarke Award: to cease rabbiting on about the huge shortlist of significant sf books the panel of judges produced (but then dumped on); to cease chiding the 1993 gurus for the peculiarly Thatcherite message they conveyed ("There is no such thing as science fiction"), that individual sf texts, composed in the high ferment and delirium of a genre facing heatdeath and the millennium in a strangulated market, could be read in isolation from that engendering mix; and maybe even to forgive the award-winning novel – Marge Piercy's dinosaurish *He, She and It* (1992; UK title *Body of Glass*) – for clodhopping into the 90s: like some Clifton Fadiman golem gumming up the iris that opens a path to the worlds of when. Iris hog aside, almost all the 1993 books seemed natural inhabitants of the decade in which we live, object lessons in the survival of the sf novel in an era whose futures are gardens of forking paths, with no veins backwards to the heart.

Even Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars*, which does at points superficially resemble an Edsel on the old agenda-sf highroad, bears witness in fact, on every page, to the pathos and vulnerability any modern writer must feel when assertions must be made, maps drawn to guide us. Robinson is a psychopomp of day, and *Red Mars* asks us to believe in what can be seen there. It is an act of will. It shows some of the strains of making a counterstatement (though I might have voted for it, had I been a Clarke jurist, I would have done so in part because of its bravery of stance, what one might call its Edsel Arete: both Michael Swanwick's *Stations of the Tide* and Karen Joy Fowler's "ineligible" *Sarah Canary* were in fact more finely written); but the fact remains that the stress-lines that roughen the reader's experience of inhabiting *Red Mars* reflect the conscious effort it takes to act as though any future even remotely resembling those dreamt of by our genre fathers could, any longer, be seen as worth a moment's thought. We have grown that much in wisdom. (We have fallen that far into desuetude.) As an aesthetic endeavour, *Red Mars* is like an abacus: it counts the cost. (*Green Mars* will be reviewed here by Paul J. McAuley, who may well find that *Red Mars* reads, through the larger frame engendered by its successor, as far more radical and subversive a text than it could possibly seem standing alone.)

It is in fact only when one reads a genuine agenda-sf version of *Mars* that one does realize how very modern the Robinson attempts are, and how

deeply his *Mars* books violate the salutatory sleight-of-hand (ie, *With One Bound He Was Free*) that underlies almost all agenda-sf rhetoric about hero-driven paradigm shifts, about breaking through into the unknown with Kinnison. There are lots of good moments in Greg Bear's *Moving Mars* (Tor, no price shown), and a couple of extrapolation highs far more visceral in their effect than anything Robinson manages (or wishes) to present us with, and a good ole Future History, neatly retrofitted for nanoware, that lurks like lymph in the interstices of *Story*, making the whole tale of how Casseia Majumdar moves *Mars* read like a vignette in some massive, strangely anaesthetized fixup; but it didn't half feel nostalgic, this epic whose imaginary science shticks actually engender a *literal* *One Bound She Was Free* scenario, with glam politics dancing like attendant lords around the protagonist, with nefarious plots on the part of old Earth, and love at first sight, and a conspiracy-driven epiphany. It didn't half feel like a backward bath.

Except for a short epilogue written in a style which, in a modest and low-key way, seems to homage the sotto-voce stiff-upper-lip keen hearable in any Poul Anderson novel when a protagonist is being fast-fried into an avatar of the Folk to Come, the whole of *Moving Mars* is presented as the autobiography, written many years after the events described, of Casseia, a humourless, spunky, recalcitrant, charismatic, monogamous young woman who eventually becomes de facto President of Mars in Revolt. We begin in the year 2171, when family-based conglomerates called Binding Multiples – familiar to Bear readers from *Heads* (1990) and (though less in the foreground, I seem to remember) from *Queen of Angels* (1990) too – still dominate Mars. An Earth-inspired attempt to federalize this congeries of half-tamed mafias fails abjectly, while at the same time precipitating in the young Casseia a sense that the political destiny of the planet can be analysed (and should be determined) by folk with the pony of plot between their thighs, and she begins to study the ways of politics, which at the same time not quite falling sufficiently in

love with brilliant young scientist Charles Franklin, soon destined to effect a paradigm-change on the human universe; they screw, but split up. Eventually, she is selected to go to Earth as part of a delegation bent on securing Martian hegemony, but soon learns that the rulers of Earth have no wish to inhabit a glass house with a loose cannon planet in the back yard. The mission therefore fails, for reasons which are inherently plausible, but which are melodramatized in the plotting – the head of the Martian delegation is exposed as a fonder of women, a fact which his whole Binding Multiples knows but inexplicably thinks irrelevant when it comes time to choose the head of a delicate destiny-determining mission – and Casseia returns to Mars, where she falls into monogamy with a guy who's deep into researching the fossils which are all that remains of Martian life, and who is soon destined to overturn a few paradigms himself, when he manages to kick some fossils back to life – it is another sign of the agenda-sf heart of the book that its protagonists serve ultimately as protagonists for the entire solar system, and that each of Casseia's two bedmates in the book is destined to overturn the Tables of the Law.

In the meantime, Casseia enters politics, instrumentally affects the shaping of a new Martian constitution (some of its precepts are of strong and independent interest), becomes Vice-President, and has to deal with her ex-lover Charles who has managed to solve certain problems centering on the Bell continuum which underlies and tells the story of reality. He has (in short) learned to tweak the continuum at a level at which matter/energy is a form of gossip. Tweaking is a way to change the subject. When you change the subject, you change the universe. You can kill at a distance, for instance, instantaneously; and you can shift objects (you can move Mars). Good stuff. No wonder Earth has been apprehensive about the mafias of Mars.

But Earth is not exactly the Earth of the old agenda-sf template in which ex-colonists of the Red Planet defend 1776 freedoms against bureaucrats from Washington, because *Moving*

Mars shares a Future History with *Queen of Angels* (reviewed in *Interzone* 41), and the Earth of that book has a thrumming multi-phasic complexity far removed from the neat clarities of the old platform. It is that Earth—even though we see it as a tourist (or an agendist) might, through the eyes of a visiting hick, we do know it is that Earth—which stands in opposition to the brawling Folk of Mars, and Bear is forced into some rather ungainly skips and jumps to avoid shoving our faces in the fact that the melodramatic war between Mars and Earth simply doesn't compute in terms of his larger and more adult schema. Even within the simplistic rodomontade of *Moving Mars*, though, we are given some glimpses of the complexities of the full Bear vision of Earth: we are allowed to meet a few self-conscious AIs, descendants of the JILL who comes to awareness in the earlier novel; we are introduced to enhancements—nano-computers which, when inserted into human heads, serve as tutors and driving instructors for the brain, teaching those who have had them implanted how to drive more expertly the thought machines within the skull; we glimpse some arbeiter and the hegemony of the therapist and various other signals that life on Earth has become a dance. But they are only glimpses, and we soon skip and jump back to Mars, and into a Perils-of-Pauline climax in which a Secret Master klatch of never-seen Earthlings, panicked by the implications of tweaking, has activated a plague of "locusts," nano-driven game-world-like organic weapons whose seeds had previously been implanted throughout the planet, and all hell breaks loose. In the end, of course, after some pretty exciting action, Charles and Casseia move Mars, thousands of light years away, in a single Bound.

Let us hope Bear has got Mars out of his system.

The Discworld novels do not necessarily march in step. Some are better than others: some are plotted with finesse while others seem to cluster jokes around the chances to tell them; some of the middle volumes slip, on occasion, coughing self-consciously, into moments of seriousness which do not really integrate too well into the overall dream: some are less funny than others. Of the two novels from last year, I thought (for instance) that *Small Gods* was superb, serious and hilarious at the same time and to the same end, and significantly innovative in form; but though *Lords and Ladies* far more routine, though at Terry Pratchett's extremely high level of professional responsibility to the task. The 1993 novel is *Men At Arms* (Gollancz, £14.99), and it is as good as *Small Gods*. It does for Clowns what

Lords and Ladies did, less originally, for elves: rewrites them into Humours of a bad dream you know you'll awake from, into teeming Discworld.

[Simultaneously with *Men At Arms*, Pratchett's paperback publisher has released Stephen Briggs's *The Streets of Ankh-Morpork: Being a Concise and Possibly Even Accurate Mapp of the Great City of the Discworld* (Corgi Books, £4.99). The package contains a pamphlet with comments by Pratchett and a short text and genuine index by Briggs; the map itself is on heavy paper, and is a genuine act of cartographic imagination. It does not work for every move of any reader's imagined traversing of the city through the entire series, but it works when it can. The whimsy inherent in mapping a gesture is restrained. A quality job.]

Men At Arms is a number of things. It's a Hidden King tale (Corporal Carrot, first met in *Guards! Guards!* [1989], turns out to be a direct descendant of the last king of Ankh-Morpork); it's an Urban Fantasy (no one leaves the city itself during the course of the story; and more than once, with genuine intensity of feeling, the etymological roots of the words *police* and *politician* are underlined); it's a Detective Fantasy (there are murders, and it is not known at first who has committed them, and the identity of the murderer is deduced); and it is a tale in which, as in all the best comedies, the threat of disorder is turned into a marriage dance. This time the threat is very real (a Leonardo of the Discworld has invented a *gonne*, and *gonnepowder*), and the formal power of the detective novel to transform disintegration into comedy is fully deployed (and the *gonne* is neutered); and this time the marriages are real, too. The depiction of the Clown Guild, and of the nature of clowndom, is acute, and strikes a new note for Pratchett. Discworld has always seemed like a dream, but Pratchett has never admitted into this pleasure anything too intimately oneiric: there are no creatures in the Discworld who represent the transformative mirror, the esemplasy of dream: but the Clowns are such. The blank True Clown with the face of a naked egg is like one of the darker metamorphs of Oz. *Men At Arms* reads like a ceremony of the given Discworld, and like something new.

John Whitbourn's second book, *Popes and Phantoms* (Gollancz,

£15.99), makes a thin sound in the ear of the mind, not displeasingly. It is a collection of stories linked by a fragile frame narrative in which Admiral Slovo (floreath 1460?-1525?), at the end of his life, runs through significant moments in his career at the behest of a visitant who may be supernatural, but who certainly represents the

Vehme, an historical secret society, originally founded in Westphalia, which acted as a kind of vigilante mafia in the killing grounds of the late Renaissance. In *Popes and Phantoms*, which is a Fantasy of History, the Vehme operates as a shaper of European destiny, and Whitbourn hints that its goals are to create precisely the nightmare we now inhabit. The history which Slovo helps undermine in *Popes and Phantoms* is therefore an alternate history. The conspiracy is us.

It's a nice idea, but enacted with an almost fatal, pooped remoteness. Slovo himself is very frequently described as an advocate of Stoicism, and gazes upon his memories from an obliterating remove, as though the whole of life were a game he had played too often. Individual episodes, all the same, exhibit an addictive (though perhaps slightly gameworldish) knowingness. The problem seems to be the whole, a problem from which Gollancz averts its eye (but not that of the bibliophile reviewer) by failing to note for our benefit that at least some of the stories were written (and published) earlier. Shortened forms of two of them, for instance, make up the contents of a 1992 booklet called *Popes & Phantoms* (Haunted Library, £2.50), which cautious readers might wish to pick up before going for the whole Slovo.

What we really want from Whitbourn is a deep breath. We want him to take a very deep breath, and write a full-length story, and make it real. These tales are laced throughout with jolts, but consistently shy from the charge. So we want a deep breath, length, pain, illumination. All of these are in the offering, hints the text on hand. This ship will come in. It had better.

(John Clute)

A Comedy of Terrors

Paul J. McAuley

It is easier to define Ramsey Campbell's iconoclastic horror fiction by what it is not than by what it is, and what it most definitely is not is, and what it most definitely is not is, the splatterpunk school of blood'n'guts'n'sex'n'drugs'n'rock'n'roll which in the late '80s clawed its way to the centre of attention in the horror genre. Campbell is working, you should excuse the phrase, in quite a different vein, steadily building up an impressive body of work in which a grinning skeleton is gradually revealed behind very English urban or pastoral scenes, and revealed through slippage and disease rather than butchery and blood work. His new novel, *The Long Lost* (Headline, £16.99) certainly features

graphically unpleasant deaths, yet it is a triumphant comic inferno rather than a suburban Grand Guignol. Its protagonists do not hunt down the monster: nor does it hunt down them. Instead, it fastens to its unknowing victims in a way that only becomes clear at the end.

The monster is an old woman, Gwen, whom David and Joelle Owain find in a seemingly abandoned cottage on a little island just off the shore of North Wales. David discovers that she may be a long-lost cousin, and he and his wife take her to a retirement home near their house in Chester. Gwen appears merely quaintly dotty, but after the Owains' friends share in a cake she has baked, their hitherto harmless traits deepen and they begin to act out sins – jealousy, lies, greed, envy, lust – which eventually literally consume them. The seeds of our destruction are in us all, according to Campbell, and the switch from habit to disastrous obsession is merely a quantitative shift whose accelerating change is too subtle to measure until it is too late. Only David manages to resist the fall into temptation, leaving him to discover just what Gwen is, and the secret and the importance of her obsessive sharing.

It is, on the surface, a genial performance played (initially, at least) for laughs as much as for chills, but Campbell plants his narrative hooks skilfully as each strand of the plot darkens from comedy to disaster. The darkness comes from within his suburbanite characters, whose very human foibles are acutely observed, and from Campbell's fully developed style of unease. Nothing is what it seems; every conversation is a cross-fire of misapprehension and misunderstanding which Campbell plays to the full, from farce to urgent tragedy and back again, inhabiting that very English tension between what is said and what is left unsaid.

With this, and with the hesitations and unfocused or qualified similes which pervade the text, and with deliberately unfocused glimpses of crucial occurrences, the literary equivalents of fast pans and jumpcuts, Campbell achieves a claustrophobic density of misdirection. It is as if the reader must peer at the text through the pinholes of a slippery mask while being flocked by crows and mocked by mad laughter. In this, Campbell fully lives up to the often-used tag of his being the heir to M.R. James. James famously used unfocused glimpses to heighten the tension as his heroes were stalked by monsters (which were often all the more horrific for being composed of nothing more than a bedsheet, or a bone and a hank of hair). Campbell's monster also spends much of her time at the edge of the narrative, glimpsed from the corner of the eye by

other characters but never truly seen even at the end, when what she seems to be falls away to reveal what she is, and understanding is reached in a moment widening into a sense of wonder astonishing in a horror novel. But then, *The Long Lost*, although displaying Campbell's full control of the narrative devices of horror fiction, is concerned with more than delivering the usual generic shocks. It is not an easy novel to read, because part of its success is the dis-ease it generates in the reader, but it is a powerful and rewarding one.

Coming-of-age and rites-of-passage are common themes in sf not because (or not just because) the Golden Age of sf is Twelve, but because one of sf's primary subjects, the discovery of how a world really works, maps particularly well onto the way in which adolescents grow into an understanding of their place in their own world. As such, sf novels about growing up have a long and honourable tradition from Heinlein to Orson Scott Card. Two more, both fine, are under consideration here.

First up is John M. Ford's *Growing Up Weightless* (Bantam, \$11.95), in which the world is Luna, which is specifically not called the Moon, for that signals an Earthly attachment for which all good Lunarians feel contempt. Luna has been colonized for over a hundred years; the heady pioneering days are over and independence has been declared, but problems of growth remain.

Matt Ronay, like many of his multi-talented super-bright friends, is growing up disaffected, having been schooled in the history of the rebellion against Earth's hegemony, but now finding that Luna's carefully controlled society is too restricting. He has reached the age where he must decide upon a career, where his ambition of earning his way onto a starship seems impossible, yet other options, including a season working in theatre, would leave him under the restrictive eye of his father. Even the virtual reality role-playing games he and his friends enjoy are becoming just that: games. Meanwhile, Matt's father must resolve a thorny political problem, and guarantee Luna's water supply without compromising her independence and putting her in the debt of the all-powerful Vacor corporation.

Ford's realization of Luna society is acute, canny and detailed, and revealed with vivid economy through the ways in which it affects those living in it. The narrative, seamlessly flipping between the points of view of father and son, makes telling comparisons between the maturation of a society and of an individual; although Matt is the main character, this is not a juvenile novel. The lessons it gives are

hard and hard won, and although *Growing Up Weightless* colonizes territory already well-explored by others, it remakes old maps with a spritely and cutting wit.

Charles Sheffield's *Godspeed* (Tor, \$21.95) unabashedly harks back to the historical Golden Age of sf – its characters don't actually wear jodhpurs, but otherwise it is a lovingly crafted homage to the milieu of Frank R. Paul's 1930s *Amazing Stories* covers. Like *Growing Up Weightless*, *Godspeed* is not only a coming-of-age sf novel, but also a colony-in-trouble-with-Earth sf novel, although the perspective of Sheffield on the benefits of severance from the mother planet (Sheffield lives and works in the U.S., but was born in Britain) is considerably more pessimistic than Ford's.

The faster-than-light *Godspeed Drive* has allowed colonization of the Galaxy, but interstellar ships have long since stopped visiting the backwater colony world of Mareen, which is now suffering from technological regression and a plummeting birthrate. Jay Hara, who tells his own story with a clear voice ringing with precisely the right note of zestful wonder, is an adolescent but still prepubescent boy growing up with his mother, who "entertains" spacers.

The plot, which is a skilful and clever homage to *Treasure Island*, swings into action when she rents a room to one spacer, Paddy Enderton, who is on the run from his space pirate shipmates; when they catch up with and kill Enderton, the navigation device he has appropriated falls into Jay's hands. Jay discovers that the device may contain the location of the long-lost *Godspeed* base, hidden somewhere in the swarm of worldlets where the spacers mine asteroids for precious light metals. With two scientists and a woman physician, he sets out in a hired ship to look for the base, where an interstellar ship might be found. But it soon turns out that the ship is crewed by the very pirates from whom Enderton had been hiding. Sheffield perfectly captures Jay's wide-eyed sense of wonder, and his uneasy relationship, part admiration, part fear, with the charming, wily, roguish and ultimately ruthless space pirate captain Danny Shaker. Much of the plot twists hinge on their duels of wit, and in the end only Jay's shrewdness can save the others when the pirates find the base and a working interstellar ship, and leave them marooned.

While *Godspeed* colourfully reworks tropes such as space pirates, jungle worldlets with Amazon inhabitants, and interplanetary junkyards, it also neatly works through all the implications of its plot. If it is a joyride,

it is carefully designed. Sheffield is not only scrupulous in explaining just why the Godspeed drive has ceased to function: the way in which it has ceased to work is crucial to the novel's resolution. Witty, literate, and crafted with an obvious love for the tropes it craftily redeems, *Godspeed* is a delight.

John E. Stith's *Manhattan Transfer* (Tor, \$21.95), is uncompromising hard sf that starts off well but doesn't repay the promise of its premise. It opens with a breathless pounce, as aliens rip the island of Manhattan free, enclose it in a bubble, and set it inside a vast hold inside their ship. The transfer of Manhattan and the mounting discoveries are swiftly delineated in uncluttered prose, with a plethora of convincing conscientiously worked-through details. Unfortunately, the resolution of this carefully set up mystery isn't as rewarding.

The kidnapped citizens, including Matt Sheehan, a resourceful and pragmatic Army Colonel, quickly learn that theirs is only one of many cities, the rest all alien, held by the ship. Sheehan leads an expedition that tunnels through the viscous floor of the hold to several of the other cities and then into the ship itself, where he and his ingenious companions confront the alien crew. But after this, Stith's painstaking foregrounding is lost in the twists and turns of ever more complicated explanations. The aliens turn out to be compliant civil servants whose job is to snatch specimens ahead of an apparently indestructible and out-of-control planet-shaper. The vast city-grabbing spaceship was constructed as an interim measure while another capable of destroying the shaper is being built – although why it is taking so long to build the planet-shaper destroyer, given the complexity of the city grabber, is unclear. And for all that the aliens are clearly far in advance of human technology, in the end the humans triumph over the planet-shaper, which its own makers can't destroy, by the feeblest kind of gung-ho jerry-rigging. Even Stith doesn't seem to believe it: the final scenes mostly consist of characters telling each other about an unconvincing off-stage space battle. There's a good joke in the last line, but it isn't earned. *Manhattan Transfer* perfectly demonstrates that ideas – Stith has plenty of good ideas – are not enough: it's what you do with them that counts.

(Paul J. McAuley)

Evolution Woman Chris Gilmore

The title story of Rosaleen Love's collection *Evolution Annie* (Women's Press, £6.99), consisting of ten shorts and a novella, begins on an hubristic note. Roy Lewis's *The Evolution Man* (1960) is quite unclassifiable except as the funniest novel ever written about anthropology. It purports to condense the crucial transitions from near to true human into a soap-opera format, wherein the characters debate in academic terms their own triumphs and reverses. The flavour is difficult to catch, but the following may give some hint:

It was unmistakably Uncle Vanya's shadow: nobody could mistake those huge bent shoulders, those hairy half-flexed knees and shaggy buttocks, that prognathous jaw – above all, that simian arm extended in a typical gesture of denunciation. There was the shadow, fixed and immovable in the most astonishing way, amid all the other shadows dancing and flickering in the firelight.

"What is it?" demanded Uncle Vanya in a terrible voice, though there could be but one disastrous answer.

"R-representational art," squeaked Alexander.

Ms Love begins by acknowledging the wit, but condemning it as "one-sided": human evolutionary/technical/social advances are ascribed to a male, you see; and since males are, well, thick, there must be some mistake. It was all the work of a prosimian Mother. Love has some wit of her own, but neither Lewis's scholarship, nor the trenchancy of John Steinbeck's "The Short, Short Story of Mankind." If you can't play in that sort of league, don't invade the pitch.

In fact most of the shorter pieces are not stories but musings, with some characters as hooks. "The Heavenly City, Perhaps" muses on the afterlife as it might appear to Baron Cuvier's "Hot-tent Venus"; "Cosmic Dusting" on how it appears to Ms Love. "A Pattern to Life" muses on the career and contribution of T.H. Huxley, and how his classifications differ from those of Jorge Luis Borges. With their repetitive, stream-of-consciousness style, plentiful digression and lack of imposed structure, they resemble nothing so much as those dreams, usually just before waking, which consist of what seem to be wonderfully significant thoughts which one can never afterwards recall.

Where there is a story it tends to concern the revenge of Mother Nature on human meddling and/or funny things happening to time. There are echoes of early Ballard here, especially "Now Wakes the Sea" and "The Gioconda di

the Twilight Noon," but all is discursive and pastel-hued. The style is gently humorous in a low-key way, but disengaged.

The novella, "The Daughters of Darius" has much the same qualities. An avatar of Darius III, whom one had believed killed by his own men after he fled the battle of Gaugamela, suddenly appears on the beach at Sandringham, where he captivates, marries, fathers three daughters upon and then deserts teenage Eva. He subsequently reappears, with the "explanation" that he and an avatar of the undying Alexander have interminable business among all the worlds of infinite space. Alexander must forever conquer, Darius must forever resist and fail.

It's an unsatisfactory destiny, but Darius seems to get plenty of furlough; Eva is but one of some 2,000 wives, and no one lacks time for conversation and explanation – to which Eva and her daughters are most certainly entitled, though neither the explanations nor the action (such as it is) make very much sense. There are a number of jokes along the way, some of them quite clever, but if they add up to one great joke in the end, I'm afraid I missed it.

In our universe the Mongol hordes came close to conquering Europe in the 13th century. Brian Rayfield in *Topaz Fire* (Legend, £9.99) stands history on its head by postulating an incursion of 13th-century chivalry, complete with longbows, plate armour and manganels, into the peaceful Sino/Mongol-type empire of Chaw. To make it credible the "Western Barbarians" can deploy witchfire at need, for this is more Sword-&Sorcery than an alternate-universe story. But the parallels are close, so that Rayfield's generalized orientalism, which makes jitsu and yoga native to his quasi-Central Asian culture, has an annoying taste of anachronism. He would have done better to invent new names for them. He would also have done better to call his forest people something other than Dryads; the word has resonances which jar every time it's used. On the editorial side, Rayfield scores automatic points with me by knowing a disinterested party, only to lose most of them by failing to distinguish between may and might and letting collective nouns govern plural verbs.

Technicalities aside, the content of the tale is well balanced and told largely from the viewpoint of Ca'lin Curos, a young commander on the defending side. To counter the western magic he seeks aid from the Dryads, who second a young sorceress to his camp. He is attracted by her vulnerability and exotic beauty no less than her courage and resource, but repelled by the customs of her people,

which he has seen at their most gratuitously bloody. He also has to contend with his two loveless marriages, the political divisions of Chaw, the corruption of local officials and the deficiencies of the peasant army under his command. It makes for a well rounded character, credible in terms of his native culture. One does not, therefore, balk at Curo's use of mental and physical torture, blackmail and summary execution in pursuit of his ends. This is a story of total war.

There are also scenes from the viewpoint of Valanas, the leading western wizard, but as he gets far less time than Curo's balance fails here. Instead there are digressions during which minor characters are established – well enough done, but I'd rather have the arch villain. I'd also have liked to know a bit more about the peacetime politics of both sides. Partly because of these omissions the book sags somewhat in the middle, degenerating into the heavy style of a campaign history that would work better with battle diagrams and maps. Rayfield makes his world real for the reader, but sometimes at the expense of his character.

The ending is somewhat arbitrary, leaving room for a sequel or Vol 2, though none is heralded; even so, this is a promising first novel, and I look forward to more from Brian Rayfield. But it's a crowded field, and if he's to reach the top rank he must either tighten up his syntax or failing that, find an editor.

By contrast, Phillip Mann's exercise in parallelism, *A Land Fit for Heroes* (Gollancz, £15.99) is subtitled *Vol 1: Escape to the Wild Wood*, and begins in a transparently no-nonsense fashion with two chapters of datadump before any character so much as speaks to another. In this line Rome succumbed neither to Christianity nor to the Barbarians, but conquered the whole world and acquired some formidable technology while shedding none of its characteristic virtues and vices – especially the amphitheatre. The opening reads rather like a marriage of Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* and Sarban's *The Sound of his Horn*.

Unfortunately Mann is unable to sustain that standard. His principal characters are the teenage lovers Angus and Miranda, trainee engineer and cook respectively. They and their families are the sort of people who get called "the salt of the Earth," and Mann revels in their ordinariness, which he never fails to explain to the reader, pointing out as he does so the many parallels between his world and our own. Spring follows winter, and summer spring – who'd have guessed?

Angus beamed back, though to be honest he did not know what to make of this last piece of information. He thought the

Academy sounded boring, but then he was not interested in domestic management. He accepted his ignorance. He made no pretences to false interest. As far as he was concerned, if Miranda was happy that was good enough for him.

And so forth, by the yard.

Rape, murder and mayhem feature in this yarn, before and after the lovers "escape" to an autochthonous society which the Romans have most improbably left untaxed and unmolested in the interstices of their imperium, but Mann's most passionate writing all concerns the workings of the "beasts" used in the amphitheatre – exotically armed and constructed one-man tanks reminiscent of Jack Vance's Killing Machine, but running off fly-wheels. It's an intriguing notion, though exactly how the wheels are cushioned against the many shocks they must encounter over harsh terrain, and how the angular momentum is balanced, are both left unclear. I'd have appreciated some blown-up drawings.

But the tension drops whenever Mann switches his attention from machines to people, for when he describes emotions he can never resist moralizing. The general effect is like a tract on the evil consequences of failing to Rule the Passions. Moreover, as the book progresses he is ever more out of his depth. Characters and customs lose such consistency as they had, and nothing follows from anything else. A "wise" inkeeper puts two heterosexual males in the same bed when they arrive unexpectedly. All right, but several months later the poor fellows are still sleeping head-to-toe – and they don't even like each other much. The dialogue suffers worst of all. It adds no credibility when characters who are supposed to be speaking Latin suddenly break into stage Yorkshire.

In desperation Mann introduces three more "wise" characters to back up his own aperçus. One of them even purports to enlighten Angus with quotes from Rousseau and Mill, but unsurprisingly, he lacks the background. Are children who have been especially good still awarded books as Sunday School prizes? If so, I nominate this one. They can Treasure it All their Lives. Others will prefer something more like...

Suppose that about 1957 Robert Heinlein had become besotted with Damon Runyon and determined to emulate his style. At the same time, he had a deadline for a juvenile. The result would be exactly like Pauline Ashwell's *Unwillingly to Earth* (Tor, \$3.99; Pan Macmillan, £2.99), save that neither Runyon nor Heinlein capitalized some, but by no means all, of their key words. Why Ashwell does is never explained, nor why a character of some importance is usually called Doug but sometimes Don.

All the Heinlein trademarks are there: the emphasis on family values, the bogus humility, even the silly given name. Lysistrata (Lizzie) Lee is petite, blonde, cute as a kitten and (despite having spent her entire life in the sticks of a backwater planet) a genius. However, she has no desire for wider horizons, higher education or even, until the last few pages, sex. Aged 19, she has to be shanghaied into university, for she would far rather stay home to look after the farm and Daddy. This probably shows sound instincts, as she is accident-prone, mainly through sheer perversity (or to put it another way, not only is she a consultant-level Sweet Little Thing, she's brave with it.) Having been warned against going anywhere near a particularly rough bar in the worst part of a mining town, she naturally heads straight there and gets work serving behind it. Once established she charms the pants off all the clientele (but only metaphorically, this not being that kind of book).

There follow several more episodes wherein Lizzie wisecracks and Does Good in varying proportions, up to some very good suspense writing at the climax and a wind-down straight out of Babette Hall's *Last Night When We Were Young*. I'm sure if I was a female 14-year-old of sunny disposition I'd like it immensely. It still left a middle-aged male curmudgeon in a good enough mood to face another offering from Women's Press.

Katherine V. Forrest's *Daughters of a Coral Dawn* (Women's Press, £5.99) carries the handicap of describing itself as a "delightful lesbian utopia." Utopian fiction is generally inferior to other kinds, with cruder psychology, preacher dialogue, creakier plotting and less wit – Aldous Huxley's *Island* being typical.

Daughters is presented as science fiction but is best approached as fantasy for two reasons. *Imprimis*, the author's scientific background is pre-Aristotelian, the astrophysics being bad enough for Captain W.E. Johns. Early on we meet a ship mothballed in a "parabolic lunar orbit," a miss from a "laser electron gun" jolts it, and shock waves from a nuclear explosion propagate through vacuum. Naiad Press, who first published it in 1984, obviously lacked a technical editor, and it has not been updated.

Secundo, the atmosphere is that of a wish-fulfilling sex-fantasy. The characters are principally descendants of an unnamed spaceman who becomes sufficiently enamoured of a Vernan humanoid to smuggle her home. They are also all women, because "Vernan genes are dominant" (meiosis? forget it!), all geniuses for the same reason, and despite being bosomy types, retain their beauty over many decades. Unendingly, such paragons of womanhood

fancy each other far more than the men or women of Earth. While they don't seduce their own daughters and granddaughters, Forrest's ideal amour is between great aunt and niece, and has a bloodless quality, being founded neither on passion nor intellect, but physical appearance. Love at first sight is the norm.

By the time they number six thousand they perceive a threat and a promise. Someone has invented a drug that permits direct cloning, so that even fleeting heterosexual relationships become redundant (they don't seem to have heard of artificial insemination). The male-dominated governments of Earth throw a collective wobble and outlaw it; the ladies head for space and a new beginning on an empty world which they call Maternas. (They also name physical features after the author's favourite lesbian writers, who include Alice B. Toklas and Radclyffe Hall, but neither Viollette Le Duc nor Mary Renault.) The parallel with *The Iron Dream* (Spinrad/Hitler) is marked, but probably unintentional.

Thereafter Part One consists largely of talk among the characters, and demonstrates the ill effects of making everyone a genius. It is not enough to reflect that "Women so gifted as we are sometimes cursed with hypersensitivity." Geniuses should do or at least say brilliant things, but their art (described in terms strikingly reminiscent of Heinlein's *I Will Fear No Evil*), is sentimental and didactic, their conversation is stilted and insipid and though nothing is quoted from their formal literary effusions, the narrative is in diary form and full of this sort of passage:

It has become apparent to us all who observe her daily that she possesses an integrative faculty of stunning dimension, seeing the whole and its parts with equal acuity whatever the complexity of the whole.

I found myself pining for *The Legacy of Heorot*, but Part Two reads more like a weak parody of Poul Anderson's *Virgin Planet*. A military ship finds itself in difficulty and makes a forced landing on Maternas. For the three men on board, who are more-or-less oafish, a sticky end is arranged, two for attempted rape, one on general principles – but the woman... Aha! She finds her True Awakening – and all in the best possible taste.

If this book has a moral it must be: if you haven't got it, don't flaunt it.

And now for something completely different. The eponymous hero of Bob Shaw's **Warren Peace** (Gollancz, £14.99) is sf's answer to Barry Mackenzie. All he wants is plenty of palatable booze, high-tar cigarettes, rich food, uninvolved sex, undemanding enter-

tainment and the security to enjoy them. He's even prepared to work to these ends, as long as the work is neither dirty, dull, arduous nor hazardous, and the hours aren't excessive. Alas! His chances of bringing off this combination are no better than yours or mine, but the misfortunes into which he blunders are such as you and I are unlikely to face.

This being humorous sf Shaw feels entitled to treat the laws of physics and biology quite as high-handedly as does Forrest, the difference being that Shaw knows what he's doing. At one point Peace is in danger of being crushed between two dirigible black holes – except that someone goofed and got puce holes instead, with rather different effects. To complain that you've never heard of/don't believe in a puce hole is very much to miss the point. This is Douglas Adams/Grant Naylor territory, though I can't see it making the small screen – certainly not before 9.30. Chapters 3-4, which appeared edited but not expurgated in *Interzone* #67, turn on what induces an alien race to masturbate.

There are other problems. The book breaks down neatly enough into sections, but Shaw's invention isn't on a par with Adams's; there's too much reliance on sending up familiar clichés, as when Peace finds himself in an alternate Manchester where it never stops raining, the cuisine consists of fry-ups and beer, the spaceship yards parody the worst period of British ship-building and all the women who aren't prudes are nymphomaniacs. OK in small doses, but this takes up nearly half the book and makes for predictable punchlines.

There's a failure of internal consistency as well. At one point Peace finds himself exercising preternatural cunning, without the least idea what he will say next. I tried to second-guess this one, with the theory that a zit behind his ear had evolved into a secondary brain, but no luck – it's never explained. Humour no less than fantasy needs tight internal logic, and *Warren Peace* is a couple of wires short of a squirrel cage.

(Chris Gilmore)

Funnies Mat Coward

“My feet are getting wet,” said Cornelius. “Mine aren’t,” said Tuppe. “But I know what you mean.” Such throwaway madness could only come from Robert Rankin, of course – unless, that is, it came from Myles na Gopaleen or Spike Milligan or Ivor Cutler. One of those nutty fringe-boys, anyway.

Rankin is on top form in **The Book of**

Ultimate Truths (Doubleday, £14.99), a popcorn vindaloo of invention and inversion, crackling with jokes and wonder. This is despite a rather forced, mechanical first few pages, in which the laugh-lines occasionally seem more Jasper Carrott than Flann O'Brien. In fact, things drag rather more than somewhat until Cornelius, our tall teenage hero, at last sets off on his picaresque quest, the excuse for which is a search for the suppressed chapters of the *Book of Ultimate Truths*, which must be republished now in its entirety in order to, you know, save the world.

The set pieces are often superb, as in the auction scene which begins with a dotty woman putting one of her previous purchases back into the sale – “I paid far too much for it the first time, so I’ve put a really low reserve on it now. If I can pick it up this week it should be a real bargain” – and ends in a magnificent riot, the sort Tom Sharpe might write if he drank more and worried less. In the thick of the action is the Wolf of Kabul; but he isn't one of those arrested, and the Chief of Police wants to know why. His sergeant explains: “Fictional character, sir. Out of the *Hotspur*.”

But the best parts of the book are the excerpts from *The Book*, in which the late philosopher Hugo Rune (“He offered the world his great wisdom. All he asked in return was that the world should cover his expenses”) explains all that is inexplicable, complete with multiple Fortean references as signposts to the initiated.

Rune's Cousin Vic, for instance, is puzzled by the absence of Nazis in post-war Berlin – he can't find any at all, no matter how many Germans he asks, and yet the place was crawling with them not long ago. Years later, he witnesses the London marathon: “Where do they all come from? If they behaved like that every day, the city would grind to a halt. And I'll wager that if you go down there tomorrow there will be no trace of them.” Rune's explanation of this phenomenon is, like Rankin's book itself, disconcertingly convincing.

I didn't find **The Galaxy Game** by Phil Janes (Millennium, £13.99) – “the start of an engaging, absurd and very funny SF series” – very engaging or very funny, and I think the publishers were absurd to issue it; unless, being more experienced in such matters than I am, they see great potential in Janes, and are willing to take a loss in publishing his first novel, to get it out of the way before he starts work on the good stuff.

There are enough decent jokes here to make that theory tenable, though not, I fear, enough to make the book worth buying. There's a nice gag about a matter-transfer experiment in which two identical Cornish pasties change

places, leaving observers none the wiser; but the heavy-handed, pipe-smoking humour of much of the book is wearing. In order to say, comically, that something is crap, Janes explains that the appropriate word "would rhyme with trap." "Bother," says one character, "or something which meant much the same thing." He repeatedly uses "said" to mean "forementioned," where there is no excuse for using either.

In places, *Galaxy Game* (which is about advanced aliens using lesser species as sporting proxies) is barely comprehensible. Janes digresses frequently, a technique which has, admittedly, contributed to the success of the genre's masters — but then they manage to do it without making it look like a fucking accident. His characterization rhymes with trap.

Even so, I'd like to see his next book. It can't be any worse than this, and, if he can be persuaded to loosen his collar and tie a little, and stop hammering the jokes home like bungs in a barrel, he could be onto something. After all, humorous fantasy and sf is almost all rubbish. Maybe once a decade you get an Adams or a Pratchett, but I can think of no other area of literature in which the chaff to wheat ratio is so dispiritingly high.

Split Heirs by Lawrence Watt-Evans and Esther Friesner (Tor, \$18.95) also suffers from laboured jokes — "Wulfrith wasn't entirely sure what a damsel was. When he asked Clootie, his master had gotten that puff-checked, hem-hawing look that means *I am going to tell you a whopper of a lie now*, and replied, 'Damsels are a rare and especially delicious breed of plum'" — and it takes a bit of fortitude to persevere through the early chapters, which are stiff with explanation, like the pre-credit sequence in an American soap.

The meat of the book however, unlike many of the jokes, is worth waiting for. Once it gets going, it flows splendidly, skilfully combining humour and plot in a story of royal destiny thwarted by cruel fates and useless servants. Plus dragons, princesses, etc.

The effete, cultured Hydrangean kingdom has been annexed by the barbarians of the Gorgorian empire. With Alexandrian cunning, the Gorgorian king marries into the Hydrangean royal family. Much of the enjoyment of the book comes from the way in which Esther Friesner and Lawrence Watt-Evans present a thoughtfully-detailed picture of a superior but subject race co-existing with its moronic conquerors.

When she gives birth to triplets, the queen, a loyal Hydrangean who longs for her line to be reinstated in its own right, sends two of the babes off to the

woods, to be cared for by her brother, "the brave and dashing heroic leader of the Bold Bush-dwellers"; Gorgorians believe that a woman who has three babies must have had three men. Naturally, the little princes never arrive at their intended destinations, but at least they get to see a bit of the world before returning for a climax which is extravagant, messy — and gratifyingly uncertain.

(Mat Coward)

A Step Too Far? Pete Crowther

Try to imagine:

It's two am. Chris Barton, a Californian mathematician, is working on a hush-hush project for the government. OD'd on caffeine and braindead from several days' virtually non-stop figure-juggling, he leaves the office for home...only to find that his car has been stolen. He borrows one from a colleague who's working right through the night.

On the way home he picks up a hitchhiker, an elderly man wearing a baseball cap. The man strikes up a conversation, asking Barton if he knows what is real and what isn't. Barton is in no mood to chat and, understandably, begins to regret giving the man a lift. However, unperturbed by Barton's cool reception, the man offers a wager: the security of Barton's existence against his (Barton's) assumption that he knows what is real and unreal in his life. Humouring his passenger, Barton accepts the wager — just to shut him up — and, a few minutes later, lets him out of the car. Then his troubles start.

When he gets home, Barton finds his car parked in his drive. Strangers — one of whom professes to be Barton — are living in his house. He is pursued by the police and the CIA. Attempts are made on his life by the most unexpected would-be assassins, one of whom he kills. And he is given a plane ticket to London.

On the plane, Barton is befriended by a man who assures him he is on his side. The man then takes a trip to the bathroom and doesn't return. When the increasingly agitated Barton persuades the stewardess to break down the door, they discover an empty bathroom and, on the mirror, a short message: SEVEN STEPS TO MIDNIGHT. (Which just happens to be the title of the book containing this confusion, a new suspense mystery by Richard Matheson.)

More and more characters drift into and out of the proceedings, including a beautiful girl who may be the reincarnation of an ancient Roman. More plane tickets are passed around. Trips to Paris and Venice ensue. More cryptic

notes. More assassins. More deaths. And more scribbled messages, adorning canal walls, bedroom doors and even whispered in his ear:

SIX STEPS TO MIDNIGHT
FIVE STEPS TO MIDNIGHT
FOUR STEPS TO MIDNIGHT
and so on.

Whenever — or, even, whatever — midnight is, it's certainly getting closer. But Barton has no idea what it's all about. In an effort to preserve the few crumbs of sanity left him, he continues, amidst the chaos, to work on said hush-hush project...something, we learn, to do with "turbulence." The complications, meanwhile, continue to pile up: a ring with a secret compartment; the ghost of a girl wearing a rotting white dress; a piece of microfilm; car chases; mountain-top fights...and so on.

The good news at the end of it all is that everything is explained — but then, surely no one would expect a writer of Matheson's proven quality to cop out with a variation on the old...and it was all just a terrible dream... resolution. The bad news, however, is that the last-minute revelations are contrived and implausible, rendering all that came before — we're on page 302 now! — quite improbable.

This kind of reality-slippage, quasi-gothic melodrama may have worked — and, indeed, *did work* — in Matheson's half-hour scripts for *The Twilight Zone*, representing the stories which have become quintessential examples of that show. But dragged out and mercilessly padded into a 318-page novel, it makes for a punishing read.

7 Steps To Midnight (Tor; \$21.95) is a sad waste of the exemplary talent that gave us a welter of short stories second only to the great Charles Beaumont's in their fractured rationality, and a series of exceptional novels which includes *The Shrinking Man*, *The Beardless Warriors*, *Hell House*, *Big Time Return* and the watershed vampire yarn, *I Am Legend*. The difficulty here — and one cannot help but have some sympathy with Matheson's dilemma...namely that of Doctor Frankenstein, who, having created something remarkable, finds his achievement turning on him at the eleventh hour — is that the events and the paranoia become so intensely insane that virtually any denouement is doomed to be a mockery (or, at the very best, a parody) of the artform and, sadly, an insult to the reader's intelligence. Take out the bad language and file under "Juvenile."

Bentley Little's new novel *The Summoning* (Headline, £16.99) is equally disappointing, particularly as it follows his excellent debut, *The Revelation* which I reviewed in July.

The Summoning is actually Little's third novel — the second (*The Mail-*

man) is also scheduled from Headline – and, though it starts well and maintains intrigue and early pacing, it soon degenerates into padding, some particularly (and unnecessarily) unpleasant happenings, and implausible characterization and dialogue. Interestingly, it is the padding which ultimately causes the book's failure in that, like a hypnotist who loses the attention of his subject, it allows the reader to step back and recognize the levels of gratuity, contrivance and manipulation being employed.

The modern horror novel – like its younger sibling, the serial killer-type suspense novel – is, perforce, manipulative, and the story's events are equally necessarily of a violent nature, all contrived to achieve the desired result. Both advocates and opponents of the genre accept this... even to the point, in the case of the former, of applauding it when it is carried out with panache and affection. (Of course, Stephen King is – or, at least, was – the exemplar in this respect.)

But such dramatic licence can only be effective if the writer observes some parameters and some ground rules, beyond or by breaking which the resulting work becomes either parodic or amateurish. *The Summoning* takes itself far too seriously to be a parody, and Little – on the evidence of *The Revelation* and some exceptional short stories – is a proven professional. No question of that.

So *The Summoning* must stand – and fall – on what it is.

What it is is yet another slant on the vampire myth, this time bringing one of the ubiquitous undead to a small Arizona town where it appears to the local reverend as Jesus Christ and persuades him to rebuild the church to a new design. Then the creature goes to work killing off the town's inhabitants by removing all their body fluids (not just their blood, but all water-based substance... including bladder and bowel contents) through the obligatory bite on the neck.

The members of a conveniently resident Chinese family recognize the problem as being the work of the cup hu girngsi – one of several equally awkward Chinese expressions that clutter the narrative – and the family grandmother hatches a plan to kill off the creature. Unfortunately – and for no other apparent reason than that of maximizing both word- and body-count – she elects to wait around 300 pages before she lets others in on the secret. When she does, the solution calls for a specialized craft... at which, it just so happens, one of the townsfolk is an expert.

Along the (laboured!) way, we've got all the usual staple players... including the hard-bitten FBI man, the sceptical journalist, the kindly old ex-Sheriff and, of course, a welter of

expendable bit-players who are introduced in the same way as *Star Trek* used to introduce (briefly!) new crewmembers for a landing party. We've also got children having their arms broken by their parents, a man spreading the blood and entrails of a dead cat on a piece of toast, and another man sucking blood from a sanitary towel.

The inevitable confrontation – while not without excitement – shows hitherto unmentioned (and unimagined!) depravities (mercifully committed "off-camera") and comes across as a straight steal from King's *It* and McCammon's *Stinger*, both of which are far superior works.

Don't say you weren't warned.

Talking of vampires, one could be entirely forgiven for believing that little more that is original could reasonably be achieved in novel form with the myth of the blood-sucking night stalker.

Collectively – and in chronological order – Stoker, Matheson, King, Rice, Collins and, most recently, Stephen Laws and Lucius Shepard with worthy variations on the theme, have surely milked that particular vein. Well, not quite.

Just when it was beginning to look as though the undead were at least still, along comes Yvonne Navarro, a young Chicagoan whose past work in the short-story format has already whetted even the most jaded appetite with the promise of something a little special when she got around to trying her hand at a longer piece. At long last, her debut novel *Aferage* (Bantam, \$5.99) fulfils that promise admirably.

Taking (one assumes) as a primary influence Matheson's apocalyptic *I Am Legend* and King's *The Stand*, Navarro paints a picture of an America effectively depopulated by a plague of vampirism which, we later discover, was the work of one woman, Anyalet, an old-timer even in vampire terms, who decided to try her hand at... well, at ruling the world.

But the world Anyalet has created is completely anarchic.

As the scourge of vampirism took its toll and the suckers began to outnumber the suckees, the ready supply of living blood diminished to drought conditions. The result is that while the remaining humans eke out their daylight existence foraging food in the empty cities and their nights holed up in elaborately protected rooms, the vampires themselves have split into two types.

Anyelet and her organized group of followers have taken their lead from dairy farmers: they capture humans and keep them shackled in their lair, periodically drinking from them without actually killing them. And, by a mixture of threat, mesmerism and the subtle playing on sexual drives, they

have retained the services of a human warder whose daylight duties (while the vampires are asleep) include feeding the prisoners and making the women pregnant. The other group comprises thousands of disorganized nomads – the undead equivalent of the shopping-bag-people – who wander the subways catching rats and other vermin for a quick drink. (This is not a place one would want to spend a weekend in!)

But, just as Anyalet has marshalled her own forces into some semblance of order, so too has Buddy McDole. Buddy has managed to avoid being caught by the vampires. Even better, over a period of time – and by extreme caution – he has pulled in other survivors. Now they are a band, with a base overlooking the streets, a supply of weapons and a steadily improving intelligence about the two types of things he and his friends share their world with.

Into this world come some new stragglers. A young man, a consumptive woman, an ex-doctor bent on discovering the ultimate weapon with which to fight the vampires, and a young girl with two unusual powers: she can kill the vampires simply by allowing them to attempt drinking from her, and she can heal by touch. Before long, the two organized groups learn of each other's existence and a confrontation looms.

Navarro has skillfully constructed an epic tale which embraces all the proven elements of the great saga. It is, of course, merely another good-versus-evil yarn which, one knows, is bound to turn out okay in the end. But it is the telling of the tale and the invention she displays in manipulating and motivating her characters believably through a world that is almost too horrific to imagine that scores so heavily in her favour. *Aferage* is a worthy nominee for best first novel of the year.

Garry Kilworth's work – particularly his short stories – has an eloquently lyrical and exotic quality that quite sets it apart from that of most other authors. The case in point: **Hog-foot Right and Bird-hands** (Edgewood Press, \$9), a commendably priced, 156-page collection of 13 stories written between 1985 and 1992. Here are tales of alternative realities and sanities, bizarre concoctions of the incredible and the commonplace.

For example: the lockdown on mirrors – what we see is actually a world of doppelgangers which exists on the other side... the only consideration being which side is the driving force and which the reflection? ("The Looking-Glass Man"); a man who gets the job of security-watchman of a drifting sargasso island off the coast of Malaysia – his only companions the animal and insect life indigenous to the years

of waste matter which comprises the "vehicle"... plus the buried remains of executed criminals ("Island With the Stink of Ghosts"); two Englishmen searching the South Yemen desert for the scribbles of an elusive poet ("Spiral Sands," which first appeared in *Interzone*); a man with an unhealthily exaggerated opinion on the benefits of attire and its accoutrements ("Truman Capote's Tribby: The Facts"); a massive, single-building, skyscraper-slum—a hive of alleyways, streets and rooms, which once housed thousands of Hong Kong's less fortunate but is now scheduled for demolition—into which a small group ventures hours before the wrecking commences searching for people left behind after the evacuation... only to find that, perhaps, you don't need to be made of flesh and blood to be lonely ("Inside The Walled City"); a party of time travellers, unable to regress further than 429 BC, watching the events of the Peloponnesian War in Greece while, across the action, other temporal travellers watching the same events are unable to go forward beyond that year ("On the Watchtower at Plataea"); a paranoiac civil servant who tries to tell all he knows about "them" ("1948"); and the indescribable title story.

Although Kilworth possesses a singular and most articulate voice, there are traces here of other, equally excellent fabulists. For it is surely Clark Ashton Smith's voice that we can hear echoing in the sighing winds that roam the night-time desert; clearly Ellison's clipped vernacular that runs with the vermin through the effluence of the Chinese tenement; and most certainly Campbell's and Patrick McGrath's brand of alternately questioning and self-assuring whispers that dog the footsteps of the fugitive civil servant and his maybe pursuers.

Hogfoot Right and *Bird-hands* is that rare thing among short-story collections: perfect.

(Pete Crowther)

Books Received September 1993

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. **Mosly Harmless.** "The fifth book in the increasingly inaccurately named *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* trilogy." Pan, ISBN 0-330-32511-3, 219pp, paperback, £4.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in 1992; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 68, 8th October 1993.)

Anthony, Piers, and Robert E. Margroff. **Orc's Opal.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21673-1, 280pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; fourth in the "Kelvin" series.) 11th October 1993.

Archer, Simon. **Gerry Anderson's FAB Facts: Behind the Scenes of TV's Famous Adventures in the 21st Century.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-638247-9, 94pp, trade paperback, £5.99. (Illustrated trivia book about the various sf television series created by producer Gerry Anderson; first edition.) 11th October 1993.

Ballard, J.G. **The Atrocity Exhibition: With Author's Annotations.** Preface by William S. Burroughs. Flamingo, ISBN 0-586-08992-6, viii+135pp, trade paperback, £6.99. (SF collection, first published in 1970 [well, actually, it was first published in Danish in 1969, believe it or not—Jannick Storm translated it from Ballard's English in record time and somehow achieved a world-first edition]; originally announced by HarperCollins/Flamingo for July 1993 but delayed until now, this is Ballard's famous book of "condensed novels," last reissued in Britain in a new edition which contains the notes that JCB wrote for the San Francisco-published "Re/Search" edition, 1990; however, this edition does not contain the illustrations which graced that American edition; also, two of the additional pieces of fiction have been dropped—"The Secret History of World War 5," which is easily available in Ballard's collection *War Fever* [1990] and doesn't really belong here in any case, and "Queen Elizabeth's Rhinoplasty," an imaginary-operation piece which we assume has been left out for reasons of censorship [just as irrelevant mentions of Ronald Reagan and Jackie Kennedy got the American first edition pulped on the orders of a Doubleday executive way back in 1970—times have not changed that much, have they?]) 25th October 1993.

Barnes, Steven. **Firedance.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85094-8, 380pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (SF novel, first edition; copy proof received; sequel to *Streetlethal* [1983] and *Gorgon Child* [1989]). November 1993.

Blackmore, Leigh, ed. **Terror Australis: The Best of Australian Horror.** Hodder/Coronet [10-16 South St., Rydalmere, NSW 2116, Australia], ISBN 0-340-58455-6, xii+348pp, paperback, A\$12.95. (Horror anthology, first edition; it contains mainly new stories by Australian or Australian-associated authors such as Guy Boothby [reprint], Bill Congreve, Terry Dowling, Greg Egan [reprint], Leanne Frahm, Rick Kennett, Steven Paulsen, Dirk Strasser and Cherry Wilder [reprint]; the book is also copiously illustrated by various hands.) Late entry: July publication, received in September 1993.

Bradley, Marion Zimmer. **The Forest House.** Michael Joseph, ISBN 0-7181-3735-3, 417pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1993; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) 7th October 1993.

Bujold, Lois McMaster. **The Vor Game.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-32198-6, 345pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 8th October 1993.

Calder, Richard. **Dead Girls.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21455-0, 206pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF novel, first published in 1991 [not '92, as it dated inside]; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 75, 27th September 1993.)

Canto, Christophe, and Odile Falu. **The History of the Future: Images of the 21st Century.** Translated by Francis Cowper.

Flammarrion, ISBN 2-08013-544-9, 159pp, hardcover, £30. (Compilation of sf art, together with an extensive text on visions of the future, first edition; published in Paris, this English-language version presumably has been released simultaneously with a French edition.) October 1993.

Chetwynd-Hayes, R. **The Psychic Detective.** "Now to be a Hammer film." Hale, ISBN 0-7090-5135-2, 208pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first edition.) 30th September 1993.

Dalton, Annie. **Night Maze.** Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-0322-9, 256pp, paperback, £2.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1989; third Mammoth printing.) September 1993.

Dalton, Annie. **Swan Sister.** Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-1065-9, 122pp, paperback, £2.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1992.) September 1993.

Dowling, Terry. **Twilight Beach.** Aphelion Publications [P.O. Box 619, North Adelaide, SA 5006, Australia], ISBN 1-875346-08-2, 270pp, paperback, A\$12.95. (SF collection, first edition; third in the "Rynoseros" series.) No date shown: received in September 1993.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. **The Final Adventures of Sherlock Holmes: Completing the Canon.** Edited and introduced by Peter Haining. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0366-5, 208pp, paperback, £5.99. (Collection of essays, plays, parodies, story-fragments, poems, etc., pertaining to the great detective; first published in 1981; this reissue is billed as having "a foreword by Jeremy Brett"—which turns out of be all of seven lines long.) 23rd September 1993.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. **The Oxford Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Short Stories.** General Editor: Owen Dudley Edwards. Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-212329-7, nine hardcover volumes, £69.95 (or £7.95 per volume). [Boxed set of the classic tales of detection; first edition in this format, paperback, £5.99.] (Collection of books are copiously annotated and contain introductions by academic experts; they're billed as "the most authoritative texts available today"; an excellent Christmas present for Sherlockians.) 30th September 1993.

Gemmill, David A. **The First Chronicles of Druss the Legend.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-926331-9, 346pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy collection, first edition; it consists of four long stories about a warrior hero.) 7th October 1993.

Gemmill, David A. **Waylander II: In the Realm of the Wolf.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-989250-2, 323pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1992; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 69, 7th October 1993.)

Green, Simon R. **Ghostworld.** Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05388-7, 254pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF novel, first edition; sequel to *Midworld*.) September 1993.

Haining, Peter, ed. **Great Irish Stories of the Supernatural.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-32983-9, 378pp, paperback, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first published in 1992; it contains reprinted stories by Elizabeth Bowen, Lord Dunsany, Mary Valery, George Moore, J. Sheridan Lefanu, Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain, Liam O'Flaherty, James Stephens, Bram Stoker, J.M. Synge, William Trevor, W.B. Yeats and just about every other Irish writer you can think of, including, surprisingly, James Joyce.) 8th October 1993.

Hoban, Russell. **The Moment Under the Moment: Stories, a Libretto, Essays and Sketches.** Picador, ISBN 0-330-32798-4, 260pp, paperback, £5.99. (Collection by

a notable fantasy writer; first published in 1992.) 8th October 1993.

Huijing, Richard, ed. **The Dedalus Book of Dutch Fantasy**. Dedalus, ISBN 0-946626-69-3, 377pp, paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains 30+ odd stories, arranged alphabetically by author rather than chronologically, and all translated by the editor; most of the authors will be obscure to the English-language reader, but we are assured that they are representative of "the finest writers in the Dutch language of the last hundred years"; the introduction is disappointingly brief, although there are also five pages of biographical notes on the authors.) 14th October 1993.

James, Peter. **Prophecy**. Penguin/Signet, ISBN 0-45-117427-5, 368pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1992.) 7th October 1993.

Jones, Diana Wynne. **Charged Life**. Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-1473-5, 209pp, paperback, £3.50. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1977; winner of the 1978 Guardian Award for Children's Fiction.) September 1993.

Jones, Stephen, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Zombies**. Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-0023-8, ix+518pp, paperback, \$9.95. (Horror anthology, first published in the UK, 1993; it contains a mix of new and reprint stories by Clive Barker, Robert Bloch, Ramsey Campbell, Dennis Etchison, Christopher Fowler, H.P. Lovecraft, M.R. James, Kim Newman, Nicholas Royle, Lisa Tuttle, Edgar Allan Poe, Karl Edward Wagner and many others; apparently a British edition appeared from Robinson Publishing, but we haven't seen it.) 15th November 1993.

Kay, Guy Gavriel. **A Song for Arbonne**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21677-4, 608pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1992; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 65.) 4th October 1993.

Kress, Nancy. **The Aliens of Earth**. Illustrated by Jane Walker. Arkham House, ISBN 0-87054-166-8, viii+327pp, hardcover, \$20.95. (SF collection, first edition; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 78.) 22nd November 1993.

McCaffrey, Anne. **The Chronicles of Pern: First Fall**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02651-9, 256pp, hardcover, £14.99. (SF collection, first published in the USA [?], 1993; it consists of five longish stories "The McCaffrey's "Dragonriders" series.) 4th November 1993.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Crystal Line**. Corbis, ISBN 0-552-13911-4, 349pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1992; third in the series which began with *The Crystal Singer*.) 6th October 1993.

McRae, Murdo William, ed. **The Literature of Science: Perspectives on Popular Scientific Writing**. University of Georgia Press, ISBN 0-8203-1506-0, 321pp, hardcover, \$45. (Anthology of critical essays, first edition; this interesting item is one of the few books about pop-science writing as a form of literature; its various articles, mostly by academic writers unknown to us, cover such persons and subjects as Carl Sagan, Loren Eiseley, Oliver Sacks, Stephen Jay Gould, Primo Levi, Richard Feynman, narratives of polar exploration, chaos theory and *Omni* magazine; as one contributor remarks, in the past couple of decades "there has been a wonderful proliferation of book-length translations of science... not all of them by Isaac Asimov"; recommended.) 7th September 1993.

Maginn, Simon. **Sheep**. Corbis, ISBN 0-552-1472-4, 316pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut book by a new British writer [born 1961].) 20th January 1994.

May, Julian. **Blood Trillium**. "Grafon Books", ISBN 0-586-21161-6, 432pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992.) 27th September 1993.

Newman, Kim. **Anno-Dracula**. Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-88184-967-7, 359pp, hardcover, \$21. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1992; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 69; this is the first American edition; note the tiny change of title: a hyphen has been added.) 15th September 1993.

Nimmo, Jenny. **The Snow Spider Trilogy**. Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-1424-7, 435pp, paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile fantasy omnibus, first edition; it contains the novels *The Snow Spider* [1986], *Emlyn's Moon* [1987] and *The Chestnut Soldier* [1989].) September 1993.

Niven, Larry, and Jerry Pournelle. **The More Around Murchison's Eye**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224200-1, 402pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (SF novel, first edition published in the USA as *The Clutching Hand*, 1992; sequel to *The Mote in God's Eye*; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 73.) 21st October 1993.

Niven, Larry, and Jerry Pournelle. **The Mote in God's Eye**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21746-0, 560pp, paperback, £5.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1974; probably this duo's best novel, warmed-over Heinlein though it is!) 11th October 1993.

Rice, Anne. **Cry to Heaven**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-013202-3, 582pp, paperback, £5.99. (Historical novel by a leading horror writer; first published in the USA, 1990; third Penguin printing.) 7th October 1993.

Rice, Anne. **Lasher**. Chatto & Windus, ISBN 0-7011-4020-8, 578pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1993; sequel to *The Witching Hour*.) 28th October 1993.

Rice, Anne. **The Tale of the Body Thief**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-013204-X, 607pp, paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1992; fourth in the *Vampire Chronicles* series.) 7th October 1993.

Rickman, Phil. **Crybbe**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32893-X, 664pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1993.) 8th October 1993.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. **Green Mars**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-246-13862-3, 571pp, hardcover, £14.99. (SF novel, first edition; sequel to *Red Mars*; a final volume of the trilogy, entitled *Blue Mars*, is promised.) 21st October 1993.

Royle, Nicholas. **Counterparts**. Barrington Books [Bartle Hall, Liv.: r.c.d. Rol., Hutton, Preston, Lancs. PR4 5HB], 231pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first edition; a debut book by this British writer [born 1963] who has already had over 60 short stories published, many of them in *Interzone*.) 30th September 1993.

Shippey, Tom, ed. **The Oxford Book of Fantasy Stories**. Oxford University Press, no ISBN shown, xxii+497pp, hardcover, no price shown. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; as well as Professor Shippey's customarily learned and provocative introduction, this companion volume to his *Oxford Book of Science Fiction Stories* contains chronologically arranged tales by Richard Garth, Lord Dunsany, A. Merritt, H.P. Lovecraft, John Buchan, Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, C.L. Moore, Fritz Leiber, Ray Bradbury, Henry Kuttner, Jack Vance and most of the other English-language names one might expect, culminating with Tanith Lee, Lucius Shepard, Robert Holdstock and Terry Pratchett; recommended.) February 1994.

Sutton, David, and Stephen Jones, eds. **Dark Voices 5: The Pan Book of Horror**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-33024-1, 381pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; it contains mainly original stories by Dennis Etchison, Robert Holdstock, Graham Joyce, Katha Koja, Kim Newman, Nicholas Royle, Michael Marshall Smith, Melanie Tem, etc.) 8th October 1993.

Taylor, Bret. **Specimen 12**. Bret Taylor [27 Goodacre St., Mansfield, Notts. NG18 2HH], ISBN 0-9521681-0-3, 134pp, paperback, no price shown. (SF novel, first edition.) No date shown; received in September 1993.

Wagner, Karl Edward. **Darkness Weaves with Many Shades**. Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-017523-7, 192pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1970; first in the "Kane" sword-and-sorcery series; this edition follows the restored text of the 1978 Coronet paperback printing.) 7th October 1993.

Williamson, Philip G. **From Enchantment: The Firstworld Chronicles**, 3. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-20907-7, 353pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 27th September 1993.

Womack, Jack. **Elvisive**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21301-5, 319pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF novel, first published in 1993.) 11th October 1993.

Womack, Jack. **Random Acts of Senseless Violence**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-246-13850-5, 256pp, hardcover, £14.99. (SF novel, first edition.) 4th October 1993.

Woolley, Benjamin. **Virtual Worlds: A Journey in Hype and Hyperreality**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-015439-6, viii+274pp, paperback, £6.99. (Popular science text, first published in 1992; like all books on its subject, this well-written and sceptical study of Virtual Reality contains nods towards William Gibson, cyberpunk and *Neuromancer*.) 7th October 1993.

Wyndham, John. **The Chrysalids**. "Masters of Science Fiction," Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-0041-6, 200pp, paperback, \$3.95. (SF novel, first published in the UK, 1955; "John Wyndham" was a pseudonym for John Beynon Harris, 1903-1969.) 15th November 1993.

Novelizations, Spinoffs, Sequels by Other Hands, Shared Worlds, Sharecrops

The following is a list of all books received which fall in the above sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror (including non-fiction about shared worlds, etc). For some definitions of terminology, see *David Pringle's "Of Sequels and Prequels - and Sequels by Other Hands" in MILLION* no. 9; and watch out for our forthcoming feature on movie novelizations.

Carey, Diane. **The Great Starship Race**. "Star Trek, 62." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-489-3, 305pp, paperback, £3.99. (SF television-and-film-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) 20th October 1993.

Howe, David J., and David B. Wake, eds. **Drabble** Vol. Becon Publications [75 Rosslyn Ave., Harold Wood, Essex RM3 0RG], ISBN 1-870824-21-0, 123pp, hardcover, £8.99 [plus 75 pence p/inland]. (SF television-series shared-universe anthology, first edition; it consists of 100 brief stories, each exactly 100 words in length, not counting title, and all concerned with the adventures of Doctor Who; as with the

previous two "Drabble" anthologies, proceeds go to the RNIB Talking Book Fund; among the better-known contributors to this volume are Sophie Aldred, Colin Baker, Stephen Baxter, Steve Bowkett, Keith Brooke, Peter Darvill-Evans, Stephen Gallagher, Louise Jameson, Andrew Lane, Mark Morris, Jon Pertwee, Roger Robinson (publisher, to whom all praise) and Nicholas Royle.) 4th September 1993.

Mortimore, Jim. **Blood Heat.** "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20399-2, 309pp, paperback, £4.50. (SF television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) 21st October 1993.

Nicholls, Stan. **David Gemmell's Legend.** Illustrated by Fangorn. Legend, ISBN 0-09-

914171-X, unpaginated, trade paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy graphic novel, adapted from the book by David A. Gemmell; first edition.) 7th October 1993.

Yeovil, Jack. **Comeback Tour (The Sky Belongs to the Stars).** "Dark Future." Bostree, ISBN 1-85283-565-6, 236pp, paperback, £3.99. (Shared-world role-playing-game-inspired sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1991; third in the "Demon Download" cycle; this is the one which features Elvis Presley as hero; highly recommended as intelligent light reading; "Jack Yeovil" is, of course, a pseudonym of Kim Newman.) 7th October 1993.

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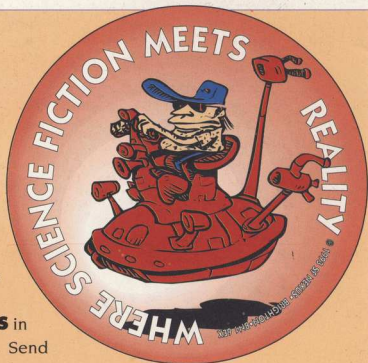
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