

# interzone/86

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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

August  
1994

**New stories by**

**Chris Beckett**

**Keith Brooke**

**Peter F. Hamilton**

**Graham Joyce**

**and others**

**Non-fiction by**

**Brian Stableford**

**Christopher Priest**

**Iain Banks**





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# interzone

## SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 86

August 1994

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# Interaction

Dear Editors:

Paul Beardsley was kind to say that I am a good slipstream writer (Small Press review, IZ 84), but he was unkind to quote me out of context; that is a cheap way to make somebody look foolish.

Slipstream is not a dogmatic set of rules. Nor is it a label to protect ourselves with; we know that only leads to stagnation. At present slipstream is the observation of new literature which has emerged from SF, Fantasy and Horror.

Slipstream is often confused with pure experimentation (which all looks the same), stream-of-consciousness (a hugely misunderstood phrase), and anything which doesn't quite fit in with publishers' expectations. In truth, slipstream is a form of fiction which transcends traditional genre/literary barriers, and leaves a wake of turbulence. Slipstream writers don't necessarily abandon plot, but they don't worship it or use it as a starting point. Slipstream experimentation is not an end in itself, but arises out of the need to find entirely new ways of expressing emotion.

Like Beardsley, I resent the way slipstream is already being seen as a neat little home for a particular style. That is damaging and shoddy. The best way to view slipstream is not as a label, but as an opportunity for development, which the genres should be open to. Some of the best experimental writers are already gaining warm acceptance with mainstream publishers. The danger for SF, Fantasy and Horror is that if slipstream is rejected, the new writers will be forced to make their home elsewhere, leaving the genres with nothing other than the hack trilogies they constantly seek to leave behind.

**Chris Kenworthy**  
Preston, Lancs.

Dear Editors:

Thanks for the ongoing issues of *Interzone*. I read each one from cover to cover (usually with great enjoyment) and frequently mean to drop you a line about one thing or another. However, by the time I get around to it another issue (or two) has come out and the subject seems dead, so it never happens.

One such topic was your piece in #82 about author-zines – a topic that obviously has great interest to me for the *Galactic Central* bibliographies. It took so long for me to get around to writing that I had decided it was too late, but you then revived the subject yourself in #84 and again asked for comments and information, so here goes. The following list is by no means

comprehensive (I doubt any list ever could be), but simply lists some author zines I am aware of – some that you don't list at all, and some with further information on those you do list:

**Brian Aldiss:** There was a "Brian Aldiss Appreciation Society" in 1987, that issued two newsletters and then vanished without a trace. The first issue was accompanied by a limited edition chapbook of "My Country 'Tis Not Only of Thee," signed by Aldiss, that is quite collectable now.

**Piers Anthony:** As you mention, there is a *Piers Anthony Personal Newsletter*, although I'm not sure what you mean by self-produced. Anthony generally contributes a lot of material (typically a column, an article and a fiction extract) but it is put together and edited by a fan/colleague. This is up to 13 issues and is still going.

**Ray Bradbury:** There was a *Ray Bradbury Review* for a while, but I know little about it.

**Marion Zimmer Bradley:** The *Darkover Newsletter* is certainly not self-produced. MZB contributes a letter to each issue, but it's really a forum for *Darkover* fans and would-be writers. I subscribed for a while in 1992, by when it had reached issue 56, and is still going strong.

**Philip José Farmer:** There was a zine called *Farmerage* that saw at least three issues somewhere around 1978.

**Robert E. Howard:** *The Dark Man* has seen three issues and is now comatose, if not defunct. There have, of course, been several Howard zines before – most notably *The Howard Collector*.

**Stephen King:** I believe there is a regular King newsletter called *Castle Rock*, although I've never seen a copy. (Now ceased – Editor.)

**Fritz Leiber:** There was a fanzine called *Silver Eel* (mainly devoted to Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser) that saw a single issue in 1978.

**Andre Norton:** There was a *Norton Newsletter* that saw at least three issues in 1979.

**H. Beam Piper:** There was a *Kalvan-APA* devoted to the Lord Kalvan Universe sometime around 1989.

**Jack Vance:** There was an ongoing fanzine called *Honor to Finuka* that ran for at least 5 issues in 1979/80, and a one shot called *Cosmopolis* in 1988.

**Gene Wolfe:** *The Book of Gold* ran for 2 issues in 1988/89 and has, since then, become extinct to the best of my knowledge.

Anyway, time to go. Enclosed are the latest two *Galactic Central* offerings – not much to show for a year's work, but I seem to get little useful done with my time these days! (These bibliographies are listed in this issue's "Books Received" – Editor.)

**Phil Stephensen-Payne**  
Leeds

Dear Editors:

All thanks for IZ 84 – and for giving the address – and promoting the existence – of the August Derleth Society.

However, its address is now:

P.O. Box 481, Sauk City, WI 53583, USA

With all best wishes.

**Rev. John Howard**  
Bracknell, Berks.

Dear Editors:

In Tim Concannon's slightly sycophantic profile of Bruce Sterling (IZ 83), he describes Sterling looking at an ancient piece of BBC transmission equipment and saying, "There's maybe as much as an entire 'K' of processing power there."

This statement is meaningless in three different ways. First, old radio transmitters contain no memory – not a single byte, let alone a "K" (or kilobyte). Nor do they have any processing power. And in any case, processing power is not measured in kilobytes.

It has always baffled me that people who know nothing about computers are precisely the ones who insist on writing about them. Bruce Sterling would be well qualified to deal factually about biology, yet instead, he has written two computer-based books (one nonfiction, the other fiction), making a number of factual errors in the process.

None of this would matter, except that Sterling modestly portrays himself as a worthy successor to Isaac Asimov in his science columns for *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. This may be true in terms of readability, but not in terms of factual accuracy. I'm very pleased to hear that Bruce is turning away from nonfiction and going back to fiction. I really think it's a more appropriate application for his formidable talents.

**Charles Platt**  
New York

Dear Editors:

Charles Platt does that voodoo so well ... I think he is plotting to become the only sf writer left in the English-speaking world ...



I read his piece on Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) in May's *IZ*. Like him, I have been a fairly rapid keyboarder for a long time – in my case, nearly 20 years on a variety of machines from ancient Imperial manual typewriters up to my current work kit, which you will guess is a pretty state-of-the-art wp package. I have a fair measure of manual dexterity, indulging in various activities such as photographic lab work and model-building which require a wide range of hand and wrist movements of varying degrees of complexity.

Furthermore, for five years between 1984 and 1989, I worked for the (then) Department of Health & Social Security on Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit claims and appeals; and whilst I was familiar with cases of Vibration White Finger (as it was then known), RSI as it presents itself today was virtually unheard of in my part of the world. Now, as a trade union health and safety representative in an IT-intensive office, I am surrounded by information on RSI and the means of invoking it.

And so it came to pass that I read Charles Platt's article. And within ten days, after a particularly intense bout of typing at work against tight deadlines for a rather demanding boss, I, too, began to develop symptoms similar to those of RSI. However, by taking Charles' experience on board, I have relied on rest, relaxation and an elastic bandage rather than seek more complex explanations and solutions. So far, the minor symptoms have not progressed further.

I have taken the liberty of copying his article to the trade journal *Health and Safety at Work*, which has been covering the industrial injury aspects of RSI rather intently of late. I have suggested that if they find it interesting,

they should approach you for reprint rights. (I attach a copy of my letter; if they do reprint, for my own peace of mind I shall check that they have approached you first.) But I am a little concerned; is Charles trying to cause an epidemic of RSI among sf writers of the world to consolidate his position in the writing market? I think we should be told...

**Robert Day**  
Coventry

Dear Editors:

Although, fortunately, I have so far suffered only slightly from repetitive stress injury (RSI), and that sports-related, I found the article in your May issue by Charles Platt on his own experience with keyboard RSI very interesting.

However, I suspect that his proposed solution of using improved voice-recognition systems will not work for a lot of people. This is because talking for hour after hour every day to their computer will leave them with RSI to the voice mechanism.

Teachers and singers already contract this. The wear and tear on the voice of their work must be much less than that of a writer's continuous monologue.

**Laurie Jones**  
Beckenham, Kent

Dear Editors:

I co-edit *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (St Martin's Press) with Terri Windling. The first, second and fourth volumes, published in 1988, 1989 and 1991 won the World Fantasy Award for the best anthology. The seventh annual collection will be out in August 1994. We are now reading for the eighth. This will include material published in the year 1994.

I am looking for stories from all branches of horror: from the traditional-supernatural to the borderline, including high-tech science-fiction horror, psychological horror or anything else that might qualify. If in doubt, send it. This is a reprint anthology so I am only reading material published in or about to be published during the year 1994. The submission deadline is December 15th 1994. Anything sent after this deadline will reach me too late to be considered for 1994. If a magazine you edit will be coming out by December 31st 1994 you can send me galleys so that I can judge the stories in time. The sooner I get the material the better.

There is a section in front of the book that covers "the year in horror," and "the year in fantasy." These include mention of magazines and publishing news concerning the horror and fantasy fields, novels we've read and liked, and in my section, "odds and ends" – material that doesn't fit anywhere else but that I feel might interest the horror reader (like trading cards, strange nonfiction titles, art books, etc). But I have to be aware of this material in order to mention it. The deadline for this section is January 30th, 1995.

When sending material to me please write YEAR'S BEST HORROR on the envelope. Terri Windling's address is: Casa Rincon, 11651 Calle Aurora, Tucson, Arizona 85748, USA. She covers fantasy exclusively and I cover horror exclusively. If you consider something both, send to each of us. We do not confer about our choices.

**Ellen Datlow**  
c/o Omni Magazine  
1965 Broadway  
New York, NY 10023, USA

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## Editor's Notes

In this issue, we're very pleased to welcome **Christopher Priest** as a new semi-regular columnist – his occasional articles on a variety of topics will alternate with Charles Platt's. As most readers will know, Chris is a distinguished if infrequent writer of sf, fantasy and hard-to-classify fiction. His last novel was *The Quiet Woman* (1990), although he tells us that he's currently at work on a new book. He has written almost no short fiction since the 1970s, which is why you haven't seen a story by him in *Interzone*, but he has been a regular reader and supporter of the magazine since its inception.

For other news of Chris's activities, see the frequent mentions of his name in **David Langford's** "Ansible Link" news column. (Although they live about 100 miles apart, Dave and Chris run a small software business, Ansible Information, in tandem.)

Our regular film reviewer, **Nick Lowe**, is resting this month, but should be back next issue. Another of our regulars, **Brian Stableford**, brings his "Yesterday's Bestsellers" series of essays to a close in this issue with his 20th article, on fantasy authors George Viereck and Paul Eldridge (never heard of them? – they were an interesting pair of writers: read Brian's

essay!). But a new series of articles, more closely concerned with science fiction, will follow from Brian's word processor soon: he's intending to cover many of the great names of the sf genre for us over the coming year or two.

Finally, an apology to **Noel Bateman**, the illustrator whose credits were missing from the pictures in two of the stories last issue (*Interzone* 85). Yes, it was Noel who illustrated both Barry Bayley's "Gnostic Endings" and Brian Stableford's "Changelings." In both cases, the artist's credit-lines somehow got dropped. Sorry.

(David Pringle)





**B**urroughs was munching on a reeceburger, a disallowed act in the Charles Street ops centre. Too much highly-prized Command and Coordination computer hardware lined up on our desks. Amazing what a stray crumb could engender in the network terminals, still electronic, unlike the crystal processing core in the police station custom-built basement – a top-of-the-range Packard-Bell optronics model. Leicestershire’s regional taxpayers are still whining about the finance.

I should have growled at him, but I’d never been good at pulling rank. Besides, Burroughs-watching had become a macabre fascination for me over the last few weeks. His appearance was ordinary enough: a 28-year old with a rounded, pink and permanently sweaty face. His thick, pointed ginger beard was a carefully cultivated emblem of masculinity – a lot of men sported beards nowadays. There was an irritating certainty in his carriage, in the way he liked to swing his arms and trumpet his androcentric prejudices. Just to let you know whose side he was on.

That confidence had been crumbling before my

eyes recently. Burroughs had been accosted by a sudden insecurity that even led to physical tremblings. I knew disguised panic when I saw it. Today his odd malaise was bad. His worst yet.

He was sweating profusely when I stopped behind him, his shirt collar undone, tie hanging loose, skin blotched and red. His appearance wasn’t enhanced by the cold blue neon flashing from across the street, exhorting us to EAT REECEBREAD. I had little sympathy. Despite his discomfort he was excited by the morning’s gossip which flashed through the building faster than optical fibre could carry it.

“Hear the news, Mark?” he asked, an indecent thrill raising his voice an octave. That “Mark” was new. It should have been “sir” but I let it go.

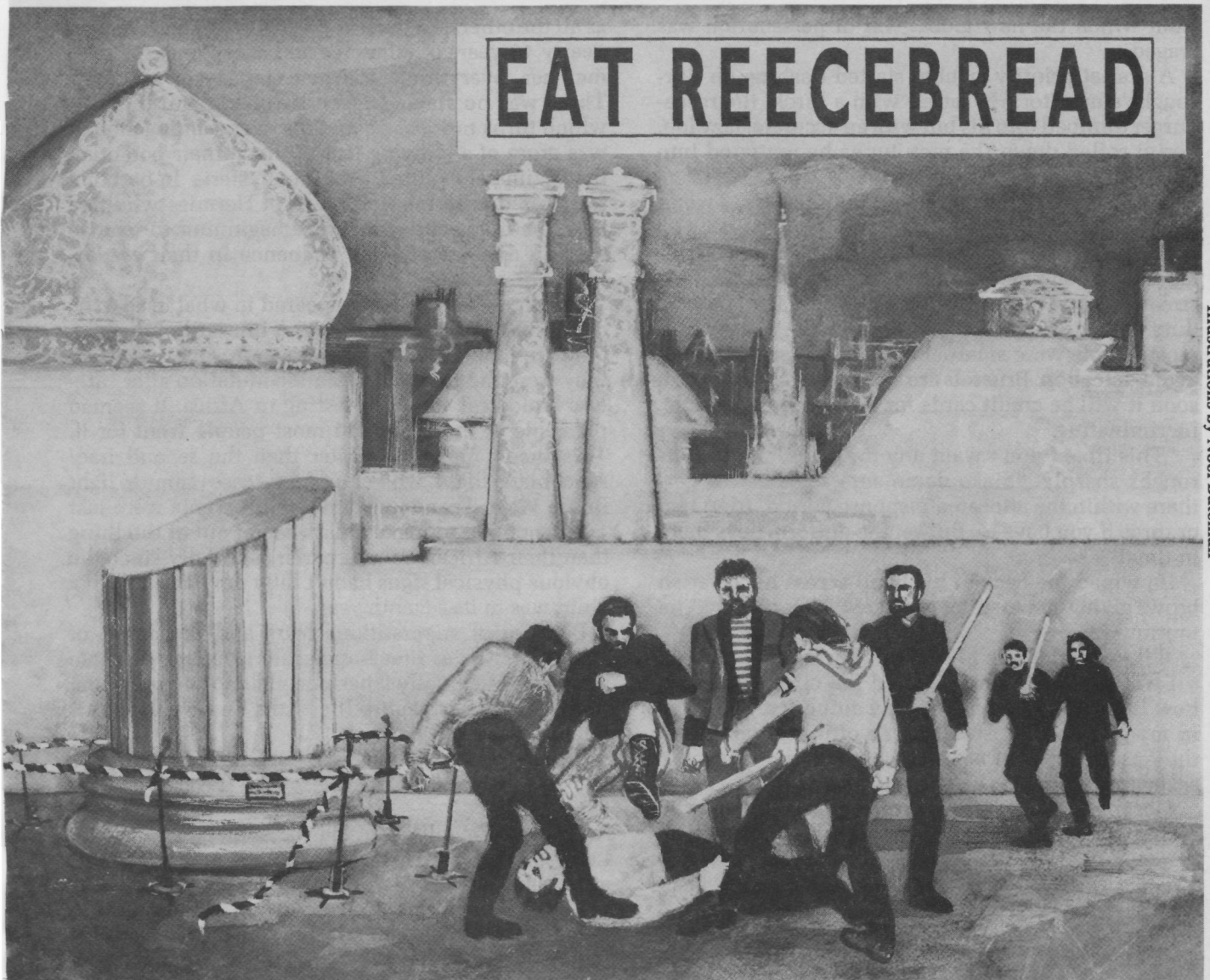
“What news?”

“There was one of them working here. A shagging Hermie on the force! Fifteen years operating in the same building as the rest of us. Just shows you don’t know who you’re working with half the time.” His undercooked reeceburger dripped white juice into his beard.



# EAT REECEBREAD

Illustrations by Noel Bateman



GRAHAM JOYCE · PETER F HAMILTON

"That's right, Burroughs. You never know."

"Did you know who it was?"

"Nope."

"Come on, you must have! Time you've been here? You know everyone!"

Of course I knew the poor creature, but I wasn't going to give Burroughs the satisfaction of probing me with more stupid questions. I stared at the amber script on his monitor as if I was actually doing my job and searching for errors.

Burroughs continued to speak with his mouth full. "It lived in one of the Nu-Cell adapted flat complexes. Sod was intercepted while it waited for the bus into work this morning. Usual thing. Clothes torn off by the mob and ten bells kicked out of it before the panda car arrived. Uniform boys said it looked like a monkey's miscarriage in a reeceblender. Yuk! Hoo hoo hoo!"

That was indeed the usual pattern. An anonymous call informs the Charles Street duty officers, who duly load the information into the nearest panda car's situation bulletin display. In theory the constables

should be at the location within two minutes to pick up the offender. But somehow there is nearly always a delay, combined with a tip-off to some thug well placed to lead a lynch gang. Well, it saves the expense and the mess of hauling them before the judiciary. The moral mess, that is.

What really galled me was that the problem obviously originated in the police ops room. It was one of my people, corrupting my routines and my communication networks.

The reason I went in for technical specialization after coming off the beat was to be above all the grey behaviour endemic to the side of the force interfacing with the public. Reality, I suppose, that's what I couldn't handle. The sheer emotional clutter of dealing with people: – turning a blind eye to this, giving that the nod. Computers and programs don't have fuzzy edges. They're also a valuable new tool in fighting modern crime since the Federal Parliament in Brussels passed the Civil Authority Unlimited Data Access act. I thought I'd found myself a comfortable little niche. Ironic it should turn out to be the heart



from which the new global war of persecution was waged.

A scarlet priority symbol started flashing on Burroughs's monitor. He sat up with a lurch, the reeceburger dumped into his bin with an accurate, lazy lob. Script rolled down the monitor as he muttered into his throat-mike.

"Christ look at that. We've got another fish. Two in one morning."

The priority request came from another duty officer taking a phone call. Somewhere out on Leicester's streets a good citizen was informing on a Hermie. The duty officer would be tracking down the call, though most people were smart enough to use a coin box to avoid detection. Brussels are already phasing 'em out: soon it will be credit cards for everything, traceable, incriminating.

"This time I don't want any mistakes," I told Burroughs sharply. "Make damn sure a panda car gets there within the allocated response period. Alert two or three if you have to. But get the uniform boys there in time!"

He wiped the back of his hand across his feverish brow, giving me a sullen glance. "Why bother?" he murmured.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that, Burroughs."

I walked away before he had the chance to show how little respect he had for my authority. Safe back in my glass-walled supervisor's office at the rear of the ops room, I sat at my own desk and hurriedly asked my terminal to display the data on the Hermie.

Morton Leverett, the monitor printed, a middle manager working in an insurance company office. Personal details followed as I accessed his citizen's file. No family, thankfully. That could have been tricky.

I summoned up my private alert program and fed in Leverett's number. His netcom unit would be bleeping, displaying the simple warning message. With luck, he would get clear in time.

There would be no record of the call — one of the benefits of being the city's chief data control officer. My program would wipe all memory of it from British Telecom's processor core.

I was still working on improving the program in the evenings. When it was complete it would snatch the data on Hermies as soon as it was entered into the station's network, warning the impending victim even as they were being informed on, increasing their odds for getting away.

I wrote that program with pain-soaked memory driving me. You see, I knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of an informer. I'd turned a Hermie in myself once. It's not something I can ever forget, let alone forgive. But I do what I can to work off my penance. And I wait for the world to stabilize.

**H**er name was Laura, and she was quite beautiful. I say "her" and "she" because when I first met her, I didn't realize what she was. You might laugh and call me a slow starter, but it was three months before I found out. The year we spent together was a hiatus of halcyon bliss until she demanded too much of me, and that's when I tried to turn her over to the police. How do I sleep at night? You may well ask.

Yes, Laura was a Hermie, as different and as ordinary

as all the others. At that time the Hermies had enjoyed nearly 40 years of tolerance and acceptance. When I met her, everything was just starting to go crazy. There was no single trigger, no one fateful incident which turns rational people into a screaming mob. It was more of a growing fear of them, their potential, that ultimately spilled over into hysteria. In part that fear was due to the first wave of Hermies who had now matured, and who were beginning to exert a slightly disproportionate influence in their respective fields.

The first Hermies had appeared in what used to be called Third World countries. A blizzard of theories blew up to explain the phenomenon. One suggested they were the product of genetic mutation after careless biological weapons-testing in Africa. It seemed plausible at the time, and most people went for it. This theory fell apart faster than the second Iraqi spaceplane flight, when numerous cases came to light in the West. Scandalized Western parents were just more inclined to make a dark secret out of the thing than their African counterparts; especially since the obvious physical signs hadn't fully developed until a child was in its seventh year.

Because of superstitious fears and the dread of stigma, it was at first impossible to collect reliable statistics. Eventually it became plain to everyone that the spread of hermaphrodite births was evenly distributed around the globe.

"Hi!" Laura had said when I first met her, two years ago now. God, the ordinariness of it! It was in a bookshop.

I wasn't actually looking for something to read. Leicester in those days was a spectacular place to live, an exciting city on the cutting edge; I enjoyed wandering round watching the changes Nu-Cell was making to arguably one of the most mundane urban sprawls in England. The company was an adjunct of the university, formed to produce and market the products of Dr Desmond Reece's biotechnology research. As far as the public was concerned he would forever be known as the genetic-engineering pioneer who'd solved the immediate world food crisis with his vat-grown reecebread. It was a protein-rich algal which came in several varieties; textures and taste varying from meat to vegetables to fruit. Even the most undeveloped countries could build the kind of fermentation vat needed to breed it in. Nu-Cell licenced the process to anyone who wanted it, charging a pittance of a royalty. Reece wasn't really interested in the money; he was a genuine philanthrope, happy to see the spectre of famine ending.

But his other projects at the university were equally important in metamorphosizing our world. Land-coral revolutionized buildings; the way we designed them, the way we thought of them. Not just new constructions, but the old, tired, ugly structures which blighted our cities too.

Property owners bought the seeds and planted them eagerly. It was like watching broad slabs of marble growing up out of the ground, enveloping the existing brickwork and concrete. A marble that was coloured like a solidified rainbow, dappled with gold, black and silver.

I walked down Rutland Street, where the topaz and turquoise encrustations had already reached the



ledges of the second-floor windows of the dreary brick buildings. The landcoral had been pruned from doors and first-floor windows, a process that had to be carried out continually until the building was completely covered, then the polyp could be stabilized by an enzyme Nu-Cell sold along with the seeds. After that it would simply renew itself, maintaining its shape for centuries. The new resplendent growths made such a wonderful change from the grime-coated streets I grew up in. How could you not have hope in your heart, living in an environment so vividly alive? It lifted the human spirit.

So maybe I was a little giddy with optimism when I saw her through the bookshop window. That first sight of her cut me like a laser. A 25-year-old in a university sweatshirt and indecently tight jeans. I was nearly 15 years her senior, but she was so magnetic I just had to go and stand next to her. I hadn't got a clever line, I'd no plan of how to talk to her, but I had to approach her. At least I wasn't in uniform. I can imagine the effect that would have had.

"I'm looking for *The Last Written Word*," she said. "Have you seen it anywhere?"

It was by Franz Gluck, perhaps the second most famous "public" Hermie in the world at that time after Desmond Reece himself. Everybody was reading it. Very intellectual stuff, which was why I'd given it a wide berth. I remember going puce in the face. "They must have sold out again. I'll lend you mine if you want. If you promise to let me have it back." I hadn't got a copy, but I knew some theoretically intelligent people who had.

That was it. We started meeting regularly, even though I was a bag of nerves whenever I sat next to her. I might have been older, but I'd generally avoided sexual experience. Something about Laura made all the muscles in my body lock, and my mouth would go dry. She had a searching way of looking at you when you spoke, as if everything you said counted.

**I**t was a wonderful summer, one of those long, dry, wearily hot periods which always turns conversations to the greenhouse effect. We alternated our time between my three-room flat overlooking Victoria Park and her landcoral dome on a new estate in Humberstone. That place really opened my eyes to the promise of the future. Laura worked for Nu-Cell in their gene-therapy lab; as an employee she got the dome for a peppercorn rent because it was experimental: lit by bioluminescent cells; its water siphoned up by a giant tap root; power supplied by an external layer of jet black electrophotonic cells. I hadn't realized how advanced Nu-Cell's technology was before then.

"Every city is going to change the way we're changing Leicester," she said. "Think how much of our materialistic attitude will be eradicated when you can just plant a landcoral seed and grow your own home. Ninety percent of your working life is spent paying off your mortgage, what a difference it'll make freeing yourself from that burden!"

Her optimism had a ferocity far exceeding mine. She believed in Desmond Reece and Nu-Cell with an almost religious fervour. The newest of the new world orders to be promulgated since the end of last century's Cold War. Most of the hours we had together

would be spent with her talking, explaining her visions of tomorrow. I just listened for the sheer joy of having her invest her time in me.

Her impassioned arguments and stubborn convictions might have frightened away some males. Fiery intellectual women are still frightening things, especially to a simple cop. But Laura was also intoxicatingly feminine. I can still see her that first night we spent together: wearing a sea-green cotton dress with slender straps and a ruff-edged skirt. Gold-tinted hair brushing her bare shoulders, eyes sparkling and teasing from the wine we'd drunk.

It was her dome, her bedroom, with its wan blue light and sunken sponge-mattress bed. I simply wanted to kiss her. And she smiled and beckoned me, because she knew me so well although I always said so little. It was a surprise for me when I finally found what she'd got under her clothes.

Summer faded into autumn, even though the strange symmetrical trees Nu-Cell had planted in Victoria Park kept their scarlet dinner-plate-sized flowers long after the first morning frosts turned the grass to a hoary silver plain. I walked down the avenues they formed on my way to work; Laura wrapped up snug and warm in her coat and ridiculously long scarf, hanging on to my arm until we reached the pavilion and parted, me to the station, her to the university. With the cold came the grey stabbing rains. But something more sinister began to stir right across the continent.

The boys in the tabloid press had stayed sober for long enough to make a few simple demographic calculations based on the most recent, and more comprehensive, surveys of hermaphrodites. Once the stories started they developed a momentum of their own; "interest items" became centre-page features. From there they progressed to front-page articles and finally graduated to concerned editorials.

Since hermaphrodites all came perfectly equipped with both a vagina and a penis, they could of course enjoy the usual sexual relationships with either sex. Whether they grew up appearing – on the face of it at least – male or female was more or less accidental and irrelevant; the only major give-away was the difficulty male-aligned Hermies had in growing beards. Once the superficial gender-stamp had stabilized (again at about the age of seven) it usually stayed that way as a matter of social convention. That wasn't what bothered people – after they had recovered from the initial shock, you understand. The problem was this: hermaphrodites, in contrast to mythology, were very fertile. If an hermaphrodite bred with a non-hermaphrodite, the possibility of them producing an hermaphrodite child stood in a positive ratio of seven-to-ten. If an hermaphrodite bred with another hermaphrodite, the result was always an hermaphrodite.

The future of the human race was certain.

Those boys in the tabloid press may be slow, but when this statistic finally penetrated the alcohol fog of the long lunchbreak, they sharpened their knives. They were vicious. Before long, stories began to appear in the papers about "the hermaphrodite conspiracy." Unsubstantiated allegations were reported as hard facts. Hermaphrodites everywhere stood accused of crimes ranging from deliberately littering the pavements to global sabotage.



I raged impotently while Laura looked on in sad silence. "Conspiracy, God! Hermies can't even spot each other in the street, never mind get together to organize megalomaniac plots. You should answer back! Demand airtime!" I waved at the inarticulate Euro MP smirking on the TV news as he hedged his bets for the interviewer.

"Who should answer back, Mark? Hermies don't have an organization to speak for them. That's what makes this all so stupid."

"God!" I stood at the window, kneading my hands. Out in the park the trees had finally shed their leaves; the bark had turned chrome blue. "Take a news crew to film round your department. Show how you're helping ordinary humans, that you've dedicated your life to it. It sounds brutal, but sick kids always get to people. Maybe the public will realize Hermies aren't ogres like the press makes out."

Laura massaged her temple. "A lone documentary isn't going to change public opinion, especially not the kind of public that's turning against us. In any case, we still haven't made enough progress on viral vectoring or transcription factors to cure children who suffer from the really severe genetic disorders."

She had explained viral vectors to me: organisms which integrate plasmids (small loops of DNA) into a cell's DNA so that defective chromosome sequences can be corrected. It's how cystic fibrosis and haemophilia were eradicated early in the new century, literally replacing the old genes which caused the illness for new ones.

It was also the same basic method which Reece had used to convert useless pond scum into reecebread, and aquatic coral into landcoral; inserting modifications and improvements, distorting the original DNA out of all recognition. But constructing transgenic plants was an order of magnitude easier than human gene therapy.

Laura and her team had been working on the more difficult hereditary cancers. They didn't have organisms which could be junked and burnt when a modification failed or mutated into teratoid abominations. Reaching perfection was a long laborious business.

But it was good work. Important, caring work. People should be made to see that.

"There must be something you can show them," I said in desperation. "What about the university hospital clinic? Nu-Cell funds have been going there for years."

"Not everyone that works for Nu-Cell is a Hermie, you know. We're not even a majority in the company, nowhere near. Besides, showing Hermies conducting experiments on bedridden children? Not a good idea, Mark. Nu-Cell has already given the world reecebread and landcoral and petrocellum beet. What more can we give?"

I put my arms round her, trying to stroke away the tensions I found knotting up her muscles. "I don't know. I really don't."

The comments and conspiracy accusations continued to fly unabated as Christmas drew near. It took on an almost ritual quality. The tabloids had found another scare image to rank alongside illegal African migration into Mediterranean Europe,

Russian nuclear power-station meltdowns, Japan's re-emergence as a military superpower, and the Islamic Bomb. But even they couldn't have predicted the full horror, the tidal wave of violence and hysteria which swept the planet.

The physical attacks started in public places as the New Year broke. It only seemed to make things worse that a disproportionate number of hermaphrodites had made a significant contribution to the world of arts, medicine, science and engineering. So much for my idea of a Public Relations coup.

It was the week before Easter when the first trouble hit Leicester. We were out shopping in the city centre, buying chocolate eggs for nephews and nieces. It was a fine spring day, we strolled idly. The clock tower pedestrian precinct had been completely converted by landcoral, with only the old white stone tower itself left free as a centrepiece. It looked handsome; the unprepossessing clash of concrete and brick, architecture from the mid-1950s to the early 2010s, all eclipsed by seamless sheets of iridescent sapphire, emerald and amber marble; buttressed by colonnades of braided gold and bronze cords. Speckled rooftop domes reflected a harlequin gleam under the cold bright sun.

We heard the noise as we walked out of the Shires mall. The crowds were growing denser up ahead, people flocking to the edges like iron filings caught in a magnetic field.

"What is it?" Laura asked.

A column of blue smoke rose in the distance. Cheers rang above the background babble. We steered our way through knots of people, anxious and curious at the same time. I wondered where my colleagues were.

Someone had broken the windows of W.H. Smith's. Books were being flung out onto the pavement through the gaping holes. People scooped them up and slung them onto a flattish bonfire blazing on top of one of the flower troughs.

"What the hell's going on?" I tried to sound authoritative.

"Hermie books," a woman crowed. She grinned wildly. "Clearing 'em off the shelves. Not before time."

Laura's hand covered her mouth, eyes staring helplessly at the blackening pages. I grabbed her arm and began to tug her away. She was in tears when we finally left the crowd behind.

"How can they do that?" she wailed. "What does it matter who wrote them? It's the words themselves which count."

I pulled out my netcom unit and called Charles Street to report the event. It took another 20 minutes for the first panda car to arrive. By then all was ash.

Some days after the bookburnings, Doctor Desmond Reece made a powerful public plea for the attacks on hermaphrodites to stop. The morning after his speech he was kicked to death on the steps of Nu-Cell's botanical research laboratory.

I spent the next three days helping to orchestrate the police reinforcements brought in to protect Nu-Cell's buildings and the University campus. The county commissioner was badly worried the mobs would wipe out the region's premier economic asset. Reece's murderers were never caught. The commissioner didn't consider the matter a priority.



Right across Europe, the Americas, and the far East citizens were burning Hermie books and cutting up Hermie doctors with scalpels; but their mouths were still red from munching on their reeceburgers. The hypocrisy of it all was driving me insane.

Nobody was really safe walking the streets. There were plenty of cases of non-hermaphrodites caught in the hysterical onslaught. Laura said very little, but she would lie awake at nights wondering when they would find out. In the dead of night she would just look at me with her moist, frightened eyes, but say nothing. She never dreamed I'd be her Judas.

The Brussels parliament was under pressure to act to halt the slaughter. But with Federal elections looming, you knew the mob was going to win either way. Under The (Hermaphrodites) Public Order and Disenfranchisement Enactment of that year, the following restrictions were ordered:

1. All hermaphrodites are required to register with their regional authority.
2. All hermaphrodites shall resign from holding public or civil office.
3. Hermaphrodites will be disenfranchised forthwith from all municipal, regional, state and federal elections.
4. An enquiry to be launched into the origins of hermaphroditism and into allegations of hermaphrodite conspiracy.

There were a lot of other clauses in the statutes, about publishing and other things with which I won't bore you. The point was that it didn't satisfy anyone. No-one gave two hoots whether a Hermie was allowed to put a cross on a ballot paper once every five years. What they wanted, as the tabloids pointed out on a daily basis, was to stop the filthy Hermies from breeding.

I got home late from work one evening towards the end of spring.

"I'm pregnant," said Laura.

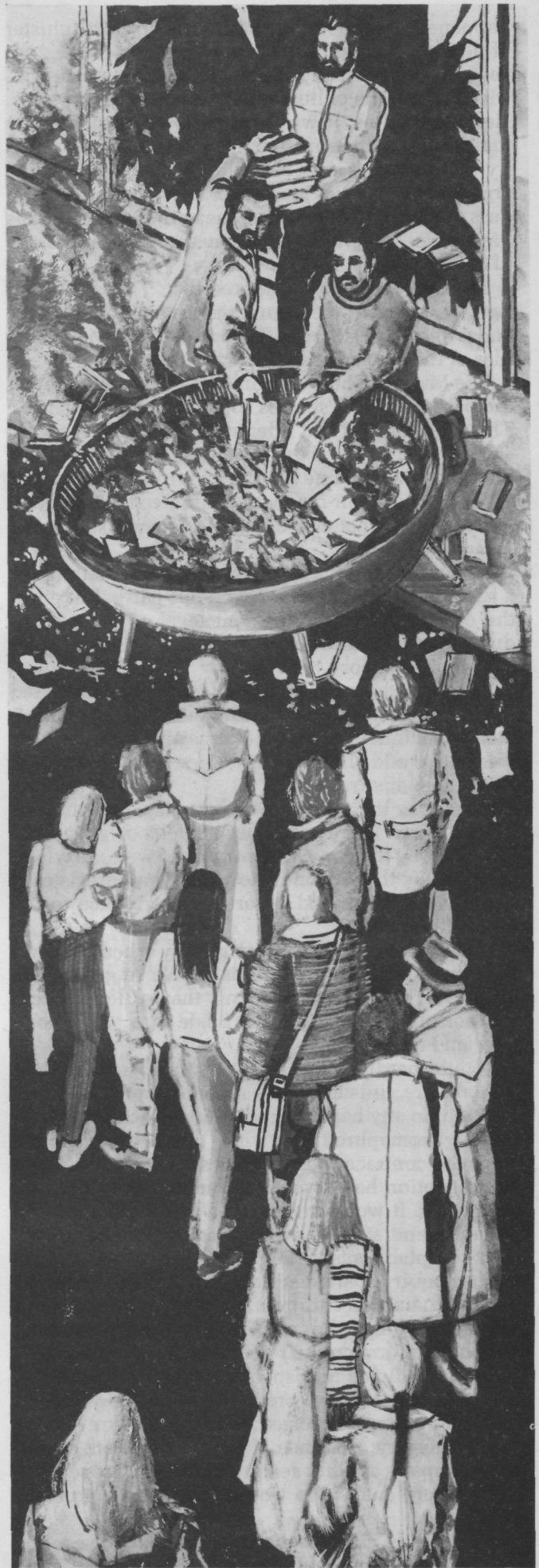
"Jesus!" I said.

"Hermes," she said. "Aphrodite." It was sort of a joke. We went and lay down and, I'll admit it, I cried like a baby.

**T**he wave of attacks subsided for a while. Burroughs and a few other people at work were visibly disappointed, but I began to feel less anxious about Laura's safety. Meanwhile the official enquiry went into labour. A surprising number of prominent people spoke up for the Hermies, risking careers and tabloid derision, not to mention public assault. But a lot of people had been sickened by the street attacks.

Meanwhile the tabloids characterized the debate as two basically opposed theories. One they called Millennium Fever. The other was known as Martian Theory.

It seems that at the turn of every century a number of people get taken with Millennium Fever. The symptoms of Millennium Fever are a certain itchy credulity in the belief system and a nervous suggestibility, all brought on by the conviction that the turn of the century will signal some major development in the course of human history. The Next Big Step. The Giant Leap. The MF people argued that the arrival of the hermaphrodites semaphored that this had already





happened. They pointed out that the first birth cluster of hermaphrodites, born around the end of the 20th century, were already making disproportionate contributions to the culture and progress of the species. Hermaphrodites, it was true, were characterized by their resourcefulness, their meekness and their fertility. It was the assertion of old gods, the MF people argued. Hermes the messenger. Aphrodite the goddess of love. The presence of the hermaphrodites was Messianic. To a planet in dire need, it was a message of love.

The tabloid louts just adored that. They staggered back from their reeceburger-and-beer lunchbreaks and wrote up the Martian Theory. Which gives you an idea of the kind of level this was pitched at.

The Martian Theory assumed some cosmic plot on the part of another species somewhere in the galaxy. This alien species had littered the planet with spores – and how they loved that word spores – to reproduce their race. At the same time the overthrow and extinction of the human race was guaranteed. Message of love? No, trumpeted the Martian Theorists, it was a message of war.

To me, both arguments sounded about as rational as a jar of ether at a teenage psych-out party. But given the choice, and the intelligent level of debate conducted through the media, most people plumped for the Martian Theory.

So did the board of enquiry. Under their proposed (Hermaphrodites) Public Order and Disenfranchisement Enactment Amendment, several new clauses were to be added. It was never going to be anything else than major trouble.

Predicting the results of the enquiry, most hermaphrodites had failed to register as previously directed. Chief among the Amendment clauses was one which made it law that anyone knowing of an unregistered hermaphrodite should report their presence to the authorities.

Laura was well into her pregnancy when the findings were published. "This is it. We've got to take some kind of a stand." Suddenly that soulful, searching look of hers had taken on a blade edge. "No bloody way am I registering."

I could hardly argue. You see, there was another, rather more sinister clause included: a blanket prohibition on any hermaphrodite breeding, either with another hermaphrodite or with a non-hermaphrodite. Enforced contraception was the solution offered. But contraception has never been one hundred per cent successful. It would take only a few accidental pregnancies and sterility would become the only publicly acceptable answer.

The enquiry board made no mention of what was to happen to unborn children.

Unfortunately, the new law not only directed people to inform on their neighbours and colleagues. It also introduced retrospective interpretation of the law. Anyone who had previously consorted with an hermaphrodite was obliged to inform. Failure to do so was a Category A offence. If Laura and I were ever to part company and her secret was to be discovered at some future date, I too would face certain prosecution.

As a further complication, that week had seen the delivery of a set of highly classified Recordable CDs to

Charles Street. They contained a program written by the experts of the Federal Detective Agency in Paris. It was a specialist monitor which would track an individual's movements on a 24-hour basis. Not physically, not optically; we're not that close to Orwell's nightmare, not yet. But the trail any one person leaves through the civil datanets is comprehensive enough to build up an accurate identikit of their movements – traffic control routing your car guidance processor, timed purchases through credit card, phone calls from home, netcom units, or office, mail, faxes. From that can be worked out who was in the pub with you, who shared your bus, your taxi, whose home you visited. And how often, that was the key. It looked for patterns. Patterns betrayed friendships and interests, contacts with criminals, even drug habits and bizarre sexual preferences.

It couldn't be done for the entire population; not enough processing power available. But the Packard-Bell sitting so princely in the Charles Street basement could quite easily track a troublesome minority clean across Leicestershire.

I had already been instructed to load the program. The county commissioner was simply waiting for the Amendment to be passed by Brussels before entering the names of all known hermaphrodites in the county.

No question, Laura would be found. She had a lot of hermaphrodite friends, some registered, others not. They would meet, talk on the phone, have meals together. Her name would be slotted into a pattern of seemingly random binary digits that flowed and swirled along the city's streets in the wake of its human occupants. And my name was linked with hers, irrevocably.

I didn't know what to do.

I watched the duty officers at their terminals, busy keen-eyed youngsters, analysing requests and assigning priorities. Oblivious to each other and to their immediate environment. Three rows of desks, with a big situation screen on the far wall. All of it geared up to maintain the rule of law. It was all so bleakly efficient.

My own heart was slowing to its normal rate. The ops room, focused on the gritty problems that the streets dumped on our overstretched uniform boys and girls, wasn't my main concern. No, it was the detectives upstairs who worried me. We had a new division at Charles Street, the Registration and Identification Bureau, formed six months ago, with the sole task of spotting Hermies. They might begin to wonder why so few Hermies were being brought in after tip-offs, or even why the precious monitor program was producing so few names. And I wasn't the only computer expert in the building.

But it looked as if Morton Leverett was going to get clean away. I asked the terminal for a display of panda-car routings. When the street map with its flashing symbols flipped up I saw Burroughs had assigned Leverett only a blue coding, about level with shoplifting.

It would mean he had more than enough time to get away. Delight warred with anger inside my skull. I'd given Burroughs a deliberate and very pointed order to get officers there fast.

I looked up to see Burroughs talking into his throat-



mike. His agitation had reached new heights. His blotchy skin betrayed him.

I used my supervisor's authority code to check his desk's communications network. He was using an outside line. Mistake, Burroughs, big mistake.

I patched the call into my own headset.

"...about twelve minutes," Burroughs's whined. "That sector's panda car is dealing with a mugging right now. I'll see if I can find another amber call to hold 'em up when they're finished. But I can't promise."

"We'll be there," a low voice replied.

The next minute was a blank. I sat there staring at nothing.

Burroughs! Burroughs was the one feeding the Hermies to the organized lynch gangs! He was responsible for men women and children being torn to pieces, several hundred of them over the last 18 months.

But then, I think I was always ready for that. My dislike for Burroughs went deeper than his slob personality and vile bigotry. A lot deeper. Perhaps it was a psychic thing, some basic animal instinct.

On the other side of the glass he was standing up, clutching his arms to his chest. His shoulders were quaking inside his baggy shirt. Face wearing the desperately grim expression of someone holding back vomit.

I stuck my head round the door. "Burroughs, where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Toilet," he gasped.

"You're off shift in half an hour. Can't it wait?"

He stopped halfway to the door. "No it can't wait!" he screamed. "I want to go! And I'm shagging well going! All shagging right?" A bead of spittle dribbled from anaemic lips.

The entire ops room had come to a halt at the outburst.

"All right?" he yelled shrilly.

"Why, Burroughs, something's put you in a terrible mood today..."

He snarled something incoherent, then turned and ran for the gents.

I smiled evilly at his sweat-soaked back.

**F**or the start of summer it had been a chill night. I'd walked along paths lined by surreal purple and black ferns, taller than myself, which made up the garden hedges in the Nu-Cell housing estate. Out in the city I imagined the pubs hosting raging debates on the approaching ice age.

Laura had sounded odd when she phoned, timorous but insistent. Policeman's instinct, maybe, but I wasn't looking forward to the meeting. I thought I could guess the reason.

The mobs had started attacking Hermies again. Encouraged by the findings of the enquiry they'd returned with a vengeance. I'd never seen such naked hysteria before. When they got hold of someone, it was like watching a storm.

When I arrived at the dome there were five other people with her. All Hermies, and all working at the University or Nu-Cell. It confirmed my worst fears. The police had suspected the existence of Hermie cabals for some time. But the fact that Laura was a member was horrifying.

"We can't just sit by and do nothing," she said. "Not





any more. It's gone too far now. They're killing us! We have to resist."

"And do what?" I asked.

"Stop the police collusion with the lynch gangs for a start."

"What the hell can I do? You don't seem to realize the position I'm in."

"You've got the power! You're there! You've got access to information. You know when the calls come in from informers. You can warn people. If you can't help us, who can?"

"And put my head on the block?"

One of the others cleared his throat, a male-aligned 30-year-old. Gerald, or at least that was the name he gave when introduced. Laura said he worked at Nu-Cell.

"Assisting our fellow Hermies here in Leicester would only be a very small part of our overall stratagem," he said.

"Stratagem?" I exclaimed. "Keep on using that kind of language, and people really will begin to believe in the Hermie conspiracy."

"When events force a minority into collusion to survive, then the term conspiracy is wholly appropriate."

"Jesus!"

"Will you listen," Laura hissed.

"We have to buy ourselves time," Gerald said. "That's all. After that the inevitable sweep of history will protect us. But the intervening years will be extraordinarily difficult for us as a race."

"What?"

He gave me a small contrite smile and held up a thin sheet of some transparent plastic. It was printed with rows of black lines, like a bar code. "I've been mapping the genome of various hermaphrodites working at Nu-Cell," he said. "I've identified the genes which produce both our dual sexual characteristics and enhanced neuron structure as well as other physiological improvements. Do you remember the so-called Martian Theory?"

"Yes," I said wearily.

"It is completely inaccurate."

"Astonishing," I said dryly.

Laura shot me a vicious glare.

"We have not resulted from artificial interference," he continued. "And that means that even if every hermaphrodite alive were to be sterilized, ordinary humans would still continue to give birth to more hermaphrodites. Within five generations every human born will be a hermaphrodite. So what we need is an interval in which people are forced to face reality and come to terms with our racial future."

"How do you know this?" I asked.

"Over 95 per cent of human DNA is inactive spacing, literally garbage. The active genes, those which make us what we are, account for a tiny three or four percent. Until now geneticists have considered those inactive genes to be part of our heritage; primitive genes that have been switched off as we evolved out of our remote ancestry through simian stages until we arrived at what we are today. That theory is incorrect. Once I identified the hermaphrodite genes, I went back and examined the genomes of ordinary humans. They too contained the hermaphrodite genes. But they were inactive; for the moment, part of the spacing.

Hermaphroditism is part of humanity's ongoing evolution."

"What switches the genes on?"

He shrugged lamely. "It is their time to be switched on. Our time. God, if you prefer, Mr Anderson, God has decided to bring us forth. Just think, in a hundred generations another sequence of genes will activate themselves. Who knows what our descendants will look like."

"And in the meantime, we get slaughtered," Laura said.

"Registration dodging isn't the answer," I said. "It criminalizes Hermies in everyone's eyes."

"Neither is registration," Philippa said. She was about the same age as Laura, with auburn hair and a small compact body. Aggression simmered, barely contained, below her calm surface persona. "Not when all that does is bring the lynch gangs down on you."

"It's not our fault," I shouted. "When the police arrive it's always too late."

"That's because someone inside your precious ops room is tipping off the lynch gangs," Laura said. "And you're just standing by and letting it happen."

I knew she was right. At the time I just didn't know who was doing it. I sank down into one of her scoop chairs. "I don't know where the leak is coming from," I said. "Believe me, I've looked."

"This may help," Philippa said with deceptive calm. She was holding out an RCD.

"What's this?"

"See for yourself." She indicated Laura's desktop terminal.

I slotted the silver disc. The program it contained was simple enough, designed for the Packard-Bell core, a number of subroutines that would work inside the original operator shell. Once loaded, any file that was started on a Hermie would be switched with another citizen file selected at random. That meant a duty officer sending a panda car to pick up a suspected Hermie would target the wrong person. Some innocent non-hermaphrodite would be cut up on the streets instead.

"No chance," I said.

"It would not have to be in effect for very long," Gerald said. "I intend to confront my non-hermaphrodite colleagues with my discovery. They are rational people, they will accept it. Then the intellectuals and leaders of the world will be made to understand what is really occurring. Hermaphroditism is inevitable."

Philippa snorted. She didn't believe in Gerald's wishful-thinking solution any more than I did. She didn't like the idea of being civil to a policeman, either. I could virtually see her mind working out ways to blackmail me into loading her program.

"Please, Mark," Laura said. "What kind of world will the baby come into if we don't try to bridge the gulf? This gives us the time to do it."

"I'll think about it," I lied.

She sat beside me and twined her arms round my neck. "Thank you."

I knew it was disastrous for Laura to get involved with these people. It was only a matter of time before they were rounded up; if they weren't informed on, the monitor program would track them

down anyway. I loved Laura, and I would have done anything to protect her and our baby. She had taught me so many incredible things, things I would never have understood on my own. But I also believed in the system, believed that the system would protect us. I decided to take action before we were both up on a charge of insurrection.

The simplest thing to do was have her picked up. Crazy? Not really: once registered, her name would be entered in the monitor program. If she contacted her cabal members the monitor would spot them. She would never knowingly betray them, so she would steer clear of them.

And me? Well, I was prepared to face the consequences. As I said, I ultimately believed in the protection of the system. Remember, this was before I'd found out about Burroughs. What's more, I would be there to prevent anything from happening.

The day after the meeting I told Laura to meet me at Guys & Dolls restaurant for lunch. Then I bypassed the normal log-in procedure and loaded an informer's report of a Hermie into the ops room network, giving Laura's name and profile, telling them where she would be. One of the duty officers would pick it up, and assign a panda car to collect us both from Guys & Dolls.

I hurried towards the restaurant hoping Laura wouldn't be late. When the uniform boys picking her up found they had a senior officer as a witness they would have to act strictly according to the book. She would be perfectly safe in my presence. After that I would inform the Chief Constable of my relationship with her, but only after she'd been correctly processed.

On the way over to Guys & Dolls I got caught up in the lunchtime traffic snarl. I sat under my perspex bubble sweating for half an hour. In the end I jumped out and walked.

I turned the corner of the street and made for the restaurant with a growing sense of anxiety. When I saw the crowd outside the restaurant I felt a strange taste in my mouth. Fingering the buttons on my uniform, I had to fight down a rising panic. Then I found myself sprinting towards the crowd.

The lynch gang had already done its work. Their victim lay naked and bloody in the gutter. One of them turned the lifeless body over with the toe of his boot. They had hacked off the penis. And as I looked, I saw that their victim had been expecting a child, and that they had sliced open her belly. The bloody foetus was almost indistinguishable from the rest of the carcass. I looked around for Laura, as if somehow just by looking I could make that figure on the ground not be her. A neon sign flashing above the crowd exhorted us all to EAT REECEBREAD.

Philippa found me, hours later. I was sitting on the New Walk bridge over the carriageway running through the heart of the city. Down below, the fuel-cell driven cars formed a silent steady stream of colourful metallic beetles, scurrying home from work. Rushing towards their loved ones.

"What good will that do?" Philippa asked gently.

I didn't even look up. "It will stop the pain."

"Only for you. There are soon going to be others in your position. Millions of us. Do you want them to endure it as well?"

"I don't care."

"Yes you do. Laura taught you to care."

I started sobbing. Philippa led me away from the parapet.

**B**ehind me the ops room was abuzz with duty officers gossiping over Burroughs's hyper-tantrum; calls for assistance and reports of crime were going unanswered. It was my job to marshal them back to work. Not today. I pushed the door of the gents open, and walked in.

There were five stalls along one wall, stainless steel urinals at the far end. White tiles gleamed soullessly under harsh tubelight. The stall at the end of the line was occupied.

Gerald, quiet intellectual Gerald, had been quite right; oppress a minority enough and no matter how meek, how mild, eventually they begin to fight back. He even led the fight.

The whole world would be Hermies in time, he said. But time was the one thing the first generation didn't have. Our father Hermes and our mother Aphrodite might be bringing hermaphrodites into the world, but they were doing it too slowly. Even gods need a helping hand occasionally.

I tested the stall door with my hand. Burroughs had slipped the tiny bolt. A fragile whimpering sound was coming from inside. I was going to have to break down the door. I was already four months pregnant with Philippa's child, and exertion like that wouldn't be good for the baby, but I kicked at the lock anyway. The bolt flew off and I was able to push open the door.

After identifying the Hermie genes, Gerald had fed the sequence into a DNA synthesizer. Plasmids came out of the other end, the essence of Hermaphroditism, all that we are. Philippa and her more militant colleagues incorporated them into the new improved varieties of reecebread that Nu-Cell was giving to the world. And the people of the world ate. Both the meek and the greedy, eating their reeceburgers. The plasmid-carrying viruses slithered into their digestive tract, into their bloodstream, into their cells, into their nuclei. And, finally, began raping their DNA.

But we're not heartless. Manipulating human genes is a tricky business. So much can go wrong. The plasmids needed to be tested first. I once said you can't experiment with gene therapy on living humans. I was wrong. There are certain individuals who can be exempt from such moral posturing.

Our test subject, myself, showed no ill-effects after a solid month of eating the modified reecebread. It was enough for us to release it for general consumption. That was six months ago.

Burroughs was sitting crammed into a corner of the stall, his trousers and pants crumpled round his knees. His wretched face jerked up as I looked in, his mouth open in a silent plea.

No wonder he'd been in such a rotten temper all week.

The chicken-flesh at the base of his scrotum had split open. A mucus plug had voided from the raw open slit, followed by a dribble of blood.

Burroughs was having his first period.



# Brief Flare

## Sarah Ash

“**T**o purify the temple with sacred fire... and to dance before the court in celebration of the New Year, one – and only one of you will be chosen.”

The boy dancers of the temple bowed as the venerable Master, Tem-Kan the Heron, walked slowly past them. For as long as Khi could remember Master Tem-Kan had been old. Wispy hair and beard, grey as tufts of sheep's fleece caught in thorn bushes, lined face, shiny as tanned leather – but eyes, o those eyes that could bore into you from a hundred paces, incisive as gimlet-points, cold as grey metal. Those eyes were not old, they seemed to feed upon an ageless power-source, a power on which the Master drew – Khi knew it must be so – to make the New Year's fires.

The Master's grey robes slithered closer over the dusty flagstones. And stopped in front of Khi.

“It's between you, Khi, and Sho-jieh – so don't disappoint me.”

Sho-jieh. Khi's oldest friend.

*Don't disappoint me.*

The long-dreamed-of future gleamed like a firefly in the dark. Khi was so close to it now he could almost reach out and grasp the flame in his hands, grasp it then watch the light illumine the encaging fingers. Soon he would be able to say yes, it was all worth it, the bruised feet, the aching of the body, the sacrifice of family and home. Soon he could learn the secret of the Master's fire...

The power.

**S**etting sun gilded the waves, gold on green. Khi and Sho-jieh sat on the dunes, sharing out the honeyed rice-cakes Khi had filched from the kitchen, cool sand soothing their burning soles. Figures, dark against the dazzling sun, moved in the waters, slender and insubstantial as shadow puppets.

A thin, reedy croaking began in the dunes behind them.

“We could go hunt for frogs?” Khi suggested.

“Mmm...” Sho-jieh seemed distracted, staring out over the waters.

“I'll bet you the last rice-cake my frog will jump further than yours!”

“Maybe...”

It had always been Sho-jieh's favourite game, they had played it since they were children. And he loved sweet rice-cakes...

Khi followed Sho-jieh's gaze. The shadow-puppet figures took on flesh, substance, as they came wading

out of the waters. Now he could hear their voices, their laughter more piercingly sweet than the lingering taste of the honey on his tongue. Two women, their butterfly-bright batiks clinging to their bodies, came towards them across the sands, came walking so close that Khi could have reached out to touch them.

Behind them, a younger girl came wading out of the jade-green tide, pushing back her wet strands of hair, black silk, from her face, water dripping onto the sand. Her thin, soaked tunic clung to her slim body. She must have been diving for pearls...

Khi felt Sho-jieh tense, sensed that every muscle in his friend's body had suddenly tautened even though he had not altered his position.

And in that moment, she glanced back over her shoulder, her dark gaze lighting on them, brief as the brush of a butterfly's wing.

Sho-jieh stumbled to his feet. Like a sleepwalker, he slowly went forwards across the sand.

“Sho!” Khi called, half-teasing, half in earnest. “It's forbidden. Remember? Your vow?”

Sho-jieh seemed not to hear him. Khi hastily snatched the last cake and crammed it into his mouth.

“Sho?” Khi brushed the last sticky crumbs from his lips.

Only a trail of damp footprints remained on the dusk-shadowed beach.

*Forbidden...*

Khi kicked moodily at the sand, scuffing up a fine spray of white granules as the wet prints disintegrated. His toes touched something soft. It was a forest orchid, wet and bruised, half-buried in the sand. He brushed the sand-granules from the crushed petals... and a faint, sweet scent issued, moist yet earthy, stirring long-buried memories, memories of a lost time when he had been loved, caressed, enfolded...

Rasping cry of a night-heron flapping its solitary way across the marshes.

The crushed orchid dropped to the sand. The beach was dark. Khi shivered in the sudden chill.

**K**hi and Sho-jieh still slept side by side in the boys' hut. Khi lay awake, staring up into the darkness of the woven roof, listening to the rustling of roosting birds... Sho-jieh's bedroll lay where he had left it, neatly tied, that morning.

Images flickered in shadow across Khi's sleep-starved eyes. Black silk, glittering wet with salt water drops... bruised orchid petals, crushed in the sand...

*Who is she?*

His hand reached out to touch, to stroke the soft black silk in the darkness – his fingers closed on emptiness.

Sho-jieh did not return until moonset, when he came padding in as silently as a marsh-cat.

"Where have you been?" Khi whispered.

"On the sea-shore." His eyes were closed but his lips still curled with a secret, knowing smile.

"That girl. You've been with that girl."

*Scent of crushed orchids...glance of dark eyes...*

Sho-jieh's eyes flicked open. "What if I have?"

A sudden vivid pain, sharper than Master Tem-Kan's cane, burst in Khi's chest. But all he said was, "You're crazy. They'll find out."

"They'll never find out. The monks are too old, too senile to notice."

Sho-jieh was smiling again, Khi could hear the sleek, self-satisfaction in his voice. Sho-jieh, always the first in everything... Was he always to take second-best? Was he always to stand in Sho's shadow? She had looked at him first, she had stared into his eyes long before she even noticed Sho-jieh.

Khi felt a sudden swirl of cold tidewaters flood between them. All these years they had been friends, all these years they had shared everything and now...

**"N**o no no! You were born with two feet so why must you lumber like a water buffalo?"

The cane whistled down again across the back of Khi's calves; he gritted his teeth, willing the pain away. He had hoped that, after ten years, he might have become accustomed to it...

"And you, Sho-jieh, the gods know why I waste my time with you. Concentrate! Listen to the beat of the gong-drum, you're flagging, you're behind the pulse, tak-tak-tak, takka-takka-tak..."

The Master's silver-tipped cane relentlessly stabbed out the rhythm on the flagstones barely a hand's breadth from Sho-jieh's feet.

"Hopeless, hopeless!" The Master clapped his hands and the drumming ceased.

Sweating, dizzy, Khi stopped; the temple courtyard continued to whirl in front of his eyes. He was used to the burn now, the burn in his lungs, the burn of his bruised feet, the once-tender soles that had become hardened and calloused with use.

"Your mind is not on your dancing, these days. I may be old, but I am not deaf...or blind, Sho-jieh."

Sho-jieh's head seemed to wither, a sunflower too heavy for its stalk. "Where were you last night, Sho-jieh?"

Sho-jieh's mouth dropped open. He glanced at Khi – Khi looked away.

The silver-tipped cane jabbed into the stone, sending up a puff of dust.

"I cannot waste my time on idlers...or fornicators. I had great hopes of you, Sho-jieh."

"Who else knew, Khi?" Sho-jieh said.

Khi did not reply.

"Who else but you?"

"The Abbot is waiting to speak with you. Do you understand me, Sho-jieh?"

Sho-jieh's eyes seemed blurred as though blinded by the setting sun, his mouth seemed unable to shape the words he was trying to say.

He turned and went stumbling away towards the inner courtyard.

Khi went to go after him but a gnarled hand reached out and held him back. "Let him go. His way is no longer your way, Khi. Your paths divide here."

The courtyard was suddenly infused with gilded light. Khi blinked, dazzled. The Master had chosen him. For a moment, the golden light flowed like wine through his veins.

Khi straightened his shoulders, lifted his head high.

Master Tem-Kan's chosen.

Golden motes caught fire and Master Tem-Kan's head appeared in the smoke, lit with an aureole of glittering dust, the manifestation of a temple god, his smooth skin glowing like burnished metal.

The shouting from the inner courtyard shattered the illusion.

A cowering figure lay half-curved up in the centre of the courtyard, shielding its shaven head against the blows and kicks of the monks. There was something familiar about the figure that made Khi's body go chill and cold.

"Sho-jieh...?"

The shouting stilled; the Abbot had appeared on his balcony.

"For violating the rules of the compound, Sho-jieh, for the breaking of your vows, you are to be cast out, never to return." The Abbot's fragile voice, wind through dry, crackling sedges, barely carried across the courtyard.

Sho-jieh defiantly raised his head. Khi could see the blood trickling down the smooth brown skin of his shaven head. His saffron robe was caked in dust and dirt; he tore it off and stood there in his loincloth – then began to limp towards the gatehouse.

"Sho-jieh!" Khi called.

"You are not to speak with him," Master Tem-Kan said softly behind him.

"Don't waste any tears on me, Khi," Sho-jieh cried; his mouth was stained crimson with his own blood. "You think you're so honoured, you, the Master's chosen. But look at him, look at him! Dried-up, desiccated, burnt-out. Is that what you truly want? To become like him? To end your days old and alone and unloved –"

"Come away, Khi," Master Tem-Kan said, voice as soft as floating cottonseed.

The sun sank behind the temple wall; shadows flooded the inner courtyard.

"Come." Master Tem-Kan's hand was on Khi's shoulder, drawing him away.

Khi's heart beat faster still. Nothing else mattered. Only that the moment of revelation was here. Now he would learn the Master's secrets. He and he alone.

**S**moke wreathed the hidden chamber; at first Khi thought it was incense but the foulness of the yellowing fumes soon told him that this was not a room devoted to prayer.

"What is this place?"

"This is the heart of our mysteries." The dry voice pierced the floating smoke like a sharpened quill, ironic and harsh. "This is where you will learn to make fire."

"B – but I thought –"



"You thought we snap our fingers, mütter a few magic incantations and draw fire from the air? Like the rest? Did you never use that sluggish brain of yours? You're not going to tell me you were naive enough to believe it was... magic?"

What was the old man telling him? That there was no mystery to the fire-dancing? No arcane powers? No magic?

It couldn't be true!

The room dimmed. He rubbed at his eyes; his knuckles came away wet. Yes, he had been naive enough to believe in the magic. And now he was naive enough to be crying – but he was cursed if he would let the old man see.

"It stinks in here," he said tonelessly. "These fumes make the eyes water."

Master Tem-Kan turned around. In each hand he carried a slender metal wand. He had bound his hands with strips of cloth.

"Close the shutters."

In the darkness, Khi could see only the glow of the lamp flame; suddenly the wands glowed, the tips sputtered and the chamber was filled with sizzling light. Flowers of fire, petals falling as fast as they opened to extinguish on the cold flagstone floor.

His breath caught in his throat. It *had* to be magic. How else could Master Tem-Kan pluck the lightning from the air and wield it into these exquisite illusions?

The light was dying, the last fire-petals dropped like goutts of white flame to the ground – and vanished. In the darkness, pinpricks of light still flared across Khi's dazzled sight.

Master Tem-Kan said from the shadows, "Don't stand there gawping like a swamp-frog, boy. Open the shutters. Get some fresh air into this room."

The smoke billowed about Khi's face as he flung open the shutters; it tasted of sulphur, it left a bitter coating on his tongue.

"At court, you understand, the slaves fan the fumes away from the exalted audience."

Khi stared at the old man through the dispersing smoke. "I – I don't understand," he said stubbornly.

Master Tem-Kan closed his eyes as though unutterably weary. "Look." He beckoned Khi closer.

The metal wand was coated in a greyish paste; the hardened coating seemed brittle, glittering dully in the light. Khi raised it, sniffed it, wrinkling his nose with disgust.

"Saltpetre, chemical salts, bound together with certain lacquers... I'll be teaching you the recipes for the composition of the paste."

"No magic?"

"The magic," said Master Tem-Kan scathingly, "is in remembering the recipes correctly so that you don't singe your eyebrows off – or quit this interminably tedious life of ours in one blinding flash of flame."

So this was the power. For this he had betrayed Sho-jieh and a lifetime's friendship. For this foul-smelling, volatile substance...

**K**hi caught sight of the girl in the temple compound next day as he hurried to his class with Master Tem-Kan. He crossed the yard hastily, trying not to stare at her. Why was she here? Perhaps she had brought gifts of food from the village in exchange for medicines...

She looked up at him as he passed. Their eyes met. Instantly she coloured and glanced away.

That same harsh, unfamiliar pain stabbed through Khi's breast.

Alone in the smoky chamber with Master Tem-Kan, he bent low over the wand he had been preparing. Her face, dark-eyed, hovered before his in the smoky darkness.

"Well?" snapped Master Tem-Kan.

Khi started. His mind was a swirl of dispersing smoke.

"Start with the double spiral I taught you yesterday."

Double spiral. Khi took up the wand and stood unmoving in the dimness, trying to remember the intricate moves the day before.

Who is she? What is her name?

"I'm waiting."

He set the tip of the wand alight.

Those eyes, so soft, so black...

His wand faltered; the spiral lost definition, the paste ignited in random comet streaks, sizzling to smutty cinders on the stone floor.

Silence.

"And that is the best you can do? Let me see those granules."

The gnarled fingers sifted through the remaining grains of powder Khi had confected. "Did you refine the salt for the moon essence for long enough, hm, hm? Were you watching as I taught you for the exact moment of crystallization? Did you remember the white turnips and the glue?"

"Yes, Master, yes!"

"And you roasted the iron sand in the correct measure of t'ung oil?"

"Of course I did!"

"Then it was the cinnabar. Too much, too little, the end result was a careless, shoddy display. What were you dreaming about, hm? Essence of the moon? The moon has bewitched your brain, boy!" The gnarled hand cuffed him sharply on the ear.

"I did my best!" Khi cried, head stinging from the blow. Red lights flashed across his vision.

"Your best?" Master Tem-Kan echoed drily. The gnarled hands caught hold of his face, yellowed nails digging into his skin. The Master's eyes drilled into his, his breath sweetly foetid behind a veil of lemon-grass. "Your best?"

"It's difficult getting it right – all the salts, the sulphur –"

"Did I ever say it would be easy? I thought I saw a spark of intelligence in those wide brown eyes of yours, a spark that distinguished you from the other herd-beasts. Now I begin to think I was deceived."

"What – do you mean?"

The hands abruptly let Khi go. He could still feel the imprint of the finger-nails in his flesh.

"That I was wrong. That you have neither the stamina nor the talent to make a fire-dancer. That you're no different from the others. That I have been wasting my time with you."

Khi gasped for breath. I will not listen to him. I am giving him my best, but he expects the impossible. Blot him out. Blot out the irascible voice, sharp and quirked as the heron's cry. I am beyond his taunts, beyond his insults.

"You will perfect this sequence – exactly as I taught you – by sundown tomorrow. Or I wash my hands of you."

**K**hi went tearing along the shore, the old man's harsh heron-voice still croaking in his ears. Far beyond the temple, his legs gave way and he collapsed, beating his fists against the sand. For a long while he stayed, face down, until the sleepy sussuration of the rise and fall of the tide washed away the last echoes of Master Tem-Kan's voice.

Slowly he rolled over in the sand, staring up at the sky. The sun was low in the sky. He must have lain there for hours. Hours that had trickled away, like the grains of soft sand between his fingers, hours when he should have been practising the sequence the Master had set him. The hours of his life slowly trickling away...

He sat up, hugging his knees to him.

She was there, gathering edible seaweed along the tide's edge, her flowered batik tucked up around her thighs. He watched her as she bent to pick up the green weed and store it in her basket, watched the way she kept stopping to push her long, straight hair behind her ears. Black silk.

She seemed oblivious of his presence, utterly absorbed in her task. And as he watched, she came trudging up the darkening sands to place the seaweed in a rush basket she had left in the dunes.

Her scream shattered the sunset tidelull.

Khi was on his feet, running towards the dunereeds where she stood clutching the basket to her. At her feet writhed a nest of green-scaled snakes, karaitis, lethal reed-snakes, hissing and darting their tongues at her bare legs.

"Step back," Khi said in a whisper. "Slowly."

"I – I – can't –"

"The basket. Drop it over them."

"C – can't –"

"I'm here. I won't let them bite you."

He edged around the seething knot of snakes and put his hands on her arms. "Just edge away. One step at a time."

Her whole body was trembling, her smooth skin felt cold and clammy beneath his fingers as gradually, step after step, she let him draw her away.

"It's all right, it's all right, see, as long as you make no sudden moves and startle them, they're as frightened as you." He spoke soothingly, softly, although his own stomach was writhing in fear. Suddenly she seemed to sag in his grip and, turning around, hid her face in his shoulder, weeping.

Black silk brushed his bare chest, soft and glistening damp with her tears.

"You saved me, you saved me, I could have died."

He stood there helplessly as she wept. He wanted to put his arms around her, to comfort her, to kiss away the tears that dripped, warm and moist, down his shoulder.

"Don't cry. You're all right," he said lamely. There was a faint perfume about her, muskily-sweet... like forest orchids.

"Yes." She wiped her eyes with her hair. And before he could stop her, she wrapped her arms around his neck and placed her soft lips on his. He was too surprised at first to push her away – then stepped back,

holding her at arm's length, looking questioningly into her heart-shaped face.

"What's wrong?"

"I – I mustn't. It's not allowed. I thought you knew."

"But what harm was there? It was only a kiss."

Only a kiss. But a kiss that had set a glow of dark embers burning inside him.

He caught her in his arms, pulled her towards him, feeling the fires flare more fiercely as she kissed him again, her nimble-fingered hands untying the thonged belt around his ochre robe, creeping beneath to stroke his slim body. When her thin floral batik fell away, she did not seem to mind but just laughed delightedly, drawing her long hair over her breasts, daring him in look and gesture to take what she was offering.

He forgot his vows. He forgot the ten long years he had spent training. He forgot Master Tem-Kan. He knew only that he wanted to possess this seductive child-woman. He threw off his robe and, as naked as she in the sultry air, parted her long hair, burying his face between her breasts. She slipped downwards beneath him, clinging closer to him until he felt himself melt within her, collapsing on top of her, burying his face in her black silk hair, inhaling its sweet scent.

Harsh cry of the night-heron flapping overhead.

Khi started up.

"Was it worth the breaking of your vow?" she asked.

"My vow!" He rolled off her and hid his face in his hands.

"They'll never know."

"My Master will know."

"One little transgression. Why can't they allow you one sin? You are a real man now. Was it good for you?"

"Yes, yes, it was good," he cried. "And I don't even know your name."

"Li-Tei."

"Why me, Li-Tei? Will it be an amusing story to tell in the village? The night I took the fire-dancer's virginity?"

"Because I like you. You are different from the others. You should be in the real world, not locked away. One day you may even say Li-Tei did you a good turn."

"The real world," he repeated mazedly. The world which he had known so briefly, the world which he had abjured to achieve the power of a fire-dancer. And what had he gained? An arid life, dedicated to the creation of illusions, the only warmth the ephemeral warmth of the fast-flaring fires, fires that died as swiftly to cold cinders.

"Come away with me," she said suddenly, raising her face to his. "Leave the temple."

"I can't."

"You can," she said, "if you want to." She turned away from him and he realized to his shame that she was crying again.

"Li-Tei, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. It's not that I don't want to, it's..."

But she was wrapping the flowered batik about her again. "Tomorrow night," she said suddenly. "After sundown. You know where I can be found." And, taking up her basket, she slipped away into the shadows of the trees.

He sat alone on the shore, listening to the frogs' night music, sifting sand through his fingers until the moon set.



**N**oon. Khi slid down, down in the dusty corner, his hands clutched to his head.

All he could see was the karait's nest, the tiny snakes swarming in the sand, threads of living jewel...

He shuddered. His body was infested with snakes; a nest of snakes, writhing and slithering in his parched stomach.

Noon already. And he had done nothing, less than nothing.

He staggered to his feet. Snakes looped and lashed before his dizzied eyes, tails rattling, intertwining, spiralling –

Spiralling. Two sand-snakes, their glittering ochre scales intertwined. He stopped on his way to open the jar of firedust. Double snake-spiral.

Could it be done?

He wove a few exploratory movements with unfired wand. He could still feel the touch of Li-Tei's sinuous body, her arms, her legs winding about his naked body...

Perfect the fire-spirals first, the sinuously intertwining coils...

His wrist was too slow. Sluggish. The wands must flick with the lethal speed of a snake's forked tongue. Slowly the firetrails in the darkness began to take on a shape, a coherence of their own. They began to... undulate.

Grains of orpiment gave the snake-forms an unnatural yellow shimmer, bright as saffron crocuses. Something more subtle was needed to temper the crudeness of the illusion. Khi dipped his hand into the pot of cinnabar granules. He mixed. He experimented. He forgot about food, drink, time.

Glittering snake-scales fell to the floor and were extinguished. Khi's eyes ached with the brightness yet still he worked on, consumed by the fever of his own creation, a fever akin to the unendurable itch of sexual desire. He had to get it exactly right.

And at last he mastered the rhythm of the slowly-unwinding serpent coils, the whole illusion shimmered and flowed, a living column of jewelled snakeskin, a dazzling double helix caught in a moment of perpetual motion.

The last granules ignited and the illusion faded into a misty pall of smoke. Khi stood back, eyes smarting with stale smoke and tears.

I can do it. I can do it, Master Tem-Kan!

"Serpents. An unconventional interpretation."

Khi's heart slammed against his ribs. That dry voice, sharp and piercing as the rasp of a prowling heron.

Master Tem-Kan was there. Watching him.

"I—I know you intended a plain double spiral, Master—"

"But it was inspired. The work of a true artist in fire."

Khi stared at him in a daze of exhaustion. Praise. But too late now. He had seen through Master Tem-Kan's strategies. He would no longer play the old man's games.

"No," he said through the dispersing smoke. "The work of a forger. A fake. A sham."

"Maybe," said Master Tem-Kan levelly. "But no less impressive for that."

"Oh yes?" Khi wiped his hand across his burning face; it came away smeared with smuts. Li-Tei was

waiting for him. He saw now how empty his life in the temple had been. "You may be content to have woven your life out of deceptions and trickery – but I am not." He choked in a jagged, smoke-fouled breath. Why did the old man not strike him with his cane, throw open the door, turn him out? He merely stood there, a carven temple statue, cold and remote as stone. "Can't you understand? I thought I wanted this – and now that I've achieved it, I – I see that it's not what I wanted at all."

Still the old man did not move, did not utter one word. When Khi threw down the wands and walked past him, out into the dusk, he did not even call him back.

**A**t first Khi thought she had fallen asleep in the soft sand waiting for him. But as he came nearer, he saw that she lay too still, that her breast did not rise and fall, that her sprawled limbs were twisted and untidy like a painted puppet whose strings had been cut.

Nearby on the sand lay the woven basket, upturned, its contents spilt...

Moonlight transformed the set, staring eyes to gleaming opals. When he hesitantly put out one hand to touch her – she was cold, colder than the wet sand on which she lay.

A faint sound, sibilant and menacing, made him withdraw his hand as hastily as if her chill flesh had burnt him.

Amongst the soft black silk of her tumbled hair lay a glinting jewelled thread, a thread that detached itself and went slowly undulating away across the white sand.

A karait.

Now he could see the black puncture holes on her wrist where it had bitten her.

There must have been one left at the bottom of the rush basket, one that had crept inside and hidden there unnoticed... until she began to gather a fresh supply of seaweed and put her hand inside...

"Li-Tei..." Her name was an anguished whisper on his lips as he stretched out one trembling hand to stroke the black silk of her hair for one last time.

Harsh heron cry, right overhead. His hand stilled, stopped.

"Can you be sure there was only one? The bite of the karait is lethal – and there is no antidote."

Khi slowly turned around. Master Tem-Kan stood behind him, his grey robes fluttering like ruffled feathers in the chill sea-breeze.

"There's nothing you can do for her, Khi. Nothing but call her people to tend to the body. Come... it's cold here."

Khi shivered. The wind off the sea was tinged with the bitterness of brine, he could taste the bitterness on his tongue. "How did you know to find me here?" he said numbly.

"The tide is out. Your footprints led me here across the wet sands. Come, Khi." The tone of command was more pronounced this time.

"Just a little longer..."

He unwrapped his robe and knelt to cover her body. The breath of wind from its folds dislodged something which fluttered from her breast onto the sands.

A single heron's feather, soft and grey.





# Cultural Differences

Iain Banks interviewed by

Stan Nicholls

The science-fiction community regards Iain M. Banks as one of the sparkiest, most imaginative and wittily offbeat sf novelists. The literary establishment regards Iain Banks as one of the sparkiest, most imaginative and wittily offbeat mainstream novelists.

And never the twain shall meet.

Novels lacking that middle initial are regularly lauded by the literati; novels with it are either ignored outside the science-fiction field or curtly reviewed with grudging sufferance. This says more about the biases of critical orthodoxy than Banks's undoubted talents, and while he may be bemused at this demonstration of literary apartheid, he's philosophical about it. "It can be irksome at times," he admits, "particularly as both sorts of novels are written in more or less the same way. The only distinctions are technical ones. You have to do research or check the facts when it comes to the real-life stuff, the mainstream stuff; but in sf – well, you have to check facts occasionally, but not usually. Especially with the kind of sf I write."

Is there any sense in which the mainstream work informs the science fiction, or vice versa? "I don't know. I'm the last person to ask, perhaps. There are definite similarities in some of the ways the books are structured and the way dialogue is generated. But I don't know if the two types of novel actually inform each other. They're written by the same person, that's about it really, and I don't think there's very much cross-fertilization, to be honest. It's more that there's a similar frame of mind involved.

"One thing I will say is that I definitely feel more at home with sf because you've got more control. If you get to a point where you think, 'For that to happen the whole society has to be different,' it's no problem in sf; you just go back and alter the society. If it happens in a mainstream novel you can't really do that. So I feel slightly more comfortable writing sf. But by a degree, a fraction, writing mainstream fiction is more rewarding, simply because you feel you've achieved more having had to wrestle with reality as well as with your imagination. I've

always said that if I was forced at the point of a gun to choose between the two I'd rather go on writing science fiction. I enjoy it far more. But I'd hate to have to give up either."

Banks's first four science-fiction novels, *Consider Phlebas*, *The Player of Games*, *Use of Weapons* and *The State of the Art* (1987-1991), are set in the universe of the Culture. The Culture is a complex, galaxy-wide human community predicated on pacifism, and whose rulers, in a typical piece of Banksian irony, are prepared to use dirty tricks up to and including murder to preserve the status quo. "The Culture is my idea of utopia," Banks says. "Or at least as close as you can get to utopia with what we regard as recognizably human stock. I'd love to live there, and that's been the guiding principle behind the whole thing. I just thought of the best possible place you could live in. Not that it always comes out that way in the books, because I'm trying hard not to make it look wonderful and goody-goody and all the rest of it."

But neither of his more recently published sf novels, *Against a Dark Background*, and *Feersum Endjin*, are set in the Culture. Why not? "I suppose they could have been. Largely it's because I didn't want to get pigeon-holed writing only about the Culture. And it's what everyone expects. I might get boring, and I just might get bored. Actually, that isn't true, because I enjoy so much writing about the Culture, I feel so at home in it, as I've said many times before.

"When I conceived *Dark Background*, my feeling was that I didn't want people to think, 'Ah, it's a Banksie, a Banksie with the M in it, so it must be a Culture book.' I didn't want to be that predictable. Also, although I could have written *Dark Background* in particular in the Culture, I think it would have taken too much away from it. I had all sorts of little technological fixes that the Culture couldn't accommodate. But the main thing was just wanting it to be something different."

Certainly the world in which *Dark Background* takes place has a much more fractured, moribund

flavour to it than the Culture. "Yes, there's no real sense of a civilization progressing in a lively way, therefore people turn in on themselves and become introspective. Irrationality is coming in, basically. There's a feeling that this society is gradually building up to something, something terrible, which actually does happen towards the end of the book. But even then it's not the usual 'everything's going to completely change' scenario beloved of so many science-fiction novels. There may be different people in certain positions of power or whatever at the close of the story but it will still be roughly the same society. By doing that, I was trying to act against what you normally expect to find in the genre.

"I've read so many sf books where the action is terribly, terribly important to the fate of everyone and everything. The fate of a whole planet can hang on the outcome of the protagonists' actions. Sometimes, the fate of the entire universe! Well, if you look at history, this is very unusual. Indeed. What usually happens is that people suffer and die and get involved in all sorts of mayhem and catastrophe and it doesn't make that much difference in the end.

"That was one of the ideas behind *Consider Phlebas*. There's a big war going on in that novel, and various individuals and groups manage to influence its outcome. But even being able to do that doesn't ultimately change things very much. At the end of the book I have a section pointing this out by telling what happened after the war, which was an attempt to pose the question 'What was it all for?' I guess this approach has to do with my reacting to the cliché of sf's 'lone protagonist.' You know, this idea that a single individual can determine the direction of entire civilizations. It's very, very hard for a lone person to do that. And it sets you thinking what difference, if any, it would have made if Christ or Marx or Darwin had never been. We just don't know."

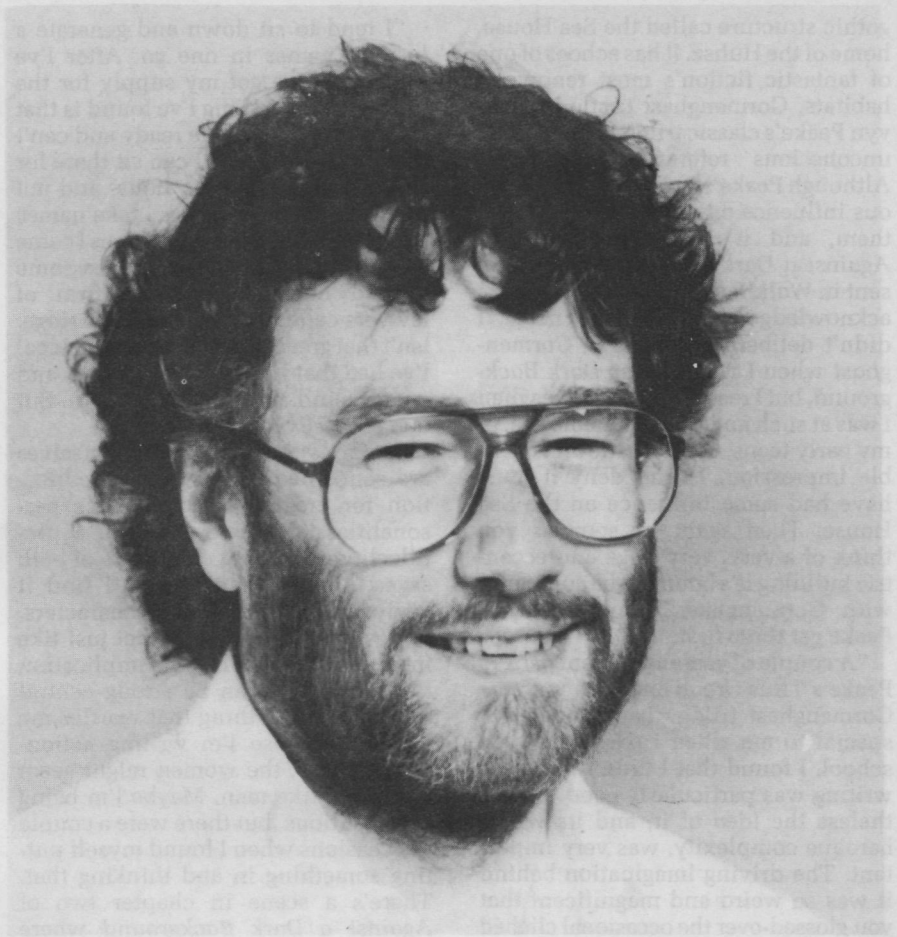
Banks wrote six novels, totalling around half a million words, before breaking into print. He's been cannibalizing some of the ideas in those

early unpublished books ever since. "The funny thing was that everyone said I was an overnight success. But it took me 16 years to get anything published. So 'over-decades success' might be more appropriate. *Dark Background* itself was based on one of those unpublished books, from 1975, I think, but it's been completely rewritten. It's the last of the old stories, and it's quite a relief to have got them all out of the way. The story had a special identity and I feel I sort of betrayed it by writing it so badly. The idea of the Lazy Gun [a weapon with an unpredictable sense of humour], for instance, was a piece of daftness I wanted to make use of. Ideas like that are worth the anguish of writing the whole thing again. I've paid my dues to it now. *Phlebas* was an old one, too; it was written just after *The Wasp Factory* [his first published book], in 1984. I've found that re-writing an old book took a lot more effort than writing one from scratch, but I had to go back to do right by these things. Now I can go on and start completely new stuff."

He has described *Against a Dark Background* as being somewhere between sf and fantasy; as almost a commentary on fantasy, in fact. What did he mean by that? "It was a slightly jokey way of trying to explain what it was. I decided that I wanted to use the tropes of science fiction to deconstruct fantasy as a form. It almost sounds convincing when you talk about it!

"It's a multiple quest novel, and it takes the well-known idea that Arthur C. Clarke had many years ago that the technology of an advanced civilization would look like magic to a less advanced civilization. So any magic that's in *Against a Dark Background* is in the shape of very advanced technology because it takes place in a setting which is much more scientifically correct, if you like, than the Culture is. It's got faster-than-light drives and other devices that don't feature in the Culture. It's very much in a realistic milieu, insofar as you can say that about an sf novel, and yet it's got the shape, and sometimes the form, of a fantasy novel. But the workings-out of the plot undermine the fantasy feel of it because things point back to reality. I've tried to insert realistic elements that one wouldn't put into an average science-fiction novel.

"There's a kind of mythic quality; or rather an attempt to explain how myths arise from ordinary things that are misunderstood. For example, there's a bit at the end where a couple of the characters find a fabulous piece of pure diamond in the shape of a gigantic crown. One of them wants to impose their idea of what this thing is – that it's some kind of holy relic or whatever, you know? – and the other says, 'Well, it's a drill bit actually.' The first one points to an inscription and



Iain M. Banks

says, 'But the runes, the runes!' Then the other character explains that they're serial numbers. That makes it sound a bit Terry Pratchett. There's more to it than that. I wanted that scene to be representative of what tends to happen when people mistake one thing for another because of their expectations. It's an example, an extreme example, of how people bend reality."

**T**his ties in with the irrationality of the various fanatical religious sects in the book, principally the Huhsz and the Fellowship of the Gun. Are they just a plot device, or is Banks trying to convey his feelings about religion in the here and now? "Both. I'm against religion, and always have been. That comes out in virtually all my books. You can argue it's kind of an easy option for me to attack religion, but that doesn't stop me from doing it. And I think including assorted religious nutters adds some extra spice. In a sense, *Against a Dark Background* uses weird faiths as symptomatic of the bigotry, calcification and imminent breakdown of our own society. You only have to look about you to see an increasing number of these loony sects coming in. It's a millennial thing, perhaps. So there are two functions: using religion as a target that I enjoy shooting at, and as an image of what's going on in the here and now."

Part of the plot of *Dark Background* involves a number of characters in search of a rare book, itself a stage in the quest for the Lazy Gun. In the process, Banks has some fun with literary traditions and includes a few nods in the direction of fabulous imaginary tomes like *The Necronomicon*. At least, that's my reading of it. How conscious were these references? "Fun- nily enough, I think they're unconscious mostly. The whole thing was basically set up as a yarn, rather on the same terms as *Consider Phlebas*, which had distinctly yarnish tendencies. I mean, when you come down to it, that was a story about a shipwrecked sailor falling in with a gang of pirates and going in search of buried treasure.

"I'm aware that you can't write a novel which involves a quest for a book, or partly is about that quest, without thinking on a bit. But I didn't try to overload the text with extra imagery. I think that's a game too much. You can get beguiled by trying to get as many different references in, and nods and winks, and you can lose the story in the clutter that results. So I don't try to do that. Any such references are generally subconscious rather than conscious. They might be there, but I'm not that aware of deliberately putting them in."

*Against a Dark Background* features a massive, incredibly convoluted neo-



gothic structure called the Sea House, home of the Huhsz. It has echoes of one of fantastic fiction's most renowned habitats, Gormenghast castle in Mervyn Peake's classic trilogy. Was this an unconscious reference too? "Yes. Although Peake's books had an enormous influence on me when I first read them, and it's definitely there in *Against a Dark Background*. It's present in *Walking on Glass* as well, and I acknowledged that in the book. I didn't deliberately think of Gormenghast when I was writing *Dark Background*, but I read Peake at a time when I was at such an impressionable age, in my early teens, that it made an indelible impression. I can't deny it must have had some influence on the Sea House. Then again, as soon as you think of a very, very large and eccentric building it's bound to be compared with Gormenghast, simply because Peake got there first.

"A couple of years ago I went back to Peake's *Titus Groan* and, although the Gormenghast trilogy had been really special to me when I read it in high school, I found that I didn't think the writing was particularly good. Nevertheless the idea of it, and its whole baroque complexity, was very important. The driving imagination behind it was so weird and magnificent that you glossed-over the occasional clichéd descriptions."

Something Banks shares with Peake, although their styles and approach are radically different, is a knack for inventing bizarre yet curiously believable names for his characters and locations. *Use of Weapons*, to take a random example, includes assassin Cheradenine Zakalwe, a robot called Skaffen-Amtiskaw and a woman named Diziet Sma. "As a matter of fact," Banks laughs, "a lot of people say, 'Why are your names so weird?' But I work to make them sound plausible in the context of the future societies the characters live in.

"There's a name-generating mode I get into which basically comes down to looking at everyday things, like the titles of books that happen to be around me at the time, and sort of extrapolating from them. The trick is to stop thinking about the names of these things as entire words and just seeing the syllables involved. Some name-generating can be incredibly easy. For instance, you can look at this carpet and that door and say, 'Cardoor!' Then you realize you can't use that because it sounds like the door of a car. So you play with it and come up with 'Headoor' or 'Doorhead' or something, and gradually a name emerges. These are stupid examples, but I think you know what I mean. It's a kind of brainstorming session, I suppose. Luckily nobody sees me doing it or I'd be carted off to the funny farm.

"I tend to sit down and generate a load of names in one go. After I've done that I've got my supply for the next book. One thing I've found is that if I haven't got a name ready and can't think of a good one, I can sit there for ages. I can be there for hours and not think of one. Sometimes I take names from companies and businesses I come across. Like, I happened to see some headed notepaper from a firm of lawyers called Gumsip and Slurridge. Isn't that great? Gumsip and Slurridge! I've had that lying around for ages and never found anything to use it in. But one of these days..."

As far as the characters themselves are concerned, Banks has a predilection for creating strong female personalities. "I suppose I have a predilection for strong characters of both sexes," he contends. "Yes, I find it fairly easy to write female characters, but I don't want them to act just like men, because that has the implication that only men can be strong central characters. The thing that worries me is that, because I'm writing action-based books, the women might seem too much like men. Maybe I'm being over-cautious, but there were a couple of occasions when I found myself putting something in and thinking that. There's a scene in chapter two of *Against a Dark Background* where [heroine] Sharrow is saying goodbye to her lover, and he slaps her. She punches him on the jaw and knocks him down. So she's besting him in male terms. Then, as my concession to her gender, she kind of sniffs a bit afterwards. But normally I make very few concessions to my women characters in the 'traditional' sense."

And few concessions to the readers in terms of empathy with the characters. In Sharrow's case we're asked to sympathize with someone whose actions inadvertently killed 468,000 people. "Er, yes. But it was an accident. Honest. She's not meant to be sympathetic, at least at the outset. She's meant to be fairly hard, and if you met her you wouldn't think she was particularly sympathetic. Not the sort of person you'd welcome living next door to you at all. I have the kind of readers who expect to respond to a character like that, and to identify with them.

"Same thing applies to my mainstream novels. Take *Complicity*, for example. The main character in that, Cameron Colley, is a sleazeball journalist, totally selfish, into drugs and booze and he's having a sado-masochistic relationship with a woman, A deeply unpleasant character. My hope and expectation was to offend as many people with *Complicity* as I did with *The Wasp Factory*. *Complicity* was to some extent written in reaction to my previous mainstream novel, *The Crow Road*, because I thought that was a bit

too comfy and middle-class. I still liked it, but I thought there was definitely a side to it that would make some people sit back and say, 'Ah, signs of authorial maturity in Banks at last! I wanted to knock that smartly on the head. So I decided to write a novel to forestall that possibility. Something on the edge; something sharp and bitter. And I intend sticking with this thing of alternating the books – sf, non-sf, sf, non-sf – as that seems to work well for me."

Banks writes fairly substantial books and little in shorter form. Is this because novels can spoil an author for short stories, so to speak? "Yes, in a very specific way. Because very few of my ideas have got to be short stories. I write lots of short stories, but they all get put into novels; they tend to get embedded in there. Unless something works really well as a short, the same idea – the same bit of a story, as it were – will do more work in a novel because it's got resonances back into the rest of the book. And when you go past it, if you do it right, it will have further resonances. You just can't get that in a single story. Some ideas have an internal elegance that's best expressed in short form. Little gems, you know? I don't think I've ever written any of those! In the end, I don't think I would have written as well, or enjoyed over-all the body of work as much, had I written more short stories and fewer novels. Or even novels that had less twiddly bits in them.

"As to writing long novels, usually endings and beginnings suggest themselves; where to come in and where to go out tend to be fairly obvious. Well, they seem fairly obvious at the time, but when you think about it rationally you can't really understand why. But it's not something that requires any great thought. Which is just as well because I don't give it any!"

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Iain M. Banks's latest hardcover science-fiction novel, *Feersum Endjin* (Orbit, £15.99, is reviewed by John Clute in this issue – see page 53.

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# Jazamine in the Green Wood

## Chris Beckett

**M**emorial Day.  
I got out of bed and opened the window. Birdsong spanned the air above the streets. A fat woman pushed her bike up from the allotments, its basket laden with leeks and broccoli.

"Morning has broken, like the first morning..." she was singing.

That old hymn. Well, yes, I thought. I suppose it is on days like this that we should thank God for all Her munificence: for light, for air, for the great dance of the planets and stars, for the moon, for birth, for the web of life... not to mention tuberculosis, beri-beri, cholera and TTX.

(TTX. Ah, yes now, there is proof, if any more were needed, that God is truly a She!)

I put on my jumper and jeans, pulled on my specially adapted boots.

And do I thank God for my feet? I demanded of myself. Do I thank Her for the curse of being born a man? Do I thank Her for my good kind reasonable parents, who have cut me off from the whole world with their good intentions, their damned principles?

I was not in a good mood.

I closed the door of my flat and hobbled off down the road towards the Peace Square, where the Memorial statues wait under the cherry blossom for the annual speeches and tears.

On the way I met Harry Higgins. He is a big, jolly man, with a red beard. He always wears the same brown sports jacket with the little blue MRP badge on the lapel.

"Going to the ceremony, eh, Jack?"

I nodded, guiltily. "Well, yes. My mum and dad, you know..."

He winked, "Of course, of course, I understand. But pop over to the Men's Club later, eh Jack? At the end of the day we men have got to stick together."

I nodded, guiltily again. Whichever way I turn, it seems, I feel guilt.

"Yes, sure. I'll be there."

"Good man, good man," said Harry, patting my arm.

"Enjoy the ceremony," he added, with gentle irony, over his shoulder. "She's a strong woman, your mother, I admire her, even if we are on opposite sides."

I noticed he didn't mention Dad.

**O**utside the Mother-Church I saw Beatrice, walking with a girlfriend: Beatrice with her curly blonde hair and her milk-white teeth, Beatrice with her beads and her lacy dresses, so nonchalantly flung together, but always stylish and funny and graceful.

God, she is so beautiful that she makes my blood run cold.

"Morning, Beatrice," I croaked.

She smiled and waved, "Hello, Jack!"

I wanted to say something else. I stopped to do it. But before I could think of anything, she'd already turned away, slipping her arm through her friend's, and giving her a kiss. Lovers no doubt, or about to become so.

Alone in the cruel web of sunlight and birdsong, I stared after them.

Then I hobbled on my way.

Under the cherry trees, Mother was giving her customary speech as Town Convenor.

"We're here to remember the victims of the plague: our husbands, brothers, fathers, sons..."

She touched the statue: that sad woman looking down at her dead male shadow. Plenty of women cried. No men did, because apart from me and my father, there were no men there.

"But secondly we're here to remember the women victims of men in the long centuries earlier..."

She moved to the second statue: that poor terrified girl who is groped and clawed at eternally by disembodied hands.

Women cried. Dry-eyed, I looked away from the statues, back across the empty sunlit square.

"Men are the weaker sex," my mother said. "More die in the womb, more die as babies. They live shorter lives because of the desperate conflict that is hard-wired into their brains. They are not less able, they are not more evil, but they are weaker. We must never let them assume control again..."

"Thanks, Mum", I muttered and looked away again down the empty square...

Only this time it was not empty! As if he had fallen from the sky, a young man stood tottering, only a few yards from me. He was very thin, unshaven, about 18, dressed in oddly-cut baggy jeans and a torn blue T-shirt. He looked scared when he saw I'd noticed him, so I quickly turned away.



"It's not that we women should hate men," said my mother. "I myself love one young man more than I love anyone in the world..."

Here she looked across at me smiling. I blushed and all the women looked at me, knowingly, benevolently...

"But their numbers must be maintained at the present level," said Mum, "for the good of all of us, men as well as women, boys as well as girls."

Everyone clapped. Women nearby looked at me as if they expected me to be proud. I managed a sort of grin.

The stranger had come up behind me. I could feel his presence and I wanted to turn and look at him, but he was like some sort of rare forest animal: I had to be careful not to alarm him.

So I watched my gentle father, Timothy, with his kindly beard and his twinkly eyes, as he came to the front with his notes at the ready and gave my Mum a little affectionate kiss. ("They live apart but they are still the best of friends!" said a middle-aged woman nearby to her companion.)

He is the the Chair of the Men's Committee. On behalf of the men in our town, he acknowledged Mum's speech and acknowledged the history of oppression that women were so determined should not repeat itself.

"But we're learning," he insisted, "generation after generation, we are learning. And I want to ask you all, as I ask you every year, to keep your minds open and allow yourself to consider the possibility that a time will come when men can be trusted again and our numbers allowed to rise naturally to the proportion that nature intended."

The middle-aged woman turned to her friend and sighed, "Oh but he is gentle, he is a good man. It would be different if they were all like him!"

**B**ehind me the stranger coughed. I turned. His eyes were very large and extraordinarily blue. "What is this place?"

"It's Peace Square," I said. "It's Memorial Day."

He stared at me. "I'm hungry."

I shrugged. "I'll get you something to eat."

He still just stared, as if his brain was incapable of processing the sounds that reached his ears.

A cold breeze rustled the cherry blossom. My father's gentle voice went on about Aggression Control programmes and Gender Development groups.

"Where do you come from?" I asked him. "How did you get here?"

He stared across my shoulder, seeming intent on other things. Then he rubbed his face with his hands. "I'm so hungry."

"Okay. I told you. I'll get you something to eat."

He followed me through the sunlit streets, gazing around at trees, at houses, at people, at notices and signs. We passed an election poster for the RadFems and he stopped to look at it. It showed a frightened woman cowering in a huge male shadow. "NEVER AGAIN!" declaimed the poster, "REDUCE THE QUOTA NOW!"

"Reduce...the...quota...", he read very slowly, muttering the words aloud, like a child.

"They don't want us any more," I said with a shrug, "that's what it amounts to. They don't want us."

He stared at me, frowning, then turned away from the poster and carried on walking.

"No cars," he observed after a while.

"No, well we hardly have any. Not since..."

But he wasn't listening. We had come to the Mother-Church and he was absorbed in studying the sign outside, with its rose-pink Mother mandala: petals within petals softly unfolded, blossoming and thriving, now that it was free from danger...

He looked at me. "Where do I come from?" he asked himself, thoughtfully repeating the question I'd asked him some 20 minutes previously.

He thought for a bit longer, then shrugged, "I don't remember. So many places."

Frowning, he started to feel about in his pockets, as if they might hold some clues. "The trees danced around me..." he said. "The ground...the ground boiled..."

He found a penny coin in his pocket and handed it to me, then he pulled out some fluff and dried bits of grass and flowers. Little blue flowers, they were: forget-me-nots.

Suddenly tears brimmed from his eyes.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

He held out the bits of flower, as if he thought these shrivelled scraps of blue could somehow speak to me. Tears ran down his cheeks as his whole face screwed up with the effort of remembering. Then suddenly he relaxed.

"Jazamine!" he cried out. "Jazamine! I remember. I was with her by the pool!"

"Who is Jazamine?" I asked him.

"She said she'd wait for me there. In the green wood...But...But I keep falling..."

"Falling? How do you mean?"

He flinched. He'd become agitated again. His breathing had become quicker. "I don't know who you are!" he shouted at me, "I've never met you before! Why do you keep asking me all these questions?"

Before I could answer he had turned on his heel and run.

"Stop! Come back! I won't hurt you!" I cried out after him, but he didn't even look round.

With my stupid feet and my stick, it was useless for me to try and follow.

**A**ll I had was the coin he had given me. I opened my hand and looked at it. It seemed quite ordinary at first glance. Then I saw it had the head of a King on it, like a coin from before the plague.

But this was a new coin. It had last year's date. And it was a King I had never heard of.

A shiver went down my spine. I stooped to pick up a fragment of forget-me-not that the stranger had allowed to fall.

Two women passed by me hand in hand, both laughing.

"...anyway, Mandy went round Gill and Sarah's," one of them said, "and there was the most God-awful row. Typical Mandy, Gill said, but she's hardly the one to talk..."

Jazamine, who the stranger loved. Jazamine in the green wood.

Where was she? Who was she? What kind of world did she inhabit?

**T**hat evening I went over to the Men's Club. It was very quiet. At the back a couple of boys were playing *Ninja Assassin* and *Galactic Warrior*, the only surviving computer games. (Venerable old things: it would not be long before *Ninja* too would have to go, to provide parts for the flagging *Warrior*). At the bar, Harry Higgins was conferring with his diminutive sidekick Peter Hemlock, and with Rod Stone, the Club manager and host.

They looked up with irritation when I came in. They were MRP men, all three, and had no doubt been talking politics. Like most people they didn't feel able to talk freely in front of me, because of my parents.

I am an outsider. I belong to neither camp. Neither the men nor the women accept me as their own.

Harry was the first to recover his good humour: "Jack! Nice to see you, mate! Let me buy you a drink!"

He is an instinctive networker. He makes it his business to be friendly to everyone, even his enemies. But even so, his welcome was ambiguous. His face smiled, but his eyes were remote. He was anxious to get back to his two friends.

But I've learnt to ignore the unspoken messages.

"Thanks, Harry, mine's a pint of bitter!"

When Rod had pulled me a pint, I chose a seat a good distance from them and put some music on the jukebox, so they could plot and scheme in peace.

"...I want you/I want you so bad/I want you-ou-ou/I want you so bad it's driving me mad, it's driving me mad..."

It's all old music on our jukebox, from the days before the Plague.

"...I want you..."

I thought about Beatrice. I thought about Jazamine in the green wood. I pictured her as Beatrice unbuttoning her dress among the bluebells. I thought about the green leaf-light on her breasts with their soft pink buds.

Presently Lily Tulip came in, precarious on her high heels. She wore a silver dress cut to the very top of her silk-envaginated thigh. Her eyelashes were heavy with mascara, her ear-lobes hung with jewels.

The three men greeted her from the bar. Harry whistled.

"Hi, guys," Lily simpered at them, then glanced across at me, knowingly, like an old fisherman casting out his line. I looked quickly away.

But I watched her as she settled down at her accustomed table, crossing her long legs sheathed in blue silk and sipping her blue curaçao.

"...I want you so bad..."

God help me, Lily wasn't what I wanted at all, but I knew I'd be going to her before the night was out.

**A**nd then the door flew open and in burst the blue-eyed stranger as if he'd been fired from a gun.

"The wood," he blurted out, "I'm trying to find my way into that wood..."

He addressed the whole room, staring round at us. He looked me straight in the face but I saw no glimmer of recognition.

"The wood?" said Rod Stone.

"The wood behind here! You can see the green branches over the rooftops! I keep following roads that seem to lead there, but they always turn out to be dead-ends."

Now he looked round at me. "There was a public baths at the end of the first road," he told me. "I went in and it was full of naked old women. It was strange, they didn't try to cover themselves. They just laughed..."

I smiled.

"At the end of the next one," he said, "there was a couple arm in arm on a bench in their garden, watching their children play. Only both of them were women!"

I saw Harry glance quizzically at Peter and Rod. "That seemed unusual to you, did it?" Harry asked.

The stranger stared at him blankly.

Harry laughed. "Listen, the wood is just through the back door there. There's a gate at the back of the beer garden. Just follow the hedge."

The young man nodded. "Yes, I remember a hedge, and in the middle a pool, where Jazamine chases minnows..."

I thought of a girl like Beatrice wading in a warm pool: rushes, willowherb, forget-me-not, lilies...

Harry frowned, "I don't remember a pool."

But the young man was already heading off.

"Wait a minute!" Harry called. "Can't I get you a drink? You're new in town aren't you?" Harry never missed the chance to make a contact.

"Y - es..." the stranger hesitated, torn.

"How about something to eat?" I asked him, getting up to join them. "I bet you're still hungry?"

He looked at me. I don't know if he remembered me now or not, but he nodded and I bought him a couple of pies, while Harry got him a pint and introduced himself.

"Higgins, Harry Higgins, convenor of the local Men's Rights crowd for my sins. Anything you need, let me know. We blokes have got to stick together, eh?"

The stranger stared.

"This is Peter, our treasurer, and Rod here is my deputy, when he's not too busy with pulling the best pint in town."

Harry glanced at me. I saw the momentary reluctance to include me.

"And this is Jack. He's one of us too at heart, aren't you Jack, me old mate? Only his Mum just happens to be the local Führer round here and his Dad, well, Timothy's a lovely bloke in many ways but he's sort of Gone Native, as they used to say in the old days. Fair comment, Jack?"

I grinned painfully.

"Oh, but he's such a good man," squeaked Rod Stone in a cruel falsetto.

**"S**o what do you call yourself, my old mate?" said Harry. "Whereabouts do you hail from?"

"M-ichael," said the young man, his mouth full of pie, "I come from - from Birmingham..."

"Birmingham, eh? Well, well! I couldn't quite place that accent of yours, but I'd never have had you down as a Brummie!"

"And how do the slits treat you up there, these days?" asked Rod Stone.

Michael stared. "Slits?"

"Slits," Rod repeated impatiently. "You know! Balloonfronts, pussycats, slaggies..."



"...doublebums," offered Peter Hemlock, "bossy-birds..."

"...women!" said Rod in exasperation.

Understanding dawned. "Oh...women...well..." The stranger's eyes glanced anxiously between their faces, wondering what sort of reply they wanted. "Well, you know..."

"We know, we know," said Harry sympathetically. "Still, you've got a good advocate there in John Thompson."

Michael looked blank.

"You don't know who John Thompson is?" asked Harry, very surprised. "The chair of the Brum Men's Committee? Good god, they say he's the most powerful man left in England!"

The stranger nodded, without much conviction. "Oh yes...He's...good..."

"In a different mould entirely from our own dear Timothy Brown," Harry said, winking at me to show no hard feelings.

"Oh, but Timothy's such a good man," said Stone again in a soft falsetto. And he didn't bother to wink.

"He's a bloody cunt-licker," said Peter Hemlock, avoiding my eye. He tipped back a glass of vodka. His eyes glazed as the ethanol hit into his blood-stream.

Rod Stone refilled his glass.

"Drink up," Harry said to the stranger. "You look like you could do with another. What were you hoping to find in the wood there anyway? It's not much of a place as far as I can recall."

"A girl... She said she'd wait for me by the pool..."

All three of them snorted with disapproval.

"A girl, Mike? What do you want a girl for?" Harry demanded. "If it's a bit of nooky you're after, you're much better off with the likes of Lily here..."

Lily had come up behind us in an overpowering blast of sickly sweet scent. "Hi there," she said.

"She's got all the bits that a woman has got," said Harry, with a wink at me, "I think we can all vouch for that, eh lads? But she's got the brain of a man, and that means she knows what a man really wants..."

Lily fluttered her eyelashes at Michael. His blue eyes stared at her with slowly dawning comprehension. However realistic her female body may be, her female face is nothing more than a mask of paint and rouge and mascara, through which looks out – fearfully – her real face: the solid, heavy face of a man.

Michael came looking for Jazamine in the green wood – and he was offered *this*.

He went red and turned away. I could see him desperately trying to think of some way of changing the subject.

"What is TTX?" he blurted out. "I heard someone talk about it and I didn't understand."

They all stared at him in shocked silence, the friendliness draining from Harry's face. "You mean you don't know?"

He could see he'd committed a terrible *faux pas* and tried to recover himself.

"No... I mean yes... I just – forgot for a moment..."

"Well, if you really know what it is, sweetie," said Lily in a hard voice, completely unlike the simpering tone she usually used, "Why don't you tell us?"

He looked at me desperately. I tried to mouth the word "plague."

"It's an... illness," said the stranger.

"Yes," persisted Lily, "and what does it do?"

"It's... like flu to start with and then..."

"It makes your balls go purple and swell up like fucking footballs," snapped Rod from behind the bar, "and then you die."

"Everyone knows that, Mike," said Harry, almost reprovingly.

**T**here was a moment of terrible silence.

"You know what he is, don't you?" said Rod. "He's one of those Shifters you sometimes hear about. He doesn't belong here. He's slipped in from another world."

Harry whistled softly.

The stranger stood there, motionless, watching Harry's face, as if waiting for a judgement.

Harry spoke very quietly. "So you come from a place where TTX never happened, do you? The women never took over?"

The boy hung his head.

"Hey!" said Rod, "You haven't got some of that stuff on you, have you: that Schrödinger medicine you're supposed to use?"

"Yeah," insisted Peter Hemlock, "give us some, get us out of this god-awful world."

Lily laughed. "You know what they sometimes say, don't you, Harry? They say you can get the Schrödinger stuff out of a Shifter if you drink up all his blood."

Her painted lips parted and Michael the Shifter stared in horror at the yellowing fangs within.

He ran. They grabbed at him. I shouted.

He tore himself free and ran again. Out of the door at the back, off in the direction of the wood.

Once he had got to the door, Harry and Peter gave up the idea of following him. They turned back to the bar, shaking their heads and panting a little.

Rod poured more drinks for them. "Do you think he was really a Shifter or was he just off his head?"

"I don't know," said Harry. "Off his head probably. I've heard the rumours but I've never been able to see how a drug could make people jump between worlds. Even if there are other worlds, which I doubt... Mind you, having said that, what do we know about anything since the slits abolished real science?"

"All the same," grumbled Peter, "I wish we'd held on to him."

Lily said nothing. But she was visibly shaking.

"Come on lads!" exclaimed Rod. "Come on Lil! Drink up and cheer up!"

They seemed to have forgotten about me. I picked up my stick and followed Michael into the wood.

**O**f course there was no pool. All there was in the middle of the wood was a small reservoir, with a locked metal lid and the grass mown neatly around it. He was standing there. He jerked round as he saw me coming, preparing to run again.

"Don't worry," I said, "I'm not about to drink your blood."

He nodded and turned away from me. "The pool was here, I'm sure. Only a few days ago. Flowers and reeds, forget-me-nots..."

"So this isn't the place where you met your Jazamine after all?"

"Yes! It is! I'm sure!" Tears came springing to his eyes.

I laughed, more harshly than I had intended. "Well, even if she had been here, so what? You don't believe men and women can really get on together, do you? Harry and his crew, I don't like them, but they're right really. So are the RadFems. Everything boils down to Them or Us. We can never be reconciled."

I lashed out at a nettle with my stick. "The fools are the ones like my Dad," I said, making myself sneer, "the good men, the gentle men, the ones who try to achieve some sort of reconciliation by denying their own nature..."

I grinned at him. He stared at me with those dazed blue eyes – and I felt ashamed. But still I went on, determined to crush his dream, determined to stamp out in myself the cruel impossible hope that opposites could be reconciled.

"Oh, I know, I know: you and Jazamine made sweet music together – it happens even here sometimes. But all that's based on a delusion, you know. What you wanted and what she wanted weren't really the same thing. Just for a moment they seemed to coincide, that's all."

Still he stared. He was confused, a little frightened, but even more than that, just plain puzzled by my hostility.

Well, I was puzzled by it too, but my bile boiled up inside me anyway. I grinned mirthlessly in his face, I waved my stick at him. There in that little scrap of a wood, with evening falling, I ruthlessly attacked this frightened stranger who had done me no harm at all.

"We think that if we long for something there must be a corresponding need somewhere out there in the world. But why should that be?" I laughed. "Do you know what a lamprey is? Do you know what it longs to do? It longs to fasten itself on the skin of a living fish and suck out its insides. That's its heart's desire! But do you think the fishes it preys on are longing to be eaten alive? Are they and the lamprey drawn together by some delightful mutual magnetism? No, of course not! If the fishes had their way, the lamprey would go hungry. He could pine himself away, for all they care."

I gave another triumphant laugh. He shivered. It was getting cold and he had only his jeans and his torn shirt, while I had my jumper and my sensible green anorak. I suppose I thought that when I'd finished with him, I'd offer him a bed for the night.

"That's biology for you, mate," I said, "that's what life is like. Not harmony, not resolution, not peace, not understanding – just conflict and desperation and struggle..."

Suddenly he winced. Ah good, I thought, I've made him cry!

But no, that wasn't it. It was nothing to do with me. He winced again, gave a little groan – then grabbed out wildly at the air.

Slow-witted idiot that I am, only at that last moment did I realize what was happening.

"No!" I cried out desperately. "Don't leave me! I didn't mean..."

But it was too late. There was a sort of loud popping sound as air rushed into the empty space where he had been. And then: nothing.

I could have learnt from him. He could have told me about other worlds, other possibilities. But I had thrown away the chance.

It was growing dark. A cold evening wind blew through the branches above my head. I was alone. "Come back!" I screamed into the emptiness of that bleak little wood. "Come back!"

It was pointless of course. He was somewhere else entirely.

The trees were skipping and dancing around him. Stones, clouds, branches flickered in and out of existence.

Beneath his feet, the ground seethed. He was searching for Jazamine in her green wood. He was falling, falling through the worlds.

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Chris Beckett has contributed five previous stories to *Interzone*, The most recent of these, "The Welfare Man" (issue 74), came third in our 1993 popularity poll. Chris lives in Cambridge.

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# Ansible Link

## David Langford



Readers rushed to inform me that according to *The Writers' Directory*: 1994-96 (St James Press), Brian Stableford died in 1993. I asked his pseudonym Francis Amery to write a suitable eulogy, which ran in part: "Would Brian really have wanted to be loudly and insincerely praised when it was too late to do him any good? Would he really have wanted so-called friends crawling out of the woodwork to proclaim that he had always been underappreciated, and to declare that his abysmal failure as a writer and as a human being had been at least a trifle unfortunate? I decided, on due reflection, that he would not." So "Amery" announces that he will instead change his name to Brian Stableford and try to publish the countless megabytes of pathetically unsold material found on the Stableford computer's hard disk. St James Press were not available for comment.

### Mimsy Were the Borogoves

**William Gibson** muttered that, when he worked on the film of his *Johnny Mnemonic* and met a producer, he knew exactly how a virus felt when it encountered its own specific antibody.

**Colin Greenland** warns that the anonymous loon who plagues UK sf writers with plot ideas (see past columns) "has found a new game. This time he's written to the BBC posing as me. The woman in the PR dept said it was hard to understand what he wanted - 'he goes on about the universe,' she explained..."

**Bernard King** (author of the *Tyrfing* and *Keeper of the Chronicles* fantasy series) suffered several minor strokes, damaging short-term memory and eyesight. He hopes that his current medication will allow him to work again soon.

**Jeff Noon** received the Arthur C. Clarke award (presented by Helen Sharman) for his sf novel *Vurt* and won all hearts at the event by getting totally smashed on the strength of it. The taped Voice of Clarke Himself - what, no satellite link? - commended practically everything and issued an unexpected plug for the *SF Encyclopaedia*... he must have liked his entry after all. After a secret initiation ceremony involving rolled-up trouser legs, I found myself on next year's judging panel and can only say (as Brian Aldiss told me when a Booker judge) that £50

tucked in at page 200 is a well-known luck charm.

**General Manuel Noriega**, interviewed by film-maker Oliver Stone, proves to be an sf fan. OS: "What books do you read?" MN: "I like science fiction very much." OS: "Any favourites?" MN: "No, whatever, whatever." Correspondent John Foyster adds: "Ya gotta admire Stone's dead sophisticated interviewing techniques, but what is Noriega trying to hide? A passion for Lois McMaster Bujold? David Drake?"

**Christopher Priest** confirms that rumour: Jim Owsley, writer of the DC comic *The Ray*, has legally changed his name to "Christopher Priest" because "I think it sounds...cool." He is so credited on the cover of the first issue (May 94). Our own CP finds it "a bit bleeding irritating to have my name pinched by another writer" and has suggested to DC that Owsley think again: "If Jim must use a pseudonym, why doesn't he pick a really silly one, like, say, 'Harlan Ellison'?"

**Carl Sagan** has sued Apple for unspecified damages - not for briefly nicknaming a new computer "Sagan," but for renaming it (after Saganesque legal threats) to BHA and letting it be rumoured that this stands for "Butt-Head Astronomer"... which Sagan claims has brought him "hatred, contempt, ridicule and obloquy." Is "butt-head" defamatory? Could such a niggling lawsuit be taken as the action of, well, of a BHA? Only the courts can decide.

**George Turner**, despite not having fully recovered the use of his right hand following last year's stroke, has heroically started a new novel. Single-handed, as it were.

**Keith Watson**, who drew *Dan Dare* for *Eagle* from 1961-7, died of cancer on 9 April aged 58. His first stripwork was *Captain Condor* (*Lion* 1960-1); he returned to *Dan Dare* in 1989-90 and his last published work was for *Thunderbirds*. A likeable man, he was highly respected in sf illustration and comics. (Information: Ron Tiner.)

### The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole

It's that time of year again, with award lists burgeoning...

**Nebula Awards.** Novel: *Red Mars*, Kim Stanley Robinson. Novella: "The Night We Buried Road Dog," Jack Cady. Novelette: "Georgia On My

Mind," Charles Sheffield. Short: "Graves," Joe Haldeman.

**Hugo Shortlist.** The novel finalists are: *Moving Mars*, Greg Bear; *Glory Season*, David Brin; *Virtual Light*, William Gibson; *Beggars in Spain*, Nancy Kress; and *Green Mars*, Kim Stanley Robinson. The Hugo list is interminable... *Interzone* features under "semi-prozine," and the Clute/Nicholls *Encyclopaedia of SF* under non-fiction. Also there is this fanzine called *Ansible* (polishes fingernails with false modesty).

**Bram Stoker Awards** for horror... novel finalists are: *Anno Dracula*, Kim Newman; *Blackburn*, Bradley Denton; *Drawing Blood*, Poppy Z. Brite; *The Summoning*, Bentley Little; and *The Throat*, Peter Straub.

### Infinitely Improbable

**SF Encyclopaedia Forever.** After many missed release dates, the Nimbus CD-ROM edition has been cancelled - the whole project was bought out by Grolier for a CD release using their far more suave software (Macintosh or Windows). There will be a "non-commercial" Nimbus DOS edition of about 20 copies to placate the editors and those who made down payments for the CD-ROM at the UK Eastercon. A Grolier publication date is awaited.

**For Dirty Minds.** Little, Brown catalogue copy for Anne McCaffrey, *The Ship Who Searched*: "But Tia won't be satisfied to glide through life like a ghost in a glorified wheelchair. She would rather strap on a spaceship." Roz Kaveney comments: "Amanda Donohoe in *Lair of the White Worm*, eat your heart out!"

**Nudge, Nudge.** In an amusingly good-natured spoof, Harlan Ellison had his attorneys threaten dire penalties if Christopher Priest's *The Book on the Edge of Forever* (formerly *The Last Deadloss Visions*) were published by US small press Fantagraphics, or distributed, or sold. That this is only a merry jape is evident from the claim that the booklet - chronicling 20-odd years of public pronouncements from this most public of writers about his fabled anthology *The Last Dangerous Visions* - is an infringement of privacy.

**Censored!** A sample of Lois McMaster Bujold's sensitive sf dialogue was cut from April's *Guardian* sf reviews: "Bothari the monster, Bothari, Vorrutyer's mad batman?" (from *Barrayar*).

# Professionals

## Keith Brooke

“She still loves me,” said River Brady from across the room. Christian Taylor watched him carefully.

Brady was staring moodily out of a blank window. He was a powerfully built man with gorgeous black hair all the way down to his knees and a mouth that seemed somehow wider than his face, but that meant nothing here. “I’m positive that my wife still loves me.” He could control his image but not the wavering tone of his voice.

Christian raised his eyebrows. They were jet black today, to match his jacket. He had never been able to take VR seriously in a business context: he was unable to trust his perceptions, wary of manipulation. He studied River Brady closely, for what it was worth. It wasn’t his place to judge, but the man was pathetic all the same.

“She just hides it effectively,” explained Brady in his soft Toronto drawl. He turned now and leaned a shoulder against the wall. “I saw her in town three days ago. She looked happy. It was a hell of an act. But when she’s on her own I’m positive that it’s all very different. She was always like that: a tremendous little actress. She constructs this brittle facade about herself but when she’s alone it gets her right here.” He sank a hand wrist-deep into his chest in the kind of melodramatic false-world display that made Christian want to laugh in the man’s face.

Instead, he tipped back in his fake seat and tried to make himself take Brady’s domestic entanglements with at least a degree of seriousness.

He hated to think that he had sunk this far. A few years ago he’d been on the fast track with the National Police and the future had looked fine. Even after rivals had got him thrown out on a minor misdemeanour he’d been able to continue with undercover freelancing: corporate work and a few unofficial jobs the Nationals didn’t want on the record.

And now he was doing domestics.

“What exactly do you want me to do?” he asked. It was work, after all. “Do you want me to build a case against her? Do you want me to provide answers for anything she might have on you?”

Brady’s chosen image showed nothing, but a protracted pause betrayed his emotion. Eventually, he said, “I want you to trace her movements, find out who she sees, what she does, where she’s living. I want you to construct a complete picture of her life and then I want you to help me draw up a proposal I can put to her through her solicitors. I want a planned

reconciliation, a trial unseparation. I want her back, Mr Taylor, and I want you to show me how to achieve that goal. Can you help me?”

“Can you pay?”

Brady nodded.

“Then I’ll need some information...”

As Christian questioned Brady, he received onscreen a set of pictures along with copies of all the relevant documentation. All the time he struggled to find his way through the barrage of over-emotional pap for some insight into the situation, some way forward.

Brady’s first contract with Ellen Rinotti had been written up seven years ago, when they were both working on plans for a new dam in what was then still Nigeria. River Brady was chief structural engineer on the project; Ellen was something of a drifter, filling in for an account handler on paternity leave. They formalized their marriage only eight months later – positively rash in such conservative times – and they started sex three months after that. It was all in the contracts Brady copied to Christian’s workbase, nothing too unusual.

Christian studied the legalese carefully, grateful for his basic police training in the elaborate hybrid language European law-firms used these days. He tried to find something to snag his interest, but he knew that when he started to get a thrill out of domestics he would be in serious trouble.

“So why did she go?” He had to ask, although he might have phrased it more sensitively.

“I have a lot of work on at present,” said Brady. He was employed by a Danish architectural consultancy now, based somewhere up in Essex. “Deadlines, exacting requirements – a great deal of pressure. I get absorbed. I neglect my social obligations.”

Such obligations were written into the contract of marriage: if it came to arbitration then Christian’s client would have little room for manoeuvre.

Brady swished his fancifully long hair and said, “I don’t claim to be without flaws, Mr Taylor: I admit that the blame must lie disproportionately in my own quarter. What I seek is another chance.”

“Then you should be telling that to your wife,” said Christian softly. But he knew she was deflecting Brady’s calls. For a moment he felt guilty. “Are you coping all right?” he asked, feeling awkward; he was aware that such a question was outside the parameters of his job.



Now Brady leaned forward aggressively. "If I could drink myself into oblivion then that is precisely where I would currently be," he said. "But I am on a three-year contract with my employers which stipulates that I be clean, so that option is beyond me." It had become a standard corporate practice to treat key employees with slow-release implants that made abuse of alcohol and certain narcotics physically impossible, either inducing a nauseous response or nullifying the action of the substances. "All I have," continued Brady, spreading his hands to indicate the false room in which they sat, "is this ersatz world with which to distract myself when I am not immersed in my work. I cope, Mr Taylor, because I am a professional, but I want my wife back. I need her with me."

Christian peeled the VR mask away from his eyes and waited for his sight to adjust to the dim light of his Earls Court flat. He looked around at the organized clutter in which he lived. He never let anybody in here: it was private, his own small patch of territory. He pushed his hair back from his forehead and sighed. "Get me Sammy," he said and instantaneously the blue on blue ident of the National Police pinged onto the flat screen pasted to the wall before him.

When the synthetic voice queried him he told it, "Constable Samarjit Gai Khan. Extension 3645."

"Hold, please."

A lot of his work was like this: person to person. The days of hacking into systems and lifting information were past, with data security so tight you had to be corporate before you could even consider it as an option. These days it was more a matter of who you knew than what you knew: what the French called *piston*.

He waited for a minute or so, and then a genial, dark face appeared on the screen, with a dark blue false backdrop. "Sammy," he said. "How's it hanging?"

"Hey, Chris," said the face. "It's good, man, but listen: it's hectic round here. *Hectic*. I'm doing ten jobs at once, you know?" He flicked at his beaded hair. "What're you wanting from me then, eh?"

Christian tried to look hurt, but it was no good; Sammy knew him too well. They went back years together. "How about some information, then?" he said. "River Sean Brady, NM37068/4C1. Ellen Mae Rinotti, HL12829/3H0."

"No can do, Chris. You know what would happen if I was found putting your private work through the system. I love you like a brother, Chris, but no way. Okay?"

Christian ignored him. "I'm heading up to Essex," he said. "So send it to the car when you have it, right? Listen, I owe you one, Sammy."

"You owe me fucking hundreds," said his friend, before the blue-on-blue ident flashed up again and he was gone.

Christian set his workbase to trawling and filtering information from the hundreds of franchised data stores that might hold something relevant to the case, then he called ahead to book himself a room at a *Formule Une* just outside Harwich.

As soon as his old two-seater VW had locked into its Trafficcontrol convoy on the A12, Christian projected one of Brady's video sequences of Ellen Rinotti head-up onto the windscreen. She was a tall woman with a plaited tail of black hair pulled down from the

back of her head and laced into the front of her fisherman's jumper with a strand of silver wool. The jumper's hem dragged halfway down her bare thighs, swinging from side to side as she danced sinuously through a garden to a tune Christian had turned down. Instead, he asked the car to play him Stockhausen's *Donnerstag aus Licht*; for a time her movements and the music were so out of synch that they almost seemed in synch and the journey was soon over.

He spent the next three days collating information, talking to acquaintances of the couple, pursuing Ellen Rinotti through the aimless jumble of her life. He came up with little, certainly nothing that suggested a formula for reconciliation that could be agreed by both parties.

Sammy had given him Ellen's current address, along with a screenful of financial information which told him that she was still receiving occasional sums of money in addition to the temporary support order her solicitors had won from her husband. She even had a criminal record from her early teens when she'd been booked twice for morality offences in her native Florence. He wondered if River Brady was aware that his wife had once been an under-age hooker. Probably not, from the picture he had painted of her when he hired Christian; her offences had been committed 15 years before they had even met.

On his fourth morning in Harwich Christian took one of the town's little electric citicars down to the seafront. Alone in a strange and somewhat shabby town, he struggled not to feel strange and somewhat shabby himself. He wondered where all his resilience had gone, his stubborn independence.

He took an outside table at a Turkish coffee shop that overlooked the dirty waters of Dovercourt Bay and tried to get his thoughts together. A short distance out a couple of jetsurfers skidded aimlessly about in the foam.

He ordered an espresso and while he waited he pulled a screen from his pocket, unfolded it and pressed it to the table. Everything was here: all the pictures, all the information he had gathered. He skimmed the headlines, touched one lightly with a finger and the screen filled with a still picture of Ellen walking through Deane Mall; he'd taken that one himself, the previous day.

All he had to go on were two inconsistencies. The first was the extra money she was somehow earning. He wondered for a moment if she was on the game again, but all the time he had followed her there had been nothing to suggest she had returned to her old ways; she just didn't look like a professional any more. Besides, her only convictions dated back over 20 years.

She filled her days at the beach, or in town, or more often back in her flat by the docks in old Harwich. She seemed to be doing no more than treading water until she found something to do with her life again.

The second inconsistency was in the information River Brady had given him. Back in the former Nigeria, when they were both working on the dam project, they had separated. It had only lasted for a couple of weeks, but Brady had been specific in asserting that they had never split up before.

But several years had passed since then and the separation had been early in their relationship, before they'd even been legally married. Christian couldn't help thinking that his lack of progress was lending significance to the most minor of matters.

He knew that River Brady was one of the best in his field: whenever his contract came free a number of firms were keen to sign him up. His one theory was that maybe Brady's firm had paid Ellen to leave him. A number of people had told him that the boundary between art and the cutting edge of engineering was a fuzzy one – perhaps Brady's employers were hoping to somehow get the best out of him, that he would sublimate his grief into the creative side of his profession. Brady himself had said that he was currently immersed in his work.

Christian took a sip from his espresso and grimaced at the sudden bitterness and heat.

Earlier this morning he'd called the London office of the bank that handled Ellen Rinotti's affairs. He had been putting this call off for the last three days.

After two synthetic receptionists tried to stall him a dark-haired woman with an angular face appeared onscreen. "Carole," he said. "I meant to call." He always thought she looked as if her features had been drawn on with pencil and ruler, they were so geometric.

She said nothing.

"I need some help," he told her. "Information. I'm on a case." The look in her eyes hurt. "Ellen Mae Rinotti, HL12829/3H0. She has irregular sums coming into her account. I need to know more."

Eventually, Carole said, "You know I can't do that."

"I know," he said, and risked a smile.

The screen went blank.

**A**nother fruitless day, but all the same another day's fees for Brady to pay.

Christian Taylor sat in his motel room removing the make-up from his face with a succession of moisturizing wipes. All around him Ellen Rinotti danced across the walls, her fisherman's jumper dragging across bare thighs. He had always taken her flirting looks at the camera as those of a wife to her husband, but now he saw in those eyes, those moistly parted lips, the whore that she had once been.

He lowered his head and scrubbed his face with a soft towel. When he looked up a message was dancing across the walls. "Yup," he said, acknowledging it, and Ellen Rinotti was replaced by the massively enlarged face of Carole Sayers. She was calling from a public booth, not daring to speak from work. The time marker told Christian the message had been recorded ten minutes ago, avoiding the awkwardness of conversation.

"Christian," she said. "It's Carole."

He smiled. He'd never known anybody like Carole for stating the obvious. The recording continued, oblivious.

"You know I can't keep doing this kind of thing. You have to promise not to keep doing this." She paused, as if waiting for him to acquiesce, and he stared at the faint fan of straight lines spreading up from the bridge of her nose. "Those payments you asked after – why not look into the Sociotronics Encounters Group? Rinotti has an account with them,

with sums coming in and out all the time. Okay Christian? Will you call?" She faded from the wall, and Ellen Rinotti was glancing back across her shoulder at him once again.

He cut her off sharply, asked the room for a VR mask and a drawer slid smoothly open at the side of his bed.

In the small un-room he opened into he flicked through a catalogue until he came to encounter groups, located SEG and touched one of its panels. A new room opened up around him, sun streaming in through an open doorway.

He went outside and looked around. SEG had put him on a tropical atoll, the sky and sea complementary shades of deep blue. He looked down and saw his bare toes curling and uncurling in sharp white sand. He didn't feel a thing.

He heard voices and turned away from the gently breaking waves. A tall fire burned in a clearing, surrounded by a cluster of grass huts. A number of people sat or stood or ran about like children. Some were clothed, others wore nothing, but most fell somewhere in between. All were young, slim, fit, with skin and hair colours ranging right across the spectrum. A small message flashed persistently in the corner of Christian's vision, warning him that he was not equipped to enjoy the full experience offered in this encounter scenario. It advised a full body stocking for total interaction, a genital glove at the very least.

He'd heard all about these encounter groups – sex at its absolute safest, the only physical interaction being between the participant's body and his or her interactive suit.

Someone beckoned to him to come closer and join in but he stayed where he was on the beach; the lack of complications attracted him, but at the same time he felt vaguely repelled. He studied the partying figures and wondered which one might be Ellen Rinotti. All the time she spent alone in her flat – when Christian had assumed she was brooding over the break-up of her marriage – all that time she had been out here in this ersatz world getting paid to lead lonely men through fake sexual encounters.

Another woman waved to him but he'd seen enough. He raised a hand to point homeward but then he paused. He'd seen someone, over in the doorway of one of the huts, getting it on with a silver-haired girl with fish-scales all over her naked body. The man flicked long black hair away from his face.

It was River Brady.

**B**uild Odense had an office complex on the site of the old golf club, about a kilometre from Parkeston Quay. A burst of development had taken place here over the last few years as a number of continental firms had cashed in on the area's *Région Désavantagée* status.

The gates wouldn't let Christian pass until he told them to check with River Brady. They opened and he drove through, then relaxed as Control took over and parked his car at the rear of the main building.

Brady kept him waiting 20 minutes, but Christian didn't care: the man was paying for Christian's time to be wasted like this. Finally, he was shown into a wide office, split up in the current fashion with paper screens and tall, jagged plants.



Brady was a small man, dapper in three-piece suit and silk tie. His round features and thinning mousy hair were nothing like those he adopted in VR. He sat on a cane mat on the floor, his bare feet tucked up into the lotus position, an array of screens and papers spread out around him. He glanced up at Christian and gestured at a chair. "Unexpected," he said. "You have something to offer?" His watered-down accent was more pronounced in the flesh.

"Nothing concrete," said Christian, as the chair settled beneath him. "I've been gathering information, building up pictures. I think that pretty soon I'm going to have to meet with your wife in order to determine her negotiating position."

"Something is bothering you, Mr Taylor. You didn't come here simply to inform me that you haven't made much progress."

"I saw you yesterday," said Christian, cautiously. "Or rather, I saw your VR image. At one of the SEG encounter groups."

Brady seemed unconcerned. "I told you," he said. "It's my only escape. So what?"

"Your wife uses the same group."

Brady's facade faltered for a moment. Either he was a good actor or he had been genuinely unaware. Finally, he said, "I didn't know. Jeez. She always did like to spend time under the hood...it just never occurred to me that our paths might cross like this and me not even notice. Jesus."

Christian sighed; Brady seemed sincere. There was no reason why he should have recognized Ellen: anonymity could be bought for the price of an image makeover – some people took a different look every trip. He decided not to inform Brady of just what his wife had been doing in VR, of how she was supplementing her income. "You have to appreciate how irregular it looked when I found out," he said.

Brady peered up at him, nodding. "Of course," he said. "Hell, I was wrong when I accused you of not making any progress: you've confirmed a great deal."

Christian waited for him to continue.

"Like I said: she still loves me. When I saw her in town and she seemed happy it was all an act. Her only escape is exactly the same as mine: this sanitized world of fantasy, hidden behind the mask."

He really seemed to believe that. The man was clutching at every last straw in his efforts to prove that the breakdown of his marriage was not irretrievable. Christian recalled his first, hasty assessment of River Brady, and he saw no reason to alter it now. The man was pathetic.

He remembered his pet theory that Build Odense might be paying Ellen to leave, in order to somehow extract the best from her husband. "How's your work?" he asked, aware that there was no way he could make the question sound casual.

Brady's expression cleared. "You want to see?" he asked. Then, without waiting for an answer, he tossed a VR mask across to Christian and said, "Come take a look."

Seconds later they stood together in a blank room. Brady glanced at a sheet of paper, touched a panel on it and a new room opened up around them. They stepped towards a door and suddenly the room was replaced by an enormous hollow space. "Don't be disorientated," said Brady.

Christian fought back a wave of vertigo, feeling certain that Brady had intended him to feel this way: he could have warned him first, if he'd really wanted to be sympathetic.

Brady waved a hand and an enormous platform drifted towards them. After a few seconds Christian recognized it as a power station: a vast deck of wave turbines, topped by rigging for a windfarm. With no regard for verisimilitude the construction was coloured garishly in yellows, oranges, reds, blues and greens, bright patterns sometimes flashing across the structure, informing the expert eye of stresses, weaknesses and God knows what else. These stations were built in the estuary and towed out into the North Sea; one of Christian's searches had told him that Brady was working on a new platform for Build Odense.

Side by side they walked across the rainbow-coloured deck. Although Christian knew next to nothing about this kind of thing, the whole structure looked to have the simple, clean lines of good design.

They stopped in the centre of the platform. The scale was unclear but Christian knew that this was going to be one of the biggest power stations in the North Sea. "It looks impressive," he said blandly.

Brady turned on him.

"Impressive?" he said, shaking his head slowly. The platform was rising and falling gently, and now Christian saw through the bright patterning that it was made up of thousands of interlocking hexagonal plates, maybe five metres across, with flexible linkages so that ripples now flowed sequentially across the entire surface, making the gaudy colours flash and zigzag in apparent chaos.

"Impressive?" repeated Brady.

The ripples were becoming more pronounced now, so that it was a struggle for Christian to remain upright.

"We are in the middle of the North Sea," said Brady, as the disturbances grew all around him. "One of the most extreme seas on the entire globe. All that supports us is a cobweb of carbon filaments, spun diamond struts, state of the art technologies – The surface presentation may impress you but that's all artifice. Let me tell you, Mr Taylor: it doesn't work! It doesn't fucking work!"

Suddenly Brady grabbed Christian's hand and they flew up above the platform an instant before there was an enormous groaning sound and a deep crack spread across the surface. Now there were two platforms, hammering against each other, individual plates tearing free and being thrown up in the air to come smashing down again into the growing chaos.

They watched in silence as the fledgling power station ripped itself apart.

Back in the first ersatz room Brady turned to Christian and said softly, "I can't work like this. I'm going out of my mind. I'm nothing without my Ellen."

They peeled masks and stared at each other. They were in the real world now, yet Christian felt perversely that he had been closer to the genuine River Brady amid all the fakery of his VR design room. Now, it seemed that there was little more to say.

"Do I have your permission to meet your wife?" asked Christian.

River Brady shrugged. "Whatever you feel is necessary. I think you know what it means to me."

Christian climbed out of his chair and left the office.

Someone was waiting for him in the passenger seat of his car: a tall blond man in an anonymous green suit with an ID panel on the lapel. Company Security. Christian could smell it from the other side of the car park. He slid into the driver's seat and thumbed the ignition so the car would know it was him.

"It will not take you anywhere until I grant permission," said the man in immaculate second-language English. Someone else with a talent for stating the bloody obvious.

"What do you want?" asked Christian brusquely. They were both professionals, there was no need to skirt around the real business.

"I represent Build Odense," said the man. "We are concerned at the drop in performance of one of our key employees. We wish him to be more settled in his work."

"You're threatening me?"

The man smiled, dipping his head slightly as he did so. "I hope not," he said. "I hope we will be able to reward you well for enabling our employee to improve his performance. Please understand how important an issue this has become for my company. Not only do we have our current contractual obligations to Powergen to fulfil: the time is approaching for companies such as ours to tender for the various phases of the second Channel Link. Our employee's skills would be a key part of any such bid. You must see why we are so concerned."

"You want him to be happy," said Christian.

The man nodded, then pushed his door open and climbed out, dropping his business card on the empty seat. As soon as the door swung shut, the company's parking control system cut in and Christian's car backed out of its space and headed for the road.

His head starting to buzz, he took the wheel and said, "Give me Messiaen's *Turangalila*." Thinking music. It was all starting to slot together.

He found her on the second level of Deane Mall, a sprawling shopping centre built on the infill between Harwich, Parkeston and the thoroughway. It was one of her favourite haunts. She would spend hours of the day idly browsing at Bloggs or HN, or meeting up with friends for drinks and leisure shopping.

She was at a booth in Boots when he spotted her, staring at various versions of herself on the wide-screen, each demonstrating a particular cosmetic alteration available from the in-store surgeon.

He waited nearby, no need to hurry. After a time she showed that she knew he was there, but she lingered for another ten minutes before turning to him.

"There are other booths," she said. He had expected traces of an Italian accent but instead her voice was undistinguished Home Counties.

"I was waiting for you, not the screen," said Christian. "I know a lot about you. I want to talk. Okay? Business."

She shrugged, sure of herself. "Buy me coffee," she said, and led the way up to a sitting area on the mezzanine.

"I'm working for your husband," he told her, as they waited for the pot of Lapsang Ellen had decided they would share.

"I guessed. Such a romantic. Terribly boring, but romantic nonetheless."

Christian looked away, through the greenery to the thronged main thoroughfare. Every time he looked at Ellen Rinotti he saw superimposed an image of her dancing out of time to Stockhausen in an over-sized fisherman's jumper.

"Who's paying you?" he asked.

"Does it matter?"

"Not really." Those irregular top-up payments: she wasn't a whore in the SEG – there were enough people giving it away in there to make that unfeasible – it was just the route they'd chosen through which to channel her payments. A rival company had paid her off in order to sabotage Build Odense's chances for the Channel Link contracts. It was that simple.

He should have seen it sooner. Harwich was a company town, full of the employees of rival firms, yet all the time Christian had been following her Ellen Rinotti had scrupulously avoided contact with anyone from these other companies. If she so clearly didn't want a connection to be made then such a connection had to be there.

"Why?" he asked her.

She smiled sweetly, and said, "I'm a professional, darling. I work for the highest bidder. Pay me enough and even you could have me."

He looked away again, uncomfortable. "How were they so certain it would work?" he asked.

"They took precautions," she said, leaning towards him. "Come here and I'll show you."

Cautiously he leaned closer and then, without warning, she reached round to the back of his head and forced her mouth against his, teeth clashing, tongue sliding in, withdrawing. She pulled away and he stared at her, vision blurring. He shifted awkwardly in his seat and couldn't tear his eyes from her vicious smile. He felt as if the blood in his veins was fizzing, as if he was about to explode.

"With some couples," she said, "I believe it is an affair of the intellect. With others love takes its purest form." She smiled again. "But between Riv and me I can assure you it is purely physical."

He couldn't bear her to be so near, yet when, seconds later, she stood, smoothed her clothes and walked lazily away he felt as if she was tearing the flesh from his body.

Some kind of implant in her mouth, he realized. Some kind of aphrodisiac, something powerful. And addictive.

Christian watched her go, trembling slightly, as hooked as River Brady had ever been.

It was all he could do to stumble up to the parking deck and tell his car to take him back to the motel. He couldn't get that cruel bitch out of his mind. She danced in front of his vision even when he squeezed his eyes tightly shut, his fists grinding into the sockets.

Later, he managed to call the anonymous security agent at Build Odense. "I have the answer to your problem," he said. Every word was a struggle, but gradually he found that the sheer effort of concentration helped distract him from what Ellen Rinotti had done to him. He took a swig from his bottle of grappa and continued, "Get Brady back with his wife and his performance will improve."



The man nodded indulgently. "You have a proposal?"

"Pay the bitch and she'll do whatever you want," said Christian. "She's a pro. She's got him chemically addicted to her – that's why he's so screwed up at the moment. In the long-term he'll have to be detoxified and then he'll be the first to kick her out..." But if Ellen's employers had done their work properly such a detoxification would never work – she would have a grip on River Brady for as long as she chose.

"But in the short term you advise a financial fix, yes?"

Christian nodded.

"It will be arranged. We are grateful, Mr Taylor. Rest assured that you will be rewarded." The wall blanked and Christian was left with his phantom images of the woman who had implanted herself into his desires.

**H**e spent three days holed up in his room, trying to forget the bitch. But he couldn't do it. She was in his every thought, always the star of those dreams he managed to recall. If he watched TV or listened to music it was always Ellen Rinotti's face he saw, or her voice he heard.

For much of the time he did what River Brady had been contractually unable to do: he drank himself into oblivion.

And then, on the fourth morning he woke to find that he had succeeded: the obsession had died as he slept. In his relief he rushed around the room, packing his few possessions then, in the doorway, he suddenly stopped.

He went back into the room and shut the door. "VR," he said, and the drawer slid obediently open.

In the first false room he asked for the whereabouts of River Brady. Almost immediately a door appeared in what had been a blank wall. He pushed through and wasn't surprised to find himself on the beach; it was the weekend – everyone had to have their days of leisure.

The grass hut village wasn't there today. For all Christian knew this could be a different island altogether: there was nothing particularly distinctive about the white sand, the blue sky and sea. It was a very sterile environment, now that he came to think of it.

He found River Brady sitting on a rocky promontory, staring out to sea. Dreaming of power stations or Channel Links, perhaps. Brady turned and waited for Christian to clamber up to join him; the system would have alerted him to Christian's visit as soon as it had been initiated.

"You knew what she was doing, didn't you?" said Christian.

River Brady gave his wide-mouthed smile but said nothing. He stared past Christian, as if searching for something.

"You're still hooked on her, you realize that? That's why you were so desperate to have her back. It was a drug, that's all it was."

"Are you still hooked on me, Mr Taylor?" The voice came from beyond Brady. Christian stretched up and saw the silver-haired woman standing ankle-deep in the waves, water running down her scaly body.

They were silent for a long time, Ellen Rinotti

combing the tangles from her hair, River Brady staring at the waves. Christian wondered how many times the pair of them had pulled this lucrative trick before – how many "separations" had gone unrecorded. He knew Brady had worked for at least seven different companies in his career-to-date.

Without a word he climbed down the rocks and began to walk back along the beach, leaving the two of them together on the promontory. He felt drained. He thought of Carole and knew he should call her. He glanced back one more time, then raised a hand and pointed for home.

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**Keith Brooke**, who lives in Tewkesbury, has had three science-fiction novels published, with more books pending. His most recent of many sf/fantasy stories in these pages was "Easy Never Pays" (issue 84).

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**Lawrence Dyer** ("Slugs and Snails," page 40) has contributed quite frequently to small-press magazines. His one previous story for *Interzone* was the memorable "The Four-Thousand-Year-Old Boy" (issue 73). He lives Buxton, Derbyshire.

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# Out of the Temple

## Christopher Priest

Here is a working proposition concerning science fiction: it is fiction that is ultimately based on rationalism.

It's not seen that way by most people, for whom science fiction is the opposite, synonymous with fairy tales, flying saucers, ghost stories, and so on. Even now, when there have been so many hits in the cinema, and on TV, and when the practical gadgets and technical situations of science fiction are clearly comprehended even by the non-sf-reading public, there seems to be a persistent belief that sf is not about real things.

If we take a less superficial view, sf can be argued seriously.

Rationalism is an exercise of the mind, demanding method, reason and logic. It attempts to solve the insoluble; it tries to explain the inexplicable.

Because rationalism is an approach rather than a prescription it also has the advantage of not being expected to produce answers. The failure of rationalism leaves rationalism intact, and a rationalist who cannot solve or explain something is not beaten by it because the approach remains sound.

The connection with sf is clear. A science-fiction writer traditionally raises questions, and does not present answers. The plot of a science-fiction story develops from the writer's exploration of the central question, the story's tension being generated by a rational wish to arrive at an answer. Rationalism therefore drives the plot, but again the failure in the end to find that answer is more or less irrelevant.

A religious fanatic says, irrationally: the end of the world is coming, and here's what to do about it. (*Pray! Go to the temple! Give me money!*)

But a rational sf story says: the end of the world is coming, and this is what it's going to be like! (*Comets! Tidal waves! Looting! Orgies!*)

Consider the difference between sf and fantasy. In fantasy the irrational dominates. A fantasy story with a rational explanation simply cannot be fantastic. When magic is revealed it is no longer magical. A science-fiction

story, on the other hand, can go explained or unexplained, provided the approach remains rational.

But rationalism applied to rational things is dull, workaday. Explain football. How does a carburettor work? Why did you come in late last night? (Maybe not so dull.) How did the murderer get into and out of the locked room? Why is the sky blue?

With an absurd mystery, however, things are a little different.

Take UFOs. It seems to me that UFOs, absurd though they are, must be real. People really see them, their lives are affected by seeing them, and many witnesses of UFOs, being rational human beings, are as genuinely mystified by their experience as the people to whom they tell their stories. There are now too many separate accounts, over too long a period of time, for anyone to try to argue that UFOs do not exist.

The amount of documentation in support of UFOs is overwhelming, once you start delving. Every library and bookshop has dozens of titles on offer, many of which appear to be the product of intensive research. I would guess that most people reading this article have probably read at least one book about UFOs at one time or another.

The first I ever read, while still at school, was *Flying Saucers Have Landed*, by Desmond Leslie and George Adamski. This was notable for several reasons. The first part, by Leslie,\* was turgid beyond belief and dealt with evidence from ancient Sanskrit literature of the existence, way back then, of similar flying objects. The second part of the book was much more trashy and readable, being Adamski's account of his own close encounter with a Venusian spaceship in the Californian desert.

\* Leslie was the author who tried to sock Bernard Levin on the jaw, during an edition of *That Was The Week That Was*.

Most interesting of all was the fact that the book included photographs taken by Adamski. Several were memorable close-ups of the spaceship in flight, while another purported to be a picture of it on the ground. The caption said: *The scene of the meeting with the Venusian. The Venusian ship is visible between the hills.*

I scoured that last picture for what felt like years, trying to make out the lines of the ship in the mass of badly focused rocks and mounds. I never did find it.

Two decades later I was with some friends in a café in London's Drury Lane when I noticed the place had an antiquated, 1950s-style water cooler. The lid, where there was a kind of filter, looked familiar: it was circular, with a raised dome, a ferruled rim, and had round air holes let into the side. After a few seconds I remembered Adamski's spaceship... because there it was, right in front of me.

Rationally, this proves nothing. Adamski could have faked his photographs with one of the filters. Just as possible, the designer of the water cooler might have based it on Adamski's picture.

Once you start thinking seriously about UFOs you run into the central question implicit in all UFO reports, the one raised by Adamski and many other writers who have followed him. Is a UFO a spaceship from another world or is it not?

The answer to this question broadly separates the rational from the irrational, the sf from the fantasy.

If you think *Yes!*, or *Might be!*, or *What else?!*, then you have embarked in a direction I find irrational. While you allow that UFOs might be alien spacecraft, you are inevitably ruling out the possibility of other, perhaps more rational, approaches.

Spaceships, though standard technical devices of sf, in this context quickly acquire a sort of non-scientific religious quality. If UFOs are spacecraft they must be from another world. If you think about what is already known for certain about the physical



nature of our Solar System, and about the sheer immensity of interstellar space, then the question "which other world?" becomes an embarrassing one. But in rational terms the real objection is that the presumed alienness is used by spacecraft enthusiasts to account for the oddness of UFO activity, the unpredictability, the skitish contacts with lonely peasants and late-night car-drivers. To accept this possibility is to withdraw from reason altogether.

With the spaceship hypothesis gone it's possible to examine the other standard UFO "answers" a bit more logically. Meteorological phenomena, weather balloons, secret experimental military aircraft, and so on, can all be considered properly without extra-terrestrial distraction. If you look at the eye-witness accounts methodically it doesn't take long to realize what has been blindingly obvious all along. First, that no single physical explanation will satisfactorily account for every incident, and second, that the UFO phenomenon is not one mystery but several, all different.

You are left with the statement I made at the beginning: that the UFO experience is undoubtedly real, that it actually happens. UFOs do exist, but maybe not in the way most people seem to think. Attempts at a physical explanation don't get far.

The rationalist (without necessarily supplying a whole answer) might say: based on all the evidence to hand UFOs appear to be non-physical in nature, and the explanation of them might therefore relate to the observer not to the observed.

UFO buffs are hot on finding and examining evidence. They measure things. They interview witnesses. They pore over weather reports, aircraft and satellite movements, astronomical data. They are your classic over-specialized enthusiasts.

A less external approach might be more productive. UFO researchers never seem to ask witnesses questions like these:

"Have you been well lately?"

"Have you suffered a bereavement?"

"What had you had for dinner on the evening of your close encounter?"

"Are you under stress at work?"

"What exactly were you doing in your car on Dartmoor at 2.30 am?"

Different patterns of UFO behaviour might well emerge from this line of questioning.

One of the odder sub-sections of the UFO experience is that of Alien Abductions.

Described broadly, this is where ordinary people are snatched out of their lives and transported to a waiting UFO, where they meet strange, grey-coloured aliens with catlike eyes, are prodded about a bit, injected with

things, then are returned whence they came. (Usually to their beds, often to the cars in which they were driving across Dartmoor at the time.)

You can probably detect from my tone that I don't take this too seriously. But my tone comes from prejudice: I know hardly anything about the subject, so when a lecture on UFO abductions was held locally I went along with as open a mind as possible.

The first surprise came at the door: I had to queue to get in. (Not cheap, either.) Once inside the crowded hall I realized it was more of a meeting of like minds than a lecture, although eventually a talk did begin.

By the end of the evening I was convinced that I was the only person in the hall who had never been abducted by aliens! The speaker, a local writer named Maria Ward, put up a slide depicting an artist's impression of one of these aliens' faces, and an audible thrill of recognition ran through the room. (It looked like something off an old *Analog* to me.) Many in the audience were uncomfortable with the face looking out at them, and relaxed only when another slide came up.

The physical circumstances of an abduction are familiar enough, and could be summed up in the word Spielbergesque. What is more surprising is that the experiences that follow (the grey alien figures, the proddings, the injections, the surgically white rooms and corridors) are remarkably consistent from one account to the next.

This was taken by Ms Ward to prove that abductions must be objectively real, because so many different people experience the same events independently of each other, whereas to me it tended to suggest quite the opposite. The words "collective unconscious" kept forming in my mind, but I was out-numbered and kept quiet.

The major surprise of the evening concerned numbers. Huge numbers of people are said to have been snatched by aliens. Ms Ward herself revealed that she had been abducted several times, and that she went in dread of it happening again. ("I'm terrified every time I see a UFO," she said.) Lots of heads were nodding around me; seeing UFOs must be an everyday event. In the USA more than 500,000 people have been abducted since 1961, when a New England couple called Barney and Betty Hill were famously abducted, starting the whole thing.

Half a million Americans! How could this be true, without leaving some tangible impression on the world, or at least on America? When I told her about this claim, my wife, Leigh Kennedy, said, "Statistically, that means one of my cousins must be one of them!"

Speaking of tangible impressions, those left by UFOs are as nothing compared with the evidence left by the makers of crop circles.

I happened to be living in Wiltshire during the years when crop circles were in the headlines, and I was able to visit some of the best ones. The first I saw at close quarters were in a field opposite Silbury Hill, clearly visible from the A4 alongside. They had appeared during the night of 14th July 1988, and were to remain imprinted in the corn until the harvest at the end of August (and the impressions were still visible in the stubble for some weeks after that). The group of circles was in this configuration:



Each circle was perfectly round, and each of the smaller ones was the same distance from the central one as all the others. The whole formation was nearly 100 yards across.\* There was something chillingly geometrical and exact about the marks, and this added to the mystery. Standing on the side of the A4, and staring at the oddly beautiful formation, I knew the circles had to be man-made. I didn't want them so, because I felt the lure of the fantastic, but rationalism has a powerful hold.

Mysteries demand answers. Who or what could have put the circles there, and why? Was it a natural phenomenon or was human agency involved? From where I was standing it did not appear easy for human beings to have trampled down the corn without leaving tracks through the surrounding crops while stealing to and fro. It looked as if something had come down from above to land on the corn, but against this was the fact that an overhead electrical supply ran directly above the circles, and that was unbroken.

If you are at all familiar with crop circles you will know that theories about them fall into three groups.

The first is the UFO enthusiast theory, which links circles with mysterious nocturnal lights, movements and sounds, and thus brings in the spacecraft-from-Venus idea. The Silbury Hill circles duly produced a UFO report: on the night in question a lady from Marlborough had seen a disc-shaped object hovering in a cloud, emitting a white parallel beam of light towards Silbury Hill! Confirming the

\* The diameter of the central circle was 17.2m; that of the outer circles 6.5m. The exact distance was 88.15m. Measurements and other details used here are taken from *Circular Evidence* by Delgado & Andrews, Bloomsbury, 1989.

extra-terrestrial nature of the experience, a surge of energy passed through her car and tossed articles from the dashboard into the air!

Next come the more humdrum loony theories, prime amongst them being the Tornado Theory. In this one, hitherto unidentified wind formations are said to draw precise circles, rings, lines and boxes in the corn (but only in one part of the country, during one period of the year, and only when no one's looking). Even more daft is the Rampaging Randy Hedgehogs Theory (work it out for yourself). Another is the Blocks of Ice Falling From Space Theory. Leigh got into the spirit of all this and came up with the Cowpats Dropped by The Cow Goddess Theory.

Rational elimination, as with UFOs, can deal effectively with all of these, leaving only a third theory, a spoilsport one. That is, that the circles are a hoax.

What sort of hoax, who the hoaxers might be, who the victims are thought to be, I cannot say... but a hoax the circles must be. No other rational explanation is possible. All the impossible ones rule themselves out.

The following summer a huge crop circle (actually a complex pattern) appeared overnight in a field near a village called Alton Priors, three miles from Pewsey where I was living. Even Pewsey people, generally a bit cynical about these things, were gossiping about it, so that evening I went and had a look at it. The fame and commercialism that soon attached to it had not yet begun. This was to become probably the most famous Wiltshire crop pattern of all: pictures of it appeared in most of the newspapers and an aerial photo was later adapted for use on a record sleeve. The farmer on whose land it appeared was able to charge parking and admission fees, and an air operator in Swindon ran sightseeing flights over it.

When I was there it was still less than a day old, but even so at least a hundred local people were exploring the formation. There was something of the air of a family outing. Kids were dashing around, grandparents were helped along the narrow access lines, group photographs were laughingly being taken, and in one of the most perfectly formed circles of all (where in the very centre a cone of dried soil had inexplicably been raised) a large dog spread its rear legs and crapped messily on what crop circles enthusiasts call a counter-clockwise 'S' swirl.

Careful of the dog mess, I stood and surveyed the full extent of this immense creation (maybe three hundred yards end to end, and a quarter of that in overall width) and marvelled at the sheer scale, ingenuity, precision and, yes, beauty of this hoax.

In my habitually rational frame of mind, I could easily imagine the gang

of hoaxers at work in the night. It would have needed only about thirty of them working together. There they would have been, pressing down the corn in total darkness and total silence, not noticed from the road, not detected from the houses across the way, not using noisy or heavy implements, working in unison without yelling instructions to each other, not accidentally tripping in the dark and leaving unwanted blemishes in the rest of the corn. Yet in those short summer hours of darkness they had produced an asymmetric, intricate and aesthetically satisfying shape the size of an athletics arena, the circles exactly circular, the connecting passages straight, the whole thing drawn and aligned with unwavering precision.

Clever, these hoaxers.

**S**f rarely deals with UFOs and crop circles, of course, and perhaps my intermittent interest in them reveals why. Rationalism fails in the end, and you find that you have progressed nowhere.

It is this wish to resolve an intrigue, while not really wanting to know the whole answer, that sets some of us off reading and writing sf. This restraint separates sf from the fanatical: sf works best when it keeps a sceptical distance from its subject, puts up a sense of humour, or uses irony, and refuses the glib answer.

When the crap hits the crop circle, the place to be is with the tidal waves and orgies, not praying with the penniless in the temple.

(Christopher Priest)

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# SLUGS AND SNAILS AND PUPPY-DOGS' TAILS



Three days after his right hand had been amputated, and now that he was back in his bedsit against the advice of his doctors, Fraser carefully peeled the bandage from the stump. When he saw what was revealed he gasped. He could hardly look at the soft bud of new growth that sprouted from the centre of so much clotted blood and dried-up meat that was the end of his wrist. A tender pink bud, it was, like some sort of tumour.

Terrified that the bud was cancer, Fraser hastily rebandaged the wound with the clumsy arthritic fingers of his remaining hand. A nagging voice in the back of his brain told him he ought to have stayed in hospital and not discharged himself. Being knocked down by a delivery van and having your hand mangled in the axle wasn't something to take lightly, now was it? But, wasn't he virtually a member of the medical profession himself in view of the 40 years he'd spent as a printer of medical text books? If need be he could undertake self-treatment, drawing on the knowledge he had accumulated during those years. He certainly had no intention of sticking to the agree-

ment to attend his local doctor's that they'd wrung out of him when he discharged himself from the hospital. Why, he was sure that somewhere he still had a few soiled copies of the medical volumes he'd printed — yes, there they were, at the bottom of a pile of stuff on top of the dusty sideboard where he stored the tins of diced meat and beans that he lived on these days.

Struggling to extricate one of the volumes from the pile with his good arm, and sending clouds of dust into the air, he wondered if the bud growing on the end of his wrist could be the result of some disease he'd picked up while he was doing time. But he'd spent most of his sentence trying to avoid contact with the cons because he knew he shouldn't be there — as if his taking a secret cut of Reynolds' share of things was so terrible that he had to be sent down for it! Reynolds was his lazy sod of a partner in the printing business; how he hated even the sound of his name. Embezzlement, they'd called what Fraser had done. Four years it had got him and now he was too old to work; he'd see Reynolds got what was coming to him for that. Disgruntledly, he tossed the medical

# LAWRENCE DYER



book back onto the pile of stuff.

A couple of hours after Fraser failed to go out to an appointment at his doctor's that had been made for him by the hospital, a neighbour came knocking at the door. Fraser shouted at the man to go away. The next morning when the knocking started again he crouched and hid in the musty shadow at the back of the padded armchair he'd rescued from a skip, his arthritic knees pressing painfully into newspapers spread so thinly over the floorboards. As he listened, he breathed in the mould spores from the damp chair, could see their fine dusty presence as they hung in the cold air of the room and mingled with the smoke of his exhaled breath. Finally, the letter flap snapped open and a woman's voice invaded the small bedsit: "Mr Fraser, This is Jean Saunders, I'm the district nurse. Your arm must be looked at. You're no spring chicken any more and you've no one to look after you..."

He shouted back that he wanted to be left alone, then he breathed shallowly until she went away.

It was two weeks after, when driven by more than

itching – driven by strange sensations from beyond his wrist – Fraser tremulously removed the bandages. Underneath, the bud unfolded like a pink flower from the end of his hairy wrist: it had grown into a perfect baby hand. No raw flesh remained, and he found he could make the soft little fingers move.

It took another week and a half for the hand to grow to adult size, though it remained younger-looking and less hairy than the one it had replaced. Fraser didn't know how or why the hand had regrown. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before, though he remembered from childhood his mother remarking on how quickly his cuts and bruises healed.

Now, as he faced the mirror over the fireplace in his bedsit and peered through the film of dust at his reflection between the blotchy islands of mould in the mirror-back, he saw the feeble old man he was rapidly becoming. His face had already sagged out of all recognition, and surely his nose and ears were bigger these days than they used to be? With his newly grown hand he tried to tease out a few remaining dark hairs to overlay the swathe of sticky white that now



plastered much of his head. His new hand looked so young in the mirror as it rearranged the hair on his old, tired head. If only things could be different. But his body did have the ability to regrow if damaged, didn't it? That much was obvious from what had happened to his hand. Couldn't he regrow his other hand as well, but deliberately this time... by cutting it off? What else might be possible? Could he face the idea of trying to regrow other parts of his body too?

**I**t took a few days of troubled thoughts before Fraser made up his mind to make an attempt on his left hand. Even before he felt ready, one Saturday tea-time he found himself clearing the kitchen table of the crockery that mouldered there encrusted with days of use, and then setting out in the cleared space steel implements on a towel, sharpened irons that were still hot from being sterilized in a big steel pan on the rusty gas stove. The implements were surgical tools purchased second-hand from a medical suppliers...

Afterwards, when his grisly task was so soon finished, he sat in a shocked daze and looked blankly at the room. The used bone-saw lay in the sink among the piles of unwashed plates; he had watched the pool of glutinous water in the sink-bottom slowly change to red-brown. Layers of newspaper on the kitchen table alongside the sink were a soggy-red papier maché blanket. As he lay in the cocoon of his armchair he began to sway silently backwards and forwards, numb with the loss he had inflicted on himself, tears all cried-out though his face still contorted tearlessly from time to time. He knew he had gone too far: he had amputated not only his left hand, but the whole arm.

With his youthful right hand he now gripped the bandaged stub of his shoulder and felt the moistness of blood seeping through the clean linen, though he had taken care to seal the cut ends of the main vein and artery with what was by then a shaking hand, his one remaining hand. He had been overcome by the desire to test the ability of his body to its limits – the need to know how much was possible – so he had cut through the arm close to the shoulder-joint, not stopping when the pain killers he injected around the shoulder proved not strong enough. Now his severed left arm lay inside the rust-spotted, blood-smearied fridge in the corner of the room, wedged between mouldy cheese and stale bread, the arm cool and stable in case he panicked, or in case the stub refused to show signs of regrowth, and he had to make a desperate dash to hospital to have it sewn back on.

The smell of his own urine mingled with that of the disinfectant in which he had bathed his shoulder before beginning the operation. He had used disinfectant in a feeble attempt to make the operating conditions sterile. Though he had done so and had also boiled the grey metal scalpels, clamps and bone saw, he doubted conditions had been clean enough as he now surveyed the dereliction of the bedsit. But hadn't dirt from the van's axle got deep into the mangled mess of his original right hand with no apparent ill effects? Perhaps his unusual constitution was strong enough to shrug off invading germs. This thought was two-edged however: an instant later fear shot through him at the idea that it might have been the dirt itself

that had somehow triggered the regrowth of his hand. He took a deep breath and tried to swallow the metallic taste that lingered around his tongue. He had to think straight, to keep a clear head. Surely dirt couldn't stimulate regrowth.

Realizing he was in shock, he struggled up from the chair, ignored the fresh jolt of pain in his shoulder, and tried to put the kettle on. Tea was what his mother had always sworn by in times of crisis. But he felt weak, couldn't manage with just his right hand, couldn't light the gas stove, knocked the kettle of cold water to the floor. He collapsed again into his chair and for long minutes rocked himself gently into a kind of sleep. Only one thing kept him from giving up completely, a tiny vestige of hope: beyond the pain there was a tingling in his shoulder, a sensation he had experienced before.

The following morning at first light, after a troubled night of pain and broken dreams in his armchair, he dragged himself across to the mirror above the mantle. Before he undid the bandages on his shoulder he looked, as he did each morning, at his reflection. The ageing man. Not at all like the image in the press clipping from the local rag. In the clipping, which he still had, there was a photo which showed him posing with a pile of the latest in the long series of medical text books that his firm had printed. In those days he had been upright, dark-haired, his best years still ahead. And now he had only one arm and might stay that way. If only the renewal abilities of his body, such as they were, would work quietly away without need of any outside interference, counteracting the ageing process gradually from within. But he had once read that ageing was controlled by a special gene and was nothing like damage to the body in the way that a cut was – rather, it was a process akin to puberty or the menopause.

He turned to the task in hand and, wincing, undid the bandages now stiff with dried, brown blood. Gently and very slowly, as if uncovering a prize bloom brought to perfection inside a paper cowl in preparation for a flower show, he pulled the gauze and cotton-wool from the end of the stub. Spiderwebs of cotton stuck to the wound. He turned to the mirror. He rubbed at the surface film of dust on the glass with his good hand until he could clearly see the reflection of his left shoulder. Nestled in a hard rind of thick yellow pus, in the centre of the wound, was a fresh, pink bud of flesh.

**T**he electric plug made a sharp click as Fraser punched it home. He flicked a switch and the machine hummed into gentle life. It had lost paint from the corners of its metal casing and old reminders of instructions were hand-scrawled in chipped black ink across the front, but he knew the mechanism was reliable enough. He switched it off again then lifted it with both hands. The muscles of his strong youthful arms flexed and he shifted the machine back against the wall of his apartment. This completed the assembly of medical apparatus he needed for what he had come to call "the final stage." With a triumphant grin he threw himself casually across the sofa.

Nine months had passed since he had severed his left arm and he felt so strong and young again now, for

he had regrown not just the left arm and hand, but through the use of his scalpel and bone-saw, the whole of his right arm too, and both legs. He had gone even further than this, had removed and regrown one of his kidneys and half a new liver, and he was not finished yet.

When he took the time to think about what his body could do, he was puzzled. Months before, when the special ability of his body had first become apparent, he had begun to seek an explanation. As a child he remembered cutting earthworms in half so that the "head-ends" would regrow the rest of their bodies. Remembering this, he borrowed a book from his local library, and from it learned that lizards, which are structurally much closer to humans than are worms, can sometimes regrow severed tails, but that in general the more advanced a creature is the less of its body will regenerate after injury. Humans can only regenerate soft tissue such as skin, and repair broken bones, he read, which made him laugh out loud in the library until he met the eyes of a child staring at him in astonishment.

In the weeks after he had regrown his left arm as well as his right, and before he started on his legs, he had begun to see his body's regenerative abilities as a gift from God, as if after an unsuccessful life he was being given a second chance. In his darkest moments he saw this "gift" as divine retribution against those he believed had wronged him, and in particular against Reynolds, his partner in the printing business.

With the strengthening belief that what he was doing to himself was "meant to be," had come an increasing confidence in his skills as an amateur surgeon. He had pressed ahead with the leg amputations with little fear, and though the internal organ removals had caused him some problems, he had surmounted the difficulties. A trip to the local hospital pretending abdominal pain led as he hoped to an X-ray that demonstrated he had a full set of internal organs: what he had removed was successfully regrown.

Still he was not satisfied, there were some parts of his body he dared not remove, his heart for instance. How could he live without a heart during the time it would take to regenerate? Yet he wasn't satisfied with the one he had, he feared it might give out under the stress of feeding blood to such young active limbs, and then all his work would be in vain. And his old back ached more than ever now, no doubt another effect of the new-found youth of parts of his body.

So he had come to "the final stage," the thing that had to be done if he was truly to have a second chance at life. And now all the equipment he needed was ready.

He glanced around his apartment: minimalist plain walls in crushed coral, blocked floor of Thailand teak, free-standing black music centre like a slab of basalt — nothing could contrast more with his former surroundings. Fraser had been in the apartment six months; his new girlfriend Celia had helped him select the décor. She thought he was 32 years old — a lateral stripping of his scalp so that the hair came strong and brown on the new pink skin, followed by a complete facial skin strip, the ultimate cosmetic surgery, had seen to that. Yet though he dieted and had tried some sections of stomach skin removal and regrowth too, he had been unable to get rid of the





sagging torso and rounded belly of his 66-year-old trunk.

Rolling over on the sling-back sofa, he surveyed the clutter of computer-linked equipment that now filled one end of the apartment. It was not the wages from his new job as kitchen worker at a local Balti restaurant – a position he felt was beneath him – that had paid for the equipment, or for the apartment either. He still had a considerable sum of money stashed away from his years of helping himself to Reynolds' share in what he had now come to think of as his "first" life. It was with this money that he had bought, through the few contacts he did reluctantly make while inside, the stolen NHS equipment that would assist in the final stage of his transition to a second life.

He began to make preparations now, switching on and checking all the equipment again, linking up the tubing that would carry his blood through the bypass machines where it would be oxygenated, dialysed and be suffused with nourishment from glowing, lens-like plastic packs of nutrient jelly. Five gallons of illegally and expensively obtained transfusion blood stood by as a back-up to this elaborate system. He had lied to Celia that he would be away on holiday for 12 weeks – an unusual opportunity to go to China with a friend; he had also cancelled milk and newspapers. Twelve weeks was the time he estimated that the final stage would take, based on what he had learned in his lesser experiments.

**T**hat night, when everything was in place, when he had sterilized surgical tools and gone over the details of the plan again and again until he was certain nothing could go wrong, he was ready to begin. He removed his clothes and climbed into a large transparent polythene sack. Then, wearing the sack, he lay down on his back on a very low, wheeled trolley that stood on an expanse of blue plastic sheeting covering the teak floor. He glanced again at the displays on the machines, then remembered to turn on the radio in the music centre. Though an adjunct to his plan, this would give him something to listen to in the long days that lay ahead. The radio blurted into life – it was a child's voice reciting verse. "Little girls are made of sugar and spice and all things nice," the high-pitched voice droned breathlessly, "but little boys are made of slugs and snails and puppy-dogs' tails..."

He remembered his mother had made an 8mm home movie of him when he was about three years old in which, amongst other things, he recited the very same lines that he now heard on the radio, and for a moment he was transported back to that remote time when he was at the beginning of his first life.

Turning to the matter in hand, he lowered his head backwards into the curved, padded framework of the helmet he'd had purpose-built to his own specifications. It was solidly constructed, and bolted to a plywood base that prevented it moving about on the floor. The snug fit of the helmet reassured him, as if comforting hands enclosed his skull. Next he closed the hinged, framework face-mask of the helmet. It clicked sharply, locking itself tightly around his head and face and pulling his head backwards, stretching his neck nakedly towards the ceiling. Now all head

movement had been eliminated. The closing of the mask also set into place above his eyes a fan of mirrors that would enable him to see all around the apartment at a glance. Connected to the side of the face-mask and now correctly lined up at an oblique angle, was a circular saw fitted with a new, sterilized, fine-toothed blade.

A final, careful visual check that everything was as it should be, then he took a deep breath and began to inject painkillers into his neck. He had learned the amount to use from his lesser endeavours, and soon he was cutting into his neck with the aid of the mirror-fan and an array of surgical instruments laid out like a shiny tool kit. In turn he severed the carotid artery and the jugular vein of his throat, leaving scant seconds to clamp into the head-ends of each blood-vessel the supply tubes from the machines. Finally, when the machines had taken over from his body the life support of his head, he was ready to discard the body entirely – something that was in the final analysis the only way to grow the new heart, spine and complete set of internal organs he would need in his "second" life. Only an entirely new body could provide these. That this meant he would also lose most of the work he had already done on himself was regrettable, but hadn't that work been important in itself as a way of learning the skills and building the confidence needed for the final stage? But he must move swiftly while he could still control the arms and hands of his now blood-starved body: he pressed the button on the computer keyboard that would start the electric saw sequence. The saw buzzed into action and a moment later he lost all feeling below the neck...

**H**e surfaced into consciousness and immediately felt the certainty that he had gone too far this time. All confidence had vanished and he felt the unassailable fear of a small child lost and convinced it will never see its mother again. He looked into the mirrors above his face and saw that the electric motor and tackle installed for the purpose had automatically dragged the low trolley containing his now useless body several feet off – there had to be enough room for the expanding new body that would grow from his head. A quick visual check of the machines via the mirrors showed that everything was going to plan, but he was still swamped by the feeling of hopelessness. A sweat broke out on his face and trickled down to irritate his right ear, but he could do nothing to relieve the irritation now that he had no arms or hands. A creeping panic held him, he would be doomed to suffer such skin irritations for months until the revitalized blood pumping through his head eventually failed, and then he would die. His body did have the power to regenerate, but surely not to this extent? If he had had the power to do so he might have killed himself then, and he wished desperately he had built into his mechanical systems some facility for this in case things went wrong, but he had been so convinced before he started that he could not fail.

Throughout that night he languished in a terrible depression in which he tried again and again to will himself dead. He called on God to release him from his anguish, but to no avail.

By morning he had drifted into sleep, but woke with a start, irritated by something at his neck. For a

moment he couldn't think where he was, then realized with a surge of panic that it hadn't all been a terrible nightmare and he really had done to himself something abominable. But what was the irritation at his neck? He reached with hands that weren't there to scratch it, then a sudden warm feeling of hope flooded through him – the irritation was the familiar sensation of regrowth!

So he had been right to believe in himself after all! He really would have a new body, a second life. He grinned broadly at the thought, feeling the skin tug on his neck as his lips stretched into the grin, and he would have cried out in joy if he'd had lungs. One day he would confront Reynolds. Reynolds would be old and decrepit, worn out, but Fraser would be young and just starting over again.

A rhythmic stirring, almost inaudible, interrupted his thoughts. At first he didn't pay any attention to it, for he had discovered his divine right to live again and he must enjoy that feeling to the full. Soon the ultimate victory of a new life would be his. The stirring came again, somewhere in the room. He knew that the machine which in effect breathed for him by oxygenating his blood only made a hum and had no rhythm to its sound. Yet what he could hear did remind him of faint breathing. He concentrated on it, then decided it must be an illusion generated by his brain. The brain must be unable to accept the loss of such a basic sound as breathing, that must be it. But he wasn't sure. Could someone, or some animal – a cat perhaps – have crept into the room during the night? He had locked up, secured windows and closed the vertical blinds before he had started, so it hardly seemed credible. Through the mirrors he scanned the room. Nothing. Then his eyes shot back to his decapitated body. He was just in time to catch a hint of movement... He studied the body. Mentally he held his breath and waited, watching for any sign. Then, there it was again – the chest rose slightly inside the clear plastic of the body sack, held for a moment, then fell with the faint hiss he had become aware of. He watched carefully and this time when the chest inflated then fell he saw the jagged opening at the top of the severed windpipe widen briefly and he could even make out a moist sucking sound as a jag of skin flapped over the opening when it closed again.

His body was breathing.

But how? His mind whirled, searching for an explanation. Chickens were supposed to run around after decapitation weren't they? Perhaps the breathing was a reflex action of some kind like that; it must have kept going all night while he had been preoccupied with his fears. Maybe the effect was now almost spent, was already fading. The body must be about to expire. He listened carefully for several minutes. During this time no breathing of his own could obscure any sounds. As he listened to the body breathe it occurred to him that if the everyday criterion for life was drawing breath, then it was he that was dead and the body that was alive. He waited, but there was no reduction in the rhythmic strength of the body's quiet breaths. How could that be? Surely breathing was a function of the brain. The spinal cord was part of the nervous system, and he had had to leave that behind in the body... so could it be the spinal cord that was responsible? Then again, he had arranged the saw at





an angle that would cut as close to the base of his skull as possible while missing his lower jaw: so was it conceivable that the tail-end of his brain stem had been left behind in the body and it was this – perhaps combined with the spinal cord – that was controlling what must be one of the most basic of bodily functions? Had the cut even been made accidentally higher than he had planned? Could the saw have jumped after passing under the shielded and machine-linked blood vessels of his neck and sliced through the bottom of his skull, taking part of his brain with it? There was no way he could find out by studying his head – by studying *himself* as he now thought of his head – because he couldn't see the wounded base in the mirrors. But what he could see was the end of the body's neck. In the mirror it looked thicker than he had imagined it ought to look, was a mass of raw tissue with the hole that breathed positioned towards the top. Could some of that raw tissue be part of his brain?

Later that day he noticed that the dried-off look of the tissue at the end of the body's neck was changing, was becoming more opaque as if forming a skin. And still the body breathed.

**T**he counter on the computer screen recorded that 18 days had passed, and now Fraser could see the bottom half of his developing and brand new body in the mirrors, sticking out into view beyond the bristly beard-growth of his chin. From what he could see, it was a fragile foetal body about half the size of a new-born baby, but with a greatly distended stomach and bowel, the whole thing plump with rich carmine blood pumping under pressure beneath its delicate skin. It should have filled him with joy, but during the time he had felt it beginning to swell he had also watched the skin-cap over his old body's neck swell too, forcing the now healed end of its breathing hole forward.

Another thing he hadn't anticipated was the quantity of excrement his foetal body was producing. He had made some basic preparation for this in the beginning by arranging his head inside its heavy helmet on a low plinth of books covered by the plastic sheeting, so that any excrement would flow away from him and collect in a reservoir of kapok wadding which would absorb and hold it. He hadn't made this reservoir big enough though. Already it was filled to capacity and brown liquid was trickling over the raised edge of the plastic sheet and dripping onto the teak blocks of the floor. The smell was ripe and strong; it wouldn't be long before the liquid soaked through the floor and started to swell the ceiling of the flat below. It was fortunate that that flat was empty. Though God knew what would happen if the property owner came to inspect it and discovered something was leaking from upstairs.

By contrast, his former, decapitated body had produced hardly any excrement and no urine, even though it was still alive and breathing. More than that, it shifted about in occasional nervous spasms inside the plastic sack, and he could no longer see the neck-end in the mirrors. It shouldn't even be alive, but given that it obviously was, without water it ought to be poisoning itself with unflushed toxins, and long before that it should have died of thirst. It was as if it had sealed itself off from water loss or water need, like

a pupating insect. Perhaps the plastic shroud he had encased it in at the outset was somehow aiding that process, but he couldn't explain it.

Time had little meaning to Fraser in his interim state that was so full of waking dreams and a barely-believed computerized count of the days; only the radio kept him sane. When the 18th night came it seemed both a minute since the last night and at the same time an eternity. He had long since lost the pattern of sleep and waking, but during that night he did sleep for a considerable period, only to be woken by a gurgling sound. The gurgling was like that made by a baby, only deeper in tone. In his sleep-drugged state he wondered at first if the sound had come from himself. When he had carried out the mental equivalent of rubbing sleep from his eyes – for his new hands were still too tiny and feeble to be of any use in that respect – he listened for the sound again. When it came it seemed close; worse, there was an undercurrent in it that was even deeper than before. When he realized that the gurgling was coming from his old body, his mouth opened and he screamed silently.

He tried to calm himself; he had to think. Did the gurgling mean the decapitated body was still developing? In the mirrors he studied the reflection of his own, new body lit by the sickly light of the computer screen. Apart from the swollen stomach it was still foetus-like, the limbs with only the stubs of fingers and toes. The trunk curled inwards, the knees were raised. He had only the most basic of sensations in the limbs – little more than the feeling that they were there, where his neck and chest used to be. This new body didn't seem to be growing much at all, looked just as it had days ago, yet the gurgling sound that came from his old body worried him – it was a new development, as if the old body was developing fast.

He tried to see in the mirrors the neck-end of the old body – the "other" as he had come to think of it. Fortunately it had shifted back into visual range again. It was hard to make out much in the dimness, but there was a bulge on the end of the neck. A developing head? He stared hard at it and the more he studied it the more he became certain that a baby's head was what it was. The breathing hole that was pushing to the front must have become a mouth. Worse, as far as he could see, the head did look more developed than his own new body. How was it growing so fast? It was almost becoming a rival!

He eventually put the faster growth of the other down to the greater mass of the whole entity compared with his own. Yet his new body was being fed continuously. The other wasn't receiving anything, but its growth appeared to be outstripping his. He began to fear that something was seriously wrong with his new body. He closed his eyes and prayed that the other would slow down or even die, though it felt strange to want such a thing, it was after all a part of him. But he feared what its faster development, if real, might mean.

He slept again, half-woken by sounds he slowly realized came from the limbs of the other – his old limbs – thrashing around inside the plastic shroud. It was as if the baby head was gaining control of them, and it occurred to him that it might be hungry.

He surfaced into wakefulness again, and saw from the golden light penetrating gaps in the blinds that it was dawn. He had not slept so much in a single night for some time, and though it had been a sleep of exhaustion, he felt refreshed. Renewed hope flooded through him.

Then he heard a sucking sound nearby. He scanned the mirrors. There was a figure bending down by the machines, shadowy in the pallid light. After a moment in which his tiny developing heart nearly stopped with fear, he realized the figure was his old body. It had broken out of its plastic shroud and crawled across the room. Now it was sucking at something – the nutrient jelly containers. It was stealing his food. He caught sight of the transparent connecting-tube lying on the floor, a vestige of glutinous jelly trickling from it onto the blue plastic. As he listened, the sucking of the other went on and on, and he had no choice but to listen: he knew he was helpless.

With the coming morning the light was growing brighter in the room. He could see the silhouette of the kneeling body against the window as it began to crawl again. He was surprised to see how big the head was, not as small as that of a new-born baby.

Its hunger apparently sated, the other crawled around the room, its long clumsy limbs crashing awkwardly about. Fraser tried desperately to move his tiny body: in the mirrors he could see his new limbs struggling with the effort. He had to find a way to reconnect the nutrient tube that the other had dislodged, but at its present size his tiny body would never shift the weight of his proportionately huge head, even if his head had not been locked into the helmet.

The other was scrambling across the floor towards the machines again. Fraser clenched his eyes shut as he saw what was going to happen, tried to cry out, but his new lungs managed only the tiniest of squeaks. There was a crash and he opened his eyes to see it was too late. Wrapped around the arms and legs of the clumsy body and fountaining blood into the room from broken ends were the life-support tubes. Fraser watched as his blood spread out across the floor, poured over the edge of the plastic and seeped into the gaps between the teak blocks. Then he felt the first effects, a sudden draining of energy, so that the skin on his face tightened and began to hurt. His little limbs began to twitch uncontrollably.

Apparently attracted by the squeak he had made, the other crawled over and looked down at him, its blood-spattered face only a few inches from his own. It burped loudly and contentedly, congealed nutrient jelly stuck to its chin. Then a look of curiosity spread across its young features.

Fraser knew that there would be no revenge on Reynolds now. During his last moments he concentrated upon trying to focus his fading eyes on what bent over him. He recognized the too-broad shoulders that supported the head – there was the big mole he used to see in the mirror whenever he took off his shirt. The head swam into focus briefly. He glimpsed the red bloated cheeks and wide eyes of the toddler from the home movie that his mother had made of him when he was three. Then his sight faded forever.

The look of wonder on the face of the other disappeared. The round face creased across.

It began to cry.

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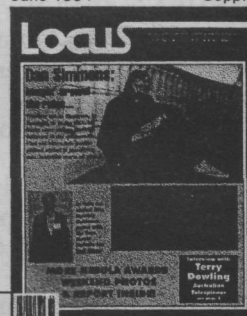
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# Yesterday's Bestsellers, 20: *My First Two Thousand Years* by George Viereck & Paul Eldridge by Brian Stableford

**M**y *First Two Thousand Years: The Autobiography of the Wandering Jew* was first published in 1928, rapidly achieving a succès de scandale which carried it through numerous reprints and created the opportunity for its two authors, George Sylvester Viereck and Paul Eldridge, to follow it up with two sequels: *Salomé: The Wandering Jewess* (1930) and *The Invincible Adam* (1932). The books marked something of a watershed in the history of American fantasy, parading a flagrant eroticism which would not have been tolerated a few years earlier.

The much gentler eroticism of James Branch Cabell's *Jurgen* – expressed entirely in symbols – had caused much controversy in the USA in 1919, the year in which assertive American moralists won their greatest and most tragic victory in the form of the Volstead Act. With the demon drink supposedly banished the moral crusaders had quickly turned their attention to “pornography”; Cabell's book came conveniently – if rather absurdly – to hand and was swiftly banned in Boston. The ban did not, of course, work as intended; the publicity generated far greater sales than the book would otherwise have attained, wherever it was obtainable. It did, however, cause publishers to exercise an unduly sensitive discretion for the next ten years – a discretion which Cabell and his supporters resented very fiercely.

One of the effects of this phantom of prohibition on the US publishing industry was a kind of “speakeasy effect” by virtue of which much European fiction in an erotic/fantastic vein – including classic works by Anatole France and Théophile Gautier as well as more conscientiously erotic works by Pierre Louÿs, Remy de Gourmont, Alfred Jarry and Hanns Heinz Ewers – was reprinted in lavish illustrated editions “for subscribers only.” These books came to constitute a kind of naughty library of works which were easily available to “connoisseurs” although they could not be found on the shelves of public libraries or general bookstores. The kind of fiction they contained was widely considered to be distinctly un-American, in that it was, for the most part, conscientiously decadent, not only in its breezy eroticism but in its frequent championship of pagan values against the moral oppressiveness of Christianity. (This calculated paganism was most explicit in the urbane literary Satanism of France's *The Human Tragedy* [1895] and *The Revolt of the Angels* [1914] but is implicit in most of the works by the authors cited above.)

The attack on *Jurgen* seems ridiculous today, in that the supposed obscenity of the offending passages is only evident to readers who can decode the symbolism – and may thus be deemed to exist entirely in the eye of the beholder but it expressed a widespread

conviction that any dabbling in the kind of calculatedly-archaic and fondly fantastic material that Cabell favoured posed a pollutant threat to the moral rectitude of a nation founded by valiant Puritans.

**T**he few American writers who had earlier taken inspiration from the lushly exotic kinds of fiction which flourished in the naughty library had found their endeavours unwelcome even at the best of times. The fervour of Prohibitionism intensified that hostility, much as the trials of Oscar Wilde had earlier intensified moralistic hostility to those British writers who had taken aboard French notions of Decadence. Most American adherents of “Bohemianism” had already forsaken the cause – Edgar Saltus and James Huneker had directed their efforts in other directions while Lafacadio Hearn emigrated to Japan and Stuart Merrill elected to restrict his own endeavours to the French language – and it is hardly surprising that the roaring 20s saw the near-total eclipse of its ideologies. There still remained, however, a small group of immigrant writers who chafed bitterly under what they considered to be the oppressive narrowness of their adopted land's moral guardians, and raged intemperately against it. One of these was Ben Hecht, whose vividly offensive *Fantazius Mallare* was published (“for

private circulation only") in 1922 with a blistering eight-page dedication "to my enemies." Hecht ended up writing for Hollywood, in a suitably cynical vein. Another was George Sylvester Viereck, who had come to the USA aged 11 in 1895; he followed a different but arguably parallel career path, becoming a journalist famed for his interviews with "great men."

Viereck's first "Bohemian" novel was *The House of the Vampire* (1907), a homoerotic tale of psychic vampirism seemingly inspired by Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which the genius – and eventually the consciousness – of a young writer is leeches away by an older and ominously versatile artist. This had been preceded by two earlier volumes, *A Game at Love and Other Plays* (1906) and *Nineveh and Other Poems* (1907), the former described by its publisher as treating "problems of life and love as seen through the medium of an extremely modern temperament." Alas, Viereck's temperament seemed altogether too modern to the American audience and his literary career did not develop as he would presumably have wished, although he published several more volumes of his own poetry as well as editing collections of poems by Swinburne, Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas. His reputation was not aided by his activities as an apologist for the German Empire during and after the Great War, but his ailing fortunes were spectacularly revived by the success of *My First Two Thousand Years*.

The window of opportunity through which *My First Two Thousand Years* passed had already been prised open by other writers, but very recently, and it stood ajar until Viereck and Eldridge violently threw it aside. Cabell, of course, remained active as a writer throughout the 20s and – still pained by the injustice of the assault on *Jurgen* – clung hard to his determination to oppose hypocrisy. His deft but cutting *Something About Eve* had appeared a year before Viereck and Eldridge's book, in 1927. In the same year the satirist John Erskine published *Adam and Eve*, which carefully avoided any hint of literary Satanism but nevertheless trod

on controversial ground in preferring the free-loving Lilith to the hectoring and hypocritical Eve. The humorist Thorne Smith had begun his long series of assaults upon the blindness of those who hated sex and strong liquor with *Topper* a year earlier, in 1926. It was, however, *My First Two Thousand Years* which shattered the barrier of primness which American publishers had erected, and left it in ruins.

**M**y *First Two Thousand Years* displays a kind of jeering irreverence for the narrow minds of American Puritans which is closely akin to the dedication of Hecht's *Fantazius Mallare*, and it exhibits the same determined fascination with sexual psychology that Hecht displayed in that work and its sequel, *The Kingdom of Evil* (1924). A similar scientific fascination came to preoccupy several subsequent writers in the same vein, including Guy Endore, author of *The Werewolf of Paris* (1933) and the remarkable Freudian romance *Methinks the Lady* (1945), and the early sf writer David H. Keller, author of the Satanist fantasy *The Devil and the Doctor* (1940) and the bizarre Freudian fantasy *The Eternal Conflict* (1949). Viereck had the advantage of knowing Freud personally – in the foreword to his last erotic fantasy, *Gloria* (1952), he refers to him as "my friend and master, the Columbus of the Unconscious" – although it is not at all clear that Freud would have approved of the highly idiosyncratic use made of his ideas in *My First Two Thousand Years* and its sequels.

The plot of *My First Two Thousand Years* recounts the story of Isaac Laquedem, a Jew who rejects his cultural heritage by enlisting in the Roman army occupying Judea in the time of Christ, adopting the name Cartaphilus to mask his origins. Cartaphilus knows Jesus personally but despises his prophetic ambitions, which he considers absurd. His hostility is increased when Jesus wins his dearest friends, John and Mary Magdalen, to the Messianic cause. Cartaphilus sees Jesus condemned by Pilate and follows him to Calvary, where he refuses an appeal for help after Jesus stumbles – thus

occasioning the famous curse which secures his immortality.

In traditional extrapolations of the legend the Wandering Jew is a miserable figure whose guilt-laden immortality is horribly burdensome, but Viereck and Eldridge's Cartaphilus is far more resilient. He is in the prime of life and fully appreciates the wonderful opportunity which has been afforded him. He soon discovers that Jesus is not the only miracle-worker in the world, and deduces that Jesus' powers must have been natural, providing no evidential support for the delusion that he was the Son of God. Later, Cartaphilus concludes that his own immortality is due to a spontaneous mutation of his flesh, for which Jesus merely provided a psychological stimulus. The problem of finding a purpose to guide him through a potentially-limitless existence causes him some slight anxiety, but he is in no mood to submit to "the Great God Ennui" without a fight and he embarks zestfully upon a twofold quest in search of wisdom and sexual fulfilment.

In pursuit of this quest Cartaphilus seeks out sages whose bold experiments in thought and deed place them at the cutting edge of progress: a deliberately controversial selection which includes Appolonius of Tyana, Mung Ling, Spinoza and the Satanist Gilles de Retz. The last-named attracts particular interest by virtue of his attempt to create a Homunculus, but he is cast as an out-and-out villain and is brought to ruin by Cartaphilus' design. Cartaphilus also searches for the secret of "undeniable pleasure indefinitely prolonged," dallying with many women, although his attention is abruptly seized and gradually captivated – by means of a series of cunning temptations and frustrating evasions – by one in particular: an immortal woman who seems to him to be his destined partner in life. This female counterpart is the princess Salomé, similarly condemned to immortality by Jokanaan (John the Baptist).

Throughout his adventures, Cartaphilus retains a determination to take his revenge on Jesus by smashing the Christian "empire of faith." This ambition leads him to be the secret inspiration of Attila, Muhammad and Martin Luther,



whose partial successes become steps on the path to a final conflict which he is in the process of engineering as the story reaches the present day (which it does at something of a headlong rush, the last century figuring hardly at all).

Laquedem narrates this tale while under hypnosis, spilling it into the eager ears of two psychoanalytically-inclined scientists whom he meets while sheltering in a monastery on Mount Athos in 1917. They cannot agree as to whether the story is to be taken literally or figuratively, but they wholeheartedly endorse its significance as an allegory of humanity's progress to modern civilization. The final passages of the narrator's account of his adventures become rather surreal as he tells of his final rendezvous with Salomé is a new Garden of Eden where she is attempting to succeed where Gilles de Retz failed in creating an artificial human being. In accordance with her feminist principles this new being is to be a Homuncula rather than a Homunculus, capable of becoming the mother of a new and better race. Cartaphilus, meanwhile, has only one more phase of his grand plan to complete before he may join her again; he and his enigmatic servant Kotikokura are now in the process of unleashing the combined forces of a "Red King" (Lenin) and a "Black King" (Mussolini) upon the tottering "White King" which is Europe and Christendom, in order to clear the way for a Millennium very different from that imagined by the dutiful and misguided followers of Jesus.

The literary style of this narrative involves a curious alloy of the portentous and the comic, which may reflect to some extent the different agendas of its two writers (Viereck notes of the light-hearted and flippantly sarcastic *Gloria* that he had originally drafted it in a much more earnest mode, but had been persuaded to lighten it by the arguments of a young friend nicknamed "the Gadfly"). Had *My First Two Thousand Years* been one whit less witty and ironic than it is it might not have crept through the window of opportunity which opened before it, but there is no doubt that its lightness is a double bluff; the authors meant every shocking syllable of it, and then

some. The success of the book allowed the collaborators to indulge their mocking fancies a little further in its sequels – which are more correctly reckoned counterparts, in that they run in parallel, only the final few pages carrying the story further forward in time – but they remained careful enough to fight shy of authentic literary Satanism. Their closest approach to that extreme is a mere flirtation, in a brief passage in which Cartaphilus and Salomé improvise a fragmentary drama in which they take the parts of Lucifer and Lilith.

**S**alomé is more overtly erotic than its predecessor, as befits an extrapolation of a tale beloved of so many famous Decadents – Gustave Moreau, Oscar Wilde and Jules Laforgue among them. Although Jokanaan declares that its sexy heroine is "too vile for the grave" the authors clearly do not agree.

Like the Wandering Jew's female partner in Eugène Sue's famous elaboration of the legend – who was Salomé's stepmother, Herodias – Salomé becomes symbolic of the plight of women in general, and the quest which gives her life meaning is the liberation of women from the curse under which the entire sex labours. While Cartaphilus attempts to inspire an endless series of anti-Christ's Salomé cleaves to those women fortunate enough to reach positions of political power, hoping to use them to advance the cause of feminism. With Queen Zenobia Salomé attempts to resurrect the ghost of Cleopatra. In Africa – where Cartaphilus is worshipped as the god Ca-ta-pha by courtesy of the exploits of his "prophet" Kotikokura – she briefly establishes a religion of her own and tries to create a society where women are dominant. She is the creator of Pope Joan and Jeanne d'Arc and rallies to the causes of Elizabeth I of England and Catherine the Great of Russia. In every case, though, she is disappointed.

Perhaps inevitably, in a Freudian fantasy, it is accepted at the axiomatic level by Viereck and Eldridge that the exercise of power is essentially masculine. Salomé discovers that powerful women can remain effective only while

the process of their physical and psychological development is arrested; in the end, all of them become incompetent when they are weakened by the delayed onset of their "bloody sacrifice to the moon." Salomé too is corrupted by nature, albeit more moderately, and she knows that she must eventually give way to the destiny which has marked her out as Cartaphilus' loving mate – but she cannot be content with that. If nature has made her frail, she is determined to overcome it.

Like Nietzsche, Salomé looks forward avidly to the victory of the coming *übermensch* – but unlike the misogynistically-inclined philosopher, she assumes that the new reign will involve a new equality of male and female. In the novel, however, the World Spirit incarnate in Nature – as conceived and animated by Viereck and Eldridge – cannot yet tolerate such an evolution, and Homuncula is cataclysmically destroyed even as she is born. In the end, Cartaphilus has to console Salomé with the proposition that the time is not yet ripe, and that there are preliminary dilemmas to be addressed and resolved as well as new scientific discoveries to be made before the human story can possibly reach that kind of climax.

*Salomé* was almost as successful in the marketplace as its predecessor, and has continued to be reprinted along with it in various paperback editions, but the third volume in the series is not included in these more recent editions and failed ignominiously to achieve similar sales in its hardcover editions, perhaps because it is the most fantastic and most explicit of the three. *The Invincible Adam* is the story of Kotikokura, the servant and sometime worshipper of Cartaphilus, who began life as a proto-human but has evolved into a handsome person of culture and intelligence. In the first chapter we find him temporarily employing the *alias* Lord Kotesbury, on the run from the outraged forces of law and morality having allegedly molested a young woman, attended by the declamations of an amateur philosopher crying "To Hell with Prohibition!" (The authors did not know that by 1937, the year in which the novel is set, the Volstead Act would have been repealed.)

Following his apprehension, Kotikokura defends himself before a jury of scientists, including those who earlier psychoanalysed Cartaphilus. He begins his tale with an account of his childhood in prehistoric Africa, when he was condemned to be sacrificed to his tribe's deity, the Great Ape, by virtue of possessing what the Great Ape has taken away from other men as a punishment: a penile bone. This is referred to throughout as a "rib," partly for reasons of coyness but mainly to insist that this equipment was what Jehovah took from Adam in making Eve. In the event, Kotikokura escapes his allotted fate, becoming instead an immortal heretic, devoted to the service of a new god, Ca-ta-pha, whose accidental (and wholly illusory) revelation gives him a purpose in life which eventually reaches a kind of fulfilment when he meets the person who seems to be the incarnation of all his hopes and desires: Cartaphilus.

By virtue of his permanent erection Kotikokura is perennially popular among women, even though he retains a crucial immaturity, having been made immortal when not yet fully grown. Although he seemed in the stories told in the first two volumes of the trilogy still to be primitive and simple-minded *The Invincible Adam* reveals that this was mostly camouflage employed in his dealings with Cartaphilus and Salomé, and that he is ready enough to display his sophistication to others. His physical appearance changes slowly with time, so that he "evolves" from being a dark-skinned pygmy to a state in which he can pass readily enough for an English aristocrat.

Having heard Kotikokura's account of his irrepressible instincts, and the reason for the assault which he is supposed to have committed, the jury of scientists is prepared to concede that his occasional outbursts of erotic exuberance are entirely natural. His crime – biting the ear of the girl he is charged with molesting – is forgiven once it is explained that ear-biting was the ultimate gesture of affection in the tribe into which he was born, and still remains his ultimate tribute to female beauty. As in the first volume, the scientists cannot agree on the literal

truth of what they have heard, but of its profound symbolic significance they have no doubt at all.

**T**he *Invincible Adam* is followed by a "personal note" which explains the allegorical significance of the trilogy (somewhat after the fashion of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who used to excuse his occasional ventures into fantasy by appending portentous allegorical decodings of a rather dubious nature). Kotikokura, this note assures the reader, "is the eternal youth – Pan, the Pied Piper, Michelangelo's David, David slaying Goliath." (As if this collection of analogues were not sufficiently bizarre, the authors subsequently add in Gargantua and Til Eulenspiegel.) His ever-elusive goal is Love, which he can never attain because he is torn by a struggle within: "the struggle between the monkey and the god, the primitive and the sophisticate, subman and superman, the libido and civilization" – or, to put it another way, *id* and *superego* frozen in time at a point when they cannot quite be reconciled into a healthy *ego*.

According to this same scheme Cartaphilus is "the sophisticated, highly civilized modern man, conscious of the feminine component which he inherits from Mother Eve." He seeks "unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged and a new synthesis of woman," in so doing becoming "brother to Faust and Don Juan" and also a kind of Everyman. Salomé is his counterpart, "the sophisticated, highly civilized modern woman," free at long last of the seven symbolic veils which enshrouded her when she danced for Herod, but not from the burdensome restraints of her biological nature.

"Our saga," the authors claim, "aims to bridge the gulf between the sexes, to establish a truce in their ageless struggle," adding by way of justification that "The latest discoveries of endocrinology and psychology confirm the poetic intuitions of Plato. No understanding of love is possible until we realize that each sex bears within itself the replica of the other," and "No one can assail the inhibitions and complexes of life without attacking the taboos which dominate civilized man no less than

his progenitor in the jungle".

This note serves to emphasize the fact that the authors' intention to offend against the taboos of the censorious American tribe, and not to do the job by halves, has been backed all along by a genuine conviction that such taboos must and ought to be broken in the name of Progress as well as that of Liberty. George Viereck's ideas about sex may have been decidedly unconventional but they were certainly sincere. His peculiar combination of prurience and eccentric feminism was to be given even freer rein in *Gloria*, in which a woman who might or might not be the Goddess of Love (a cynical character suggests that she is merely a deceptive drug-smuggler) insists that all the great lovers of history and legend were, in fact, woefully inadequate to the task of satisfying their female companions. According to her, Casanova – with the aid of a cunning technological device akin to Kotikokura's "rib" – was the only man who ever managed to overcome the limitations of male physique, and even he remained prey to the dismal faults of male psychology. As to the roots and causes which this insistent conviction may have had within Viereck's own psyche we can, of course, only speculate.

As an extended *conte philosophique* Viereck and Eldridge's trilogy cannot hold a candle to Anatole France's fantasies, and as an exercise in eroticism it seems utterly *gauche* when set beside the works of Pierre Louÿs. As Samuel Johnson famously remarked about a female preacher, however, the marvel is not that it is done well, but that it should be done at all. However blatant the trilogy's faults as a commentary on human psychology and human progress might be, the fact remains that it served as a powerful provocation to further speculation. It spearheaded a brief revivification of the tradition of American philosophical fantasy which had languished sadly since the days of Hawthorne and Poe, and which might conceivably have gone from strength to strength had not fantasy been condemned to the status of a mere genre – and consequently shunted downmarket into the pulp magazines – in the late 1930s.

It is ironic, but not entirely



inappropriate, that the influence of the Viereck and Eldridge trilogy should be most conspicuously exhibited by a work very obviously designed as a parody of it: *The Memoirs of Satan* (1932) by William Gerhardt and Brian Lunn. These British collaborators wholeheartedly – but very sarcastically – embraced the literary Satanism of which the two Americans fought shy, and were enabled thereby to adopt a rather more objective viewpoint than Viereck and Eldridge's all-too-human protagonists. The first part of the novel – which ends, in synopsis, by wondering whether Salomé was an intellectual snob – is modestly entitled "My First 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 Years," and its subsequent sections expand upon the themes of the trilogy with considerable farcical effect. The book was not a great success commercially (parodies rarely are, for obvious reasons) but it remains very readable, and its satirical edge is unblunted by the passage of time.

The moral crusaders of America were able to wreak a revenge of sorts on George Viereck during World War II, when he was imprisoned for refusing to register as an agent of Germany – which he did on principled grounds, being no great admirer of Hitler even though he retained a patriotic fondness for the Fatherland itself. He died in 1962, aged 78; Eldridge – who was four years his junior – lived to the ripe old age of 94. Their other work in collaboration was a conventional scientific romance in a decidedly British vein, *Prince Pax* (1933), in which the Ultimate Weapon is used to put an end to war. It was not published in America, which had no use for fantasies of *that* type until 1945.

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The above is the last of Brian Stableford's "Yesterday's Bestsellers." However, he will be commencing a new series of essays soon – see note on page 5.

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## Gather Yourselves Together

A previously unpublished novel by

**Philip K. Dick**

By 1952, a young Philip K. Dick had been successful with numerous sf short stories and decided to try a serious, mainstream novel. Set in 1949 amongst the evacuation of American businesses from mainland China, *Gather Yourselves Together* is a steamy, claustrophobic tale of two men and a woman isolated by circumstances and alienated from each other by their pasts – or lack thereof. Middle-aged Verne Tildon and half-his-age Barbara Mahler are forced to put aside the lingering resentments and frustrations of a Stateside love affair in order to do the job they've been assigned, preparing a factory compound for transfer to the approaching Communists. Carl Fitter is the unsuspecting young man who finds himself embroiled in their tensions, and around whose sexual awakening with Barbara the novel is structured. Never before published, this early novel reveals Philip K. Dick's obvious talent and skill in a manner quite unlike any other book he was ever to produce.

Published in the USA by WCS Books in a limited-edition, single press run of 1,200 copies. Full-cloth hardcover, acid-free paper, full-colour dustjacket. Designed, typeset, and with cover art by James "Kibo" Parry. Publication date: June 1994.

Distributed in Britain by **The Unlimited Dream Company, 127 Gaisford Street, London NW5 2EG.** Also available through Cold Tonnage Books, Forbidden Planet, Andromeda Books, and your friendly local sf dealer – price £36.

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# Unhampered

## John Clute

If there are any problems with the new sf novel by Iain (M) Banks, and there are a few, they come from a lack of complicity. *Feersum Endjinn* (Orbit, £15.99) is a book without shadows, clear and clean and spanking new, like an automatic kitchen. It glistens down the multiple tracks of its telling as though there were no yesterday. It bristles with the thrust of story. It is the most professional novel Banks has ever written, the easiest to read, the most economical in its telling, the most fun, the most exciting, and when you finally get some sense of what the feersum endjinn actually is you can feel the Earth move. But it does not claw your dreams.

*The Wasp Factory* (1984) swelters within its anguished, twisted interrogations of anima and gender like Laöcoon, the story of the thing jostling doppelgangers of the inner and the outer world together in black heat. *The Bridge* (1986) marries the wounded psyche of its protagonist to the eponymous structure, as if to a rack, with ancillary stories turning the screws. The protagonist of *Consider Phlebas* (1987) is locked in the nightmare created by the inescapable wrongness of the choice he has made in the goony space-opera war we follow with surface delight, even taking the longueurs into account. In *Use of Weapons* (1990), the marriage of the protagonist to his past, and the dovetailing narrative structure which carries him (and us) downwards to the minotaur, makes (once again) the job of reading Banks like wrestling shadow snakes in the depths of the deep lake whose very bottom reflects a face. *Against a Dark Background* (1993) does manage to agglutinate – despite a 150-page sequence in which Banks goes walkabout, fragments of the tale traipsing behind him like a crocodile of fans, not one of them, in the end, magically, managing to get lost – a sense of the *battering* that action inflicts on the sensorium, the uselessness in the end of all the noise. And *Complicity* (1993) echoes with shadow assonances, wedlock stymies, homoerotic agenbites in the mirror. In none of these books can the reader remain neutral: a simple vicarious eye. Each of them claws you down. The new one does not.

So there is a cost. Skill (an extreme example being Robert Silverberg in his silver metal doze) exacts a charge, because there is an inherent lack of danger when a text is written with too much skill, when the tale told does not challenge the skill with which it is told. So – compared to the earlier lunges off the edge of the page – *Feersum Endjinn* may evoke huge liking at first, but not quite as much love a year down the line.

This is, all the same, a cost almost certainly worth bearing, because the four intersecting tales which make up

the narrative substance of *Feersum Endjinn* are expertly and lovingly enacted. We are in a time of the Dying Earth, with touches of Wolfean geology-as-archeology adding grace notes of inspissation, along with a gigantism mildly reminiscent of Typhon (and Autarch faces carved out of mountains) in the *Book of the New Sun*. A couple of deliberate homages towards John Crowley can also be detected: not only in the assonance with Crowley's own *Engine Summer* (1979), which also deals with a twilight (i.e. Indian Summer) culture and with crystalline iterations of human souls (computer mythopoesis was at an early stage in the 1970s) who Tell the Beads of History, just like Virtual Reality partials do in this book; but also in the fact that one protagonist of the tale belongs to a work-clan called Little Big. But the central city/edifice where almost all of the action takes place is – regardless of any echoes – an astonishing exercise in scale and in the perception of scale, for the reader only gradually gathers a full sensation of the immensity of the concept: what seems to be a mountain range uplifted – aeons previous to the time of the telling – into the semblance of a vast building or “castle,” in the nooks and crannies of which kingdoms and cities have been established.

Within this vast tympanum, a complex story gets very swiftly told. There is an AI-run Crypt, which contains versions of dead personalities in an extremely complex Virtual Reality universe (echoes of Geoff Ryman's *Consensus* are clearly deliberate here), and which has noted that – because the galaxy is drifting into a astronomical cloud of some sort, the sun is fading and Earth will soon die. There is a conflict between the genetically selected rulers of different levels of the great house. There are plot and counterplots. There are four main characters (two of whom turn out to be more than casually linked, but their marriage is morganatic: nothing is inherited, or mirrored, or costs): Asura, born blank and adult out of the Crypt, an emissary of the deep minds; Chief Scientist Gadfium, who is trying to contact the AIs at the top of the highest tower, itself the base, aeons past, of an elevator like the one Arthur C. Clarke and Charles Sheffield independently conceived of in 1979; Count Sessine,

assassinated for the last time, and deep into the last of his lives within the Crypt; and Bascule the Teller, who inscribes his own seemingly picaresque tale in an idiom which initially makes one think of Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, which secondarily is likely to remind readers (like myself), who have no English schoolboy background, of Don Marquis's *archy* tales, and which only finally (for me) settles down to a surreal intensification of Molesworth. There are, in other words, no syntactical distortions in Bascule's narrative, simply a phonetic representation of a tough (North London? Glasgow? I haven't a clue) accent. Here is what it reads like: “Ther wer ryits in thi cassil & elshware & I myself remembir finkin, O fuk, & Whot ½ we dun?”

But this only slows one down for a few minutes, because it is essentially an effect, a pyrotechnic performed out of an excess of skill – there is, in fact, no burning reason at all for Bascule to spell like this, beyond a throwaway utterance or two about his inability to write except phonetically – and because it is an effect (rather than an exploration) it soon becomes an established custom of the book. The delights are in the telling, not in the claws that awaken you afterwards into Banks's default black-dog hour before the dawn. Eventually all four stories come together, like knitting needles (or a score by Steve Reich) finally hitting the same note, and the nature of the feersum endjinn is unfolded. The book is like a kaleidoscope, full of superior twists of colour, narrative zings and zaps, but all under the finest of control. Like a kaleidoscope, no matter what changes in the dance of story, *Feersum Endjinn* (and its readers) remain intact.

Not everyone is capable of reviewing Greg Egan's *Permutation City* (Millennium, £14.99) with the finicky computer-literate numeracy it seems to demand; I certainly am not. I can only depose that the book *felt* absolutely real, that the long slow arduous argumentative temperature gradient it follows upwards from the downside realities of true (limited, limiting, lugubrious) Virtual Reality to a Sense-of-Wonder set of endings seemed fully earned. The book is written easily, in Egan's square-hewn imageless style –



it's like listening to music in a room with absolutely no acoustic complications at all: no echo, no arras, no hint of the other, no fooling – but it is, at the same time, an extremely difficult book to follow. My sense of the reason for this is pretty simple-minded: it felt to me as though Egan was refusing to allow computers, or Virtual Reality, to "be" anything more than he felt they could be; it felt as though – unlike any Cyberpunk writer around – he totally eschewed the sweet-tooth of the generic analogue: there are no explanations of the events in *Permutation City* in terms of the film noir, or the Italian Western, or space opera. There is, in other words, no use of the imagery of cyberspace. There is absolutely no gear. In the simplest possible terms – I know no others – the story tells of an obsessed mid-21st-century man's successful campaign to create an Autoverse – a computer generated universe which runs, creating "through" itself more and more complex evolutionary patterns, with entire internal consistency. It is based on a molecular rather than atomic base. It is far too complex to run on computers, though not too complex for the initial conditions to be modelled (unlike the magic world of Banks's far future, where AI time runs thousands of times faster than real time, Egan's computers, when they run a downloaded copy of a human mind, must slow time down by huge factors, so that the necessary computations can take place). The only genuinely doubletalk part of the book, to my individual wondering eye, was the self-fuelling autonomy of the Autoverse itself, which, once it is off and running, feeds on some sort of probability of alternate worlds dust of the universe I couldn't parse (though others are welcome to make more sense than I could).

The end is uplifting, though still acoustically perfect. Afterwards, I had lightfilled fugal dreams I could not follow.

A book with a title like *Nobody's Son* (Maxwell Macmillan Canada, 1993, no price listed) comes along, and you think: This cannot be fantasy. No way could Sean Stewart have written a fantasy whose title contradicts the very heart of all modern commercial fantasy, and almost any other kind of fantasy as well: That heart being the assumption that Everyone is Somebody, that every Story is a quest in search of the root, that the truth of things lies in the true understanding of the rune of the past, that once is future. The hero of *Nobody's Son*, on the other hand, is the scion of a broken home, and it is never the case that the father who has abandoned his family will turn out to be 1) Uther Pendragon, 2) Wotan, or 3) not Dad at all because Dad is 1) or 2) or 4)

all of the previous except 3). Nobody's Son, whose name is Shielder's Mark, sets off on a quest into the Ghostwood in the centre of which a Dark Tower and a Spell must be vanquished, in which case Shielder's Mark can go to the capital of the country and demand of the king any one wish. So he treks onward and inward, Faerie Time bedazzles him, as do a Liminal Being who warns (and helps) him about the moat and the Whatsit, and so forth, and he gains the heart of the tower, and breaks the spell, and becomes a kind of man.

And that is the end of chapter one.

Not only does *Nobody's Son* feature a hero without a past to obey, it starts where it might well have ended. The rest of the book – which from this point is very nearly without supernatural incident, though magic lurks in the background of the tale throughout – deals with the consequences of Shielder's Mark's wish: which is to wed the king's youngest daughter. He does. She is a sparky, pig-headed, highly intelligent young woman. They get to know one another. They learn how to operate a dukedom on the marches. They fall in love, grow up, story ends. It is the most intensely likeable story this reviewer has come across in years.

So. Three books that earn their keep. A full hamper.

(John Clute)

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## This Alien Earth

### Paul J. McAuley

Since *North Wind* (Gollancz, £15.99) is the sequel to Gwyneth Jones's Tiptree Award-winning *White Queen*, we must remember that *White Queen* was a First Contact novel in which the alien Aleutians came to Earth to trade, and were mistaken for invaders. Two humans, Johnny Guglioli and Braemar Wilson, tried to prevent the Aleutians' off-hand domination by sneaking aboard their ship using a Faster-Than-Light device invented by an extremely eccentric German physicist. But they were caught and killed before they could do any harm, and a hundred years later, in *North Wind*, they are remembered as martyrs. Aleutian domination is stronger than ever, partly because Earth is riven by Gender Wars (precipitated when the Aleutians mistook a conference on women's affairs as the seat of Earth's government). There's an underground movement which wants to find the FTL device, and try again to destroy the alien ship, in particular because the Aleutians plan to improve the Earth's climate by levelling the Himalayas. And a faction of the Aleutians are also searching for the device, because they want to go home the fast way.

Although the search for the FTL McGuffin drives the plot, at the heart of the novel is the identity crisis of Bella, who although apparently an Aleutian (crippled because she is unable to generate the tiny, symbiotic wanders which tend their hosts and bind the Aleutians' commensal society) is in fact Johnny Guglioli's surgically altered daughter. Bella, the only survivor of an attack on an Aleutian outpost, is rescued by Sidney Carton, who is himself in disguise. He appears to be a human sympathizer, a halfcaste who has adopted Aleutian habits, including a belief in reincarnation (for all Aleutians are reincarnations of a range of ancestral archetypes), although unlike many halfcastes he has not undergone gene therapy. In fact, Carton (he is, tellingly, the *faux* reincarnation of a very particular fictional character) works for the mysterious Fat Man, who (it appears) wants to free humanity from the Aleutians' interference.

*North Wind* is a wilderness of mirrors, of hidden loyalties and malleable identities. As in her other sf novels, and despite the risk of fatally slowing the story she is trying to tell, Jones is not afraid to try to portray a future as complex and diverse as the present. But *North Wind's* onrushing story does not allow it to be overwhelmed by its ancillary freight of densely imagined sociological and geopolitical changes and virtual-reality high jinks. It is a road novel, and the strange place that the Earth has become is revealed in quick vivid glimpses, as incomprehensible but pregnant with meaning to Bella as it is to us. Apart from some excusable handwaving over the quantum mechanical operations on consciousness of the FTL drive, there are as many fully worked out ideas as in any of the best hard-sf novels of the past ten years, and Jones's Aleutians are amongst the most sympathetically and richly imagined aliens in recent sf, powerful but not all-knowing, as prone to misunderstanding humans as humans are to misunderstanding them.

And all of this is merely a background for Jones's acute dissections of the roles we assign to gender. For in the process of learning what it is to be human, Bella reflects human sexuality from an alien viewpoint, and Aleutian sexuality in human terms. She grows from a default male palimpsest who is "female" in the presence of any dominant male, into a robust individual, slowly and with touching defiance able to define her own self. Meanwhile, the FTL drive is found, but like everything else in this fine novel it is not what it seems. Closure is not complete – the Aleutians have yet to untangle themselves from the humans. If we are lucky there will be a further sequel. Meanwhile, we are able

to enjoy what is Jones's best book to date, and by extension one of the best radical hard sf novels of the year.

**R**achel Pollack's *Temporary Agency* (Orbit, £15.99) is another sequel to a prizewinning novel, in this case *Unquenchable Fire*, which won the 1989 Clarke Award. Like its predecessor, *Temporary Agency* is set in an alternate yet recognizable USA in which, after a revolution at the beginning of the century, miracles and ritual magics are a part of the fabric of everyday life.

The rituals and the beliefs behind the rituals are both detailed and convincing, and Pollack portrays her brave new world with considerable panache. Many rituals appease or call upon the powers of Bright Beings – Malignant or Benign, neither quite angels or devils – which can interfere or intercede in human lives. The first section of this finely crafted bilaterally symmetrical novel is narrated by a spritely teenager, Ellen, whose cousin, Paul, is seduced by a Malignant One who in human disguise runs a temping agency in Paul's office building. It becomes clear that his spirit is in danger, yet the Spiritual Development Agency will not help. Paul's family enlists the help of a civil-rights lawyer, Alison Birkett, whom Ellen hero-worships. A conspiracy is uncovered, but too late to save Paul's life. There's a fine portrayal of Ellen's teenage puzzlement at the compromises of adult behaviour, and anger at the deal by which Alison Birkett saved Paul's spirit by transmuting him into the guardian of elevators after he was trapped and killed in one by the powers of the Malignant One.

Her anger informs the second part of the novel, which takes place ten years later. Ellen has come out as a lesbian, and once again tangles with Alison Birkett. Despite Ellen's hostility, Alison declares her love, and at last wins her over. Together, they unravel a second conspiracy, again involving the Malignant One who killed Paul, now made over into a Bright One who is the guardian of a Consumer Rights activist out to expose wrongdoing on the stock exchange. In the short compass Pollack allows herself, the unravelling of the conspiracy and the developing love affair don't leave quite enough room for both to be fully worked out. The rhetoric by which Ellen is able to defuse the apocalypse ignited by the conspiracy springs neatly enough from Ellen's unresolved anger, but given the forces against which it is deployed, her victory seems a touch contrived. Nevertheless, Pollack's intensely imagined magical USA is as compelling here as in its predecessor, and this short, warm, witty novel has some wise things to say about the power of love and the unforced choices we make because of it.

**S**torm Constantine's *Calenture* (Headline, £16.99) expands upon her *Interzone* short story "Priest of Hands." It is a fever dream of a book, the dream being that of Casmear, the last living citizen of Thermidore, whose other inhabitants have been turned to crystal statues by a side-effect of a treatment supposed to confer immortality. Casmear, when he is not defending statues from the depredations of monkey-birds, writes a tale set in a land beyond Thermidore, where he imagines that looted fragments of his crystallized fellow-citizens are carried away by underground rivers and collected by Terranauts, who use them to guide mobile cities across the plains beyond the mountains.

From this bizarre seed, the tale grows to become the novel, a picaresque divided between the rite-of-passage journey of Finnigin, a fledgling Terranaut, and the search by a disaffected priest, Ays, for his origins. The problem with picaresque novels is that the hero or heroes tend to wander about until enough words have been produced, whereupon a crisis is precipitated and the plot resolved. *Calenture* isn't entirely free of structural bagginess, but for the most part it is bound together by the contrasting travails of its two heroes (who as usual with the heroes of Constantine's fictions are cheerfully bisexual) in atmospherically rendered landscapes that increasingly resemble those of dreams, and by Casmear's handwringing over the responsibilities and inadvertent revelations of authorship. Both Finnigin and Ays are helped by a mysterious figure who appears to be an avatar of Casmear. After finding each other following a nightmarish sacrifice and an unexpected rebirth, Finnigin and Ays set out together, and with surprising speed (considering the dilatory nature of the rest of the novel) reach Thermidore, at which point *Calenture* reveals itself to be like a Klein bottle; its inside is continuous with its outside.

It's a neat notion that's carefully figured, but that's about as far as Constantine takes it. Although there's a good deal of existential angst as both heroes wander about questioning the meaning of life, the longueurs of their journeys dissipate into the unresolved paradox that although their world turns out to exist as a novel written by Casmear, he is himself a character in his own fiction. At this point, perhaps, Constantine should have appeared as a character in her own novel, but she's content merely to dip her toes in the murky waters of post-modernism and leave the ending unresolved. Freed of the responsibilities of behaving like heroic characters, Finnigin and Ays wander out of the frame. Casmear wonders if he imagined the whole thing. The book swallows itself.

**J**ohn Barnes is rapidly making a name for himself as the new white (male) hope of American hard sf. His *Mother of Storms* (Tor, \$22.95), is an ambitious near-future hard-sf novel, something of a rarity because it is difficult to pull off convincingly. Barnes sets to with gusto. *Mother of Storms* combines the heat-engine physics of meteorology and the chaotic dynamics of sociology: the world-threatening destructive power of a vast self-perpetuating storm in a world made warmer by the greenhouse effect; and the social impact of XV, which allows viewers to vicariously enjoy the experiences and emotions of people wired for transmission. XV has already caused one global riot as transmitted emotions build positive feedback; the panic generated by the storm's destruction, channelled and magnified through XV, threatens to destroy what the storm spares.

Barnes conveys the physics in simple yet vivid images: his account of the birth of the storm, building from a breath of air across a still ocean to a hurricane vortex in the space of a couple of pages, is beautifully convincing. And in the first half of the novel, there are some fine moments of distancing compression used to describe the storm's destructive powers – at times, Barnes might be speaking with the voice of the storm itself.

However, his handling of the human side of the novel is less convincing, and, to borrow an architectural term, *Mother of Storms* is functionally overloaded. In addition to a scheme to skim a dismantled comet across Earth's atmosphere to rob the storm of its energy source (a project which leads to the literal deification of two of those involved with it), there are also three major subplots revolving around XV. There's a father trying to track down the man behind the murder of his daughter, who was killed to produce a segment of XV snuff porn; an XV news porn actress who is trying to redeem herself; and an investigative journalist trying to do things the old-fashioned way, exposing the story behind efforts to stop the storm in her Internet journal.

While Barnes's extrapolation of today's trend towards news as entertainment is well thought-out, and there's a sympathetic portrayal of the psychological and physical price his newsporn actress must pay, too often his rhetoric proclaims his right-on attitude while his subtext says something else. Although he tries to show that the users of XV porn are feeble wankers, at the same time he lingers over the explicit and distasteful details of their wet dreams. And the actresses's redemption from her dehumanizing career (she has been surgically enhanced, and the only form of sex to which she can respond is a kind of



violent rape) is typical of a lot of American sf in that deals with the devil of technology are allowed to become non-binding contracts. Stains on one's soul can be washed away; and besides, she's saved by the care of a good man.

Usually, it is as praise that one says that there are enough ideas in a novel for two books – here, it's the reverse. The proliferating subplots – and one seems to exist only to introduce a false tension to the novel's climax – overwhelm the main story. By the second half of the novel, the storm is no longer the focus of the plot; every so often Barnes must remind us of it by wiping out another million or so people. And in order to keep the monster plot going, Barnes must throw in more and more invention. Much of it is good, but like a snowball rolling downhill the novel just keeps growing. And that's a pity, because the ending is unexpectedly frame-breaking, an earned *deus ex machina* pronouncement that is resonant with the boundless optimism of mainstream American sf. In this, at least, Barnes shines with promise.

**F**rederik Pohl's *The Voices of Heaven* (Tor, \$21.95) is altogether more assured – but, to be fair, Pohl was writing sf before Barnes was born. As with several of his recent fictions, the ingredients are out of the sf stock cupboard – a troubled interstellar colony, a hero with a Wound, aliens – but here Pohl skilfully blends them into a fast-moving suspense novel.

Barry di Hoa, an expert in handling antimatter, which fuels the starships linking Earth with its few and failing interstellar colonies, is shanghaied from the Moon and finds himself on earthquake-prone Pava. The problem is that he's a manic-depressive, and the single resource-poor colony on Pava doesn't have the medical facilities to treat him. As he tries to come to terms with his new situation, di Hoa is involved with untangling a strike by the friendly leps, who have taken pity on the poor struggling humans, and preventing a plot against the whole colony by Millenarist fanatics, whose religion demands that they eventually kill themselves.

Pohl's acerbic view of technological progress has worn rather better than the technophile optimism of some of his confrères. Here, the colonists are doing the best they can in a hostile environment with the minimum of supplies and human resources, both needing and resenting the help of the native leps, rather as the Pilgrim Fathers needed and resented the help of the Native Americans. Pohl portrays their hand-to-mouth struggles with a satisfyingly unforced realism. The only time Di Hoa acts like a typical can-do sf hero is when he is in the manic phase of his illness, and he

doesn't remember what he was trying to do. Although the novel is narrated by di Hoa as he tries to explain humanity's foibles to a puzzled, patient lep, the genial, epicurean style is entirely Pohl's, making gentle fun of human fallibility in general and religious cults in particular. Pohl's satire may have mellowed since his collaborations with Cyril Kornbluth, but here he shows that its edge has not blunted.

(Paul J. McAuley)

## Winged Chariots Wendy Bradley

**B**eing a fast reader isn't always an unmixed blessing, particularly when you reach that plateau where you have discovered an author who speaks to you, devoured their entire series to date, and then have to sit back and wait for them to finish the next one. Lois McMaster Bujold is still writing about Barrayar but not nearly fast enough – and where the hell are all the UK copies of *Mirror Dance*, because if I have to wait for the reprint before I get one I may cry!

However there is *The Spirit Ring* (Pan, £8.99) to keep me going in the meantime. And, oh bliss, after a tense few pages of worrying that I'm not going to enjoy her first fantasy, finally I can relax – because even with the change of genre Bujold doesn't disappoint. In fact almost the only thing wrong with this book is the back cover blurb which doesn't give you the flavour at all.

For the setting, imagine how the Renaissance Italy of competing city-states would have been if magic had worked – the church licensing and supervising the operations of white magicians under the apprentice system, the Inquisition dealing with those who meddle with forbidden black arts. The heroine Fiametta is the feisty half-caste daughter of a powerful mage, and her partner Thur is a quiet craftsman who nevertheless develops the heroism he needs to do what is necessary. The two come together early on in a coincidence carefully set up by the plot if you look closely – one of the satisfying things about Bujold's work is that her plots don't have that common tendency to unravel if you pick at the threads. The plot here concerns itself with Fiametta's attempt to save her father from enslavement in a magical artefact, the spirit ring of the title, at the service of the villain after her father has been murdered for his freeing of the soul trapped in an earlier ring.

Bujold's strength is her characterization, particularly her women, so that her "Barrayar" books read like Heinlein with real people, and this strength

carries over, mostly, into the fantasy: check out Fiametta's impassioned speech (page 246) to the churchmen when they find out what kind of evil they are really up against. On second thoughts check out the whole book – and help persuade her to write faster.

**S**o, too, should Steven Brust, whose *Five Hundred Years After* (Tor, \$23.95) is a sequel to *The Phoenix Guards*, his whimsical homage to *The Three Musketeers*, and it has the same playfulness of language that was so pleasing in the first book: "your reader is the one who doesn't rush on to see what happens next, but relishes the way the sentences are formed..."

We re-encounter Khaavren, Pel, Aerich and Tazendra, the swashbuckling heroes, along with their enigmatic emperor and friends and enemies new and old. The light-hearted plot will make you hoot with joy at its audacity when the bad guys try, yet again, to assassinate Khaavren – this time on his own doorstep – and are foiled first by his own efforts, then by the timely arrival home of his servants, next when all the racket wakes his lover, and finally by the return home of the rest of our heroes.

My only problem with this novel was that after a romping adventure there is an abrupt change of mood at the climax when basically it turns into *The Three Musketeers Go Nuclear* as the whole city blows up. The resolution comes as a surprise after an almost wholly light-hearted novel and neither worked for me nor gives me much hope that there might eventually be a volume three – although if Brust can be persuaded into the wordmines one more time I'd be more than happy to see it.

**I**f being a fast reader has a down side, in that the pleasurable experience of reading something good is shortened, there is of course the converse in that you don't waste too much time on the trash. Take, for example, *Jedi Search* (volume one of the "Star Wars: Jedi Academy" trilogy) by Kevin J. Anderson (Bantam, \$5.99) which is the quintessential anorak book, where those who wondered whatever happened to Dantooine after Princess Leia sicced the Empire onto them when Moff Tarkin threatened to destroy Aldebaran if she didn't tell them where the rebel base was, can now find out. The usual shared-world problem, of there being no character development, looms large so that even after having first twins and then a third child, being separated from them while becoming a mover and shaker of the new republic, Leia *still* behaves like a spoilt brat when Han goes missing and, instead of doing something about it, assumes he's off roistering somewhere.

Hang on, though, all you anoraks: wasn't the point of Vader torturing Han and Leia in *The Empire Strikes Back* that Luke would detect their pain wherever he was through the Force and come to their rescue? So how come it doesn't work any more? Luke fails to detect Han's sesh in the torture chamber and then can't find Han, Chewie or their golly-isn't-he-like-the-young-Luke companion Kyp. Hmm. If this book had been anything more than a disposable hour or so's pastime I might really have learned to resent it.

**D**ouglas Hill's *The Lightless Dome* (book one of "The Apotheosis Trilogy"; Pan, £8.99) is apparently his 50th book but the first time he has written adult fantasy. I'm not sure whether I should be praising a valiant first attempt or pointing out tired flaws. The plot concerns Red Cordell, who is a bit-part actor in a fantasy movie. He finds a shiny sword in Props, and when the sword is summoned back to the land of Quamarr by the sorceress Aurilia Red goes too and finds he's a correlate of Red Corodel, the hero who originally wielded it. After the usual "wow, a whole other world" explanation is glossed over with a quick blow to the head he agrees to go off questing for a kidnapped princess along with Aurelia and Krost, an interesting character who appears to be your average Porthos-style big lug but is actually a dwarf giant (think about it). The kidnapped princess is with the "kidnapper" entirely of her own accord and the two are busily engaged in sacrificing sorceresses to gain power over a demon from another dimension.

"Apotheosis" is the code name of the chief sorcerer (whom we never meet) Lebarran, whose plan to invoke "the unformed" – the demon – and bring it across to Quamarr's world is preempted by the bad guy Talonimal's plan to get in there first using none of your namby pamby consensus of sorcerers to control the power but relying on straightforward sadistic bloodletting... Given the propensity of the unmotivated healer Hallifort to turn up in improbable places to save Red's life at moments of crisis, presumably he's going to turn out to be Lebarran (or else, I suppose, Lebarran's nemesis) in the usual sequels. This was an OK fast read but all the time I kept wondering why no use was made of Red's actor background.

**I**n Christopher Stasheff's *The Witch Doctor*, book three of "A Wizard in Rhyme" (Del Rey, \$20) one of those wish-fulfilment English majors – you know, the despised wimp with no friends, an encyclopedic knowledge of literature and a quiet hobby in karate – gets sucked off into an alternate universe via the bite of a spider. He is a mighty wizard there, because if you

can rhyme it you can create it, but the twist is that this is a very theologically simple universe, in which the power behind the rhyming couplets has to come from either good or evil. The hero Saul refuses to join up with either side, in spite of guardian angels and visible demons, and his attempt to hold on to a moral balance provides much of the plot motivation.

It doesn't, however, work. Because Saul is a clear hero from day one, and he can badmouth his guardian angel all he wants, there is absolutely no surprise to be had in his activities. I was enjoying the book hugely at first but it stops being a hoot when it begins to get too pious on us and comes off like a Victorian morality tale. Good for giving to the really seriously weird ultra-religious types who believe all enjoyable literature is evil: but this is no C.S. Lewis and will make no converts of its own.

**F**inally, I looked forward to spending some time with L.E. Modesitt Jr's *The Magic Engineer* (Tor, \$23.95) because I had enjoyed the previous two "Recluce" books. However this one is deeply irritating on account of being written in the present tense for absolutely no apparent reason and also because of its irksomely predictable plot. The hero, Dorrin, is apprentice healer, apprentice smith and aspiring engineer and is exiled from Recluce because he doesn't fit in (I wish Modesitt would explain how on earth or any other planet Recluce could function if it lobotomized itself by exiling anyone with half a brain cell or who had an adolescent angst attack). Dorrin puts in the required time at the charmingly named Recluce "Academy of Useless and Violent Knowledge" and then goes into exile where he has to put together his own household and living circumstances in the face of implacable enmity from the white wizards of chaos.

This is another of those tales where the villain makes the classic mistake of pursuing a hero whose heroism develops only because of the opposition, who would have been a happy nobody if he had been left in peace to practice fretwork and midwifery: life's too short for this.

(Wendy Bradley)

## Decadence and Etiolation

Chris Gilmore

**I**t's a decadent selection this month, what with necromancy, madness in several flavours and Pete Crowther's etiolated taste in horror, so who better than to kick off than Tanith Lee.

Writing of *Nightshades*, her most

recent collection, I commented that she was on a roll, and her publisher was keen to sustain the momentum. This is even more true of *Eva Fair-death* (Headline, £8.99), a post-débâcle novel which has lain in the bottom drawer since 1972. They're scraping the barrel, but the scrapings of Lee's barrel (or Lee's lees?) are better than many a writer's best wine.

It's set in a world of dark-age squalor superimposed on the polluted/irradiated wreckage of the 20th century; a few people still have operating generators, but (predictably enough) firearms are the only aspect of industrial technology which still generally works. As such, it's as close an approach to conventional sf as Lee has ever made – stronger aspects than the heroine's name recall Edgar Pangborn's *The Judgment of Eve*. It's even more reminiscent of Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains*. This noted, it isn't one of Lee's better books.

In the aptly named village of Foulmarsh the sharp-witted, sharp-tongued albino mutant Eva can see no better prospect than suffering the beatings and (assuming she's fertile) bearing the children of a clod until released by early and sordid death. Driven half mad by it, she seizes the first opportunity to present itself. A travelling preacher appears at Foulmarsh, shadowed closely by a taciturn and sinister gentleman whom Eva privately names (and sometimes addresses as) Steel, and who casually blows the preacher's brains out (apparently on general principles) before proceeding on his way. He is hotly pursued by the vengeful villagers and by Eva, who has decided even on this brief and uncomfortable acquaintance to throw in her lot with his. It's just about credible, given some rather extreme assumptions about life in Foulmarsh and Steel's masculine allure, but (as often since) Lee disdains the naturalistic. As soon as they reach anything resembling civilization, Eva is demanding that he buy her "A silk dress? From a shop? With money?" That Eva is less than semi-literate, has never entered a shop, has no idea what silk feels like and has spent her entire life in a barter economy, is so much smoke. Lee has established the character of a bizarre sexual and domestic relationship.

The parallel with Sovaz from *Nightshades* is obvious, and I recommend those interested to read them close together. The pampered pet Sovaz in her gilded cage and the abused waif Eva are both bound to enigmatic and infuriating men by love, by hatred and by dependence more than either. Both are more-or-less crazy, and while both could fairly blame an unnatural environment for a proportion of their eccentricity, both have a natural gift for it. Both find alternative lovers



(Eva's is called Sail, and has an undefined relationship with Steel) disastrously refreshing to the parts their rivals cannot reach.

This is early work, and Lee had yet to find that oblique slant on reality which suits her best. She alternates unsteadily between symbolism and the sf pseudo-western (complete with cows' skulls on the trail), and much of the story is sustained by the conversational inadequacies of the two men in Eva's life. Steel refuses a straight answer to even the most reasonable questions, while the allusive wit of Sail's sallies may amuse the reader, but are guaranteed to go over Eva's head. Irritating in all conscience, but insufficient to excuse or explain Eva's rapid and hysterical descent into unmitigated bitchiness, which alienated this reader rather faster than it alienates her lovers.

Lee makes no attempt to disguise her own dissatisfaction with the story, for which she provides two alternative endings, rather in the manner of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* – though she shows much less interest than Fowles ever did in the reader's choice. I think she's right; I'd have been sorry to hear that the only MS of this book had been recycled as loo-roll, but I'm glad to learn from the introduction that Lee wasted little time on re-editing it. Roll on the *real* next Lee novel – the one that comes after *Elephantasm*!

As genres become successful, tendencies within them begin to polarize until they divide, like well-fed amoebae. That seems to be happening to genre horror; at the tacky end of the market the form has degenerated into a sort of pornography for those whose inclination is more towards algolagnia than fornication, while tales from the staid end may well contain less overt gore and grue than a *Boys' Own* story from the 30s. Peter Crowther's anthology **Touch Wood: Narrow Houses Volume Two** (Little Brown, £15.99) is distinctly literary, and at times too low-key for its own good. It's loosely themed to superstition, but J.F. Burke's title "Tales of Unease" would suit it rather better than its own, with its unfulfilled promise of charnel houses and the worm that dieth not.

It opens weakly, with a dithyrambic "poem" by t. (sic) Winter-Damon, of whose prosody it is quite enough to say that tW-D evidently believes that when the words behind, amidst, beware, across and about don't happen to fit your metre, it's OK to shorten them to 'hind, 'midst, 'ware, 'cross and 'bout. No, Virginia, that is *not* poetic licence. Crowther is a much better judge of prose – nothing else in the book is remotely so ill-written.

The stories themselves are long on craftsmanship and, except for Bentley

Little's "The Woods are Dark," short on blood – and guts. Newly divorced women set about rebuilding their lives; lovers have tiffs; boys feel the first stirrings of manhood (or, in John Brunner's story, a young man's boyhood catches up with him); great numbers of people move house. In the background there is a feeling of something not quite right, that rationality is not the universal key, that something monstrous may be lurking in the woodshed – most of all, that the people whom the social conventions require us to trust may be *alien*; not necessarily malevolent, but irredeemably unsympathetic. They march to a music we cannot hear and would not understand, and should they maim us in their marching, our agony is *nothing* – certainly, they will not break step long enough to stamp surcease on our squirmings.

I have nothing against this sort of story – far from it; but over 300 pages of them come to cloy rather quickly. The endings are generally predictable or (Stan Nicholls's "Spoil," Spider Robinson's "His Own Petard") inconsequential, and there's a sameness in the characters which may well be justified on psychological grounds, but produces a leaden effect in the long run; the nameless, half-seen monsters are always more vital than the mere humans. It is symptomatic that in one of the few where the human triumphs (Colin Greenland's "Lodgings") she does so by taking on monstrous attributes. On the plus side, some are genuinely witty, especially Thomas F. Monteleone's "The Wager" and Stanley Wiater's "Mysterries of the Word."

Of course, as a reviewer I read the book in one chunk, which is not the right way. To get the best of it, ration yourself to a weekly treat of one story for half a year. The best week will be the one with Stella Hargreaves's "Steps," a fine study of obsessional neurosis à deux. I don't specify a time of day, but if it's late and you want nightmares, eat plenty of highly spiced, half-melted cheese – you're going to need it.

There's a lot more of the conventionally horrific in Paula Volsky's **The Wolf of Winter** (Bantam, £4.99) a tale of sword and plenty of Sorcery with strong elements of Jekyll and Hyde. The life of Varis, youngest brother of the Ulor (king) of the northern land of Rhazaulle, is made miserable by his hypersensitive eyes, a serious handicap in a country where snow-blindness is a daily hazard. By accident he discovers that the drugs used for the illegal and dangerous practice of necromancy can cure his condition, though at the price of addiction and escalating side-effects. Worse still, it is impossible to stay on the stuff without becoming involved in necro-

mancy (for which Varis soon finds a natural talent), and its attendant risk of "spifflication," a word which here belies its curious etymology and comic overtones – sooner or later necromancy blows the mind permanently.

Volsky's writing is conventional, but more than usually well done. There is humour amid the horror, and her eye for detail is first class. The atmosphere of the court, which rather resembles Norwegian decadence as visualized in the perfervid imagination of a puritanical Swede, comes across especially well, and allows her to develop a useful sub-plot in the romance between the Duchess of Otreska, neglected sister-in-law to the Ulor, and King Dasune, come to cement a treaty. Will she manage to ditch her oafish husband? What will become of the children if she does? Small but interesting questions beside the big one – will Varis conquer his ignoble craving, or will it drag him into depravity, madness and disgrace?

Then the tone suddenly switches, along with the viewpoint. Varis becomes wholly hateful, and sets to cutting down the relatives who stand between himself and the throne with the devious gusto of Richard III. Once they are reduced to a single nephew and niece (Shalindra, who takes over the principal viewpoint), the book takes on the new and less interesting character of a pursuit/revenge melodrama. Perils-of-Pauline can still be well done, as Volsky proves, but it's been done before a lot more often than *Macbeth*. The youth and innocence of the new protagonist forces the book to take on much of the character of a juvenile, in stark contrast to the opening chapters. Volsky is well aware of this, and makes a point of introducing many juvenile genre clichés only to reverse them, but they are clichés nonetheless.

Things improve when Shalindra, by now grown up, is confronted with Varis, by now on the edge of spifflication but full of old political and necromantic ambitions and new sexual ones, in all of which she figures. Yet he has not become entirely evil; his ambition was to be an enlightened despot, and the strong implication is that had Shalindra and her brother not reappeared he would have achieved it – he was well on the way. And the ending? Now, I wouldn't tell you that! But I can say it aches for a sequel.

That a writer kills himself at an early age proves nothing about the quality of his writing, yet it suggests that he may have been a man of powerful emotions, which the writing may reflect. Such was the fate of the acknowledged decadent, Mário de Sá-Carneiro, whose short novel of 1913, **Lucio's Confession**, is now available in English for the first time, issued by

Dedalus at £6.99 in a workmanlike translation by Margaret Jull Costa.

The introduction by Eugénio Lisboa confesses that it is "a dated book, full of aesthetic mannerisms typical of the time." I have to concur; it puts me in mind of nothing so much as *Teleny*, the homosexual love story of two decades previously (and the time when the book is set) which is often attributed to Wilde. It suffers by comparison; the central relationship, between the successful novelist and playwright, Lucio, who narrates the tale, and Ricardo, the rich poet, is too ethereal to arouse much interest.

The two meet at a soirée in Paris, where the principal entertainment is a lavishly produced and lewdly choreographed programme of striptease, described by the author in self-indulgent detail. Well enough for those who don't mind some mildly pornographic writing, though for Lucio the show is a flop:

But, however perverse, none of these marvels aroused in us lubricious or bestial desires, rather they stirred up an extraordinary and delicious longing in the soul that both burned and soothed.

As Heinlein remarked, a few such unfortunates are born in every generation; all right, how about each other? No. The friendship of Lucio and Ricardo is entirely chaste, and consists for the most part of Lucio listening while Ricardo describes and defines in great detail the agony to which his soul is constantly subject, and laments his failure to enter into "Life with a capital L," a phrase which has rather lost its lustre in the last eight decades. It's all very silly and affected, and put me in mind of Peacock's prescient description of the novel of the future:

The ancient Odyssey, which held forth a shining example of the endurance of real misfortune, will give place to a modern one, setting out a more instructive picture of querulous impatience under imaginary evils [from *Nightmare Abbey*, 1818].

Then Ricardo goes back to Lisbon, and a year later invites Lucio to visit him and meet his new wife, Marta. At this point the novel picks up, as Marta is a woman of mystery – not least, how and where did a man of Ricardo's habits and temperament meet her? She appears to have no antecedents, no tastes, no *raison d'être* except as Ricardo's wife – or mistress, for Lucio has some doubt as to whether they are actually married. Even her physical reality is questionable – she sometimes seems to fade out when no one is paying her much attention, like Bishop Berkeley's rock.

Most curious of all, only Lucio notices any of these anomalies. Surely she's nothing so common as a vampire, but a lamia? a muse? a familiar spirit? It begins to prey on Lucio's mind, and he pursues the mystery, but what he

catches is the woman herself. They become lovers (she making all the running) with, it seems, Ricardo's tacit approval, as their behaviour is too blatant not to arouse suspicion. This does nothing to resolve the mystery, and Lucio begins to notice gaps in his own memory; things he knows he has done exist in his mind only like things he has read about. Is he going crazy, and if so, is it because of her?

Despite the folly and pretentiousness, and although the ending is swiped from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *LC* works well enough if you can accept its assumptions; Sá-Carneiro's depiction of a mind collapsing, albeit from the impact of self-inflicted wounds, is extremely skilful. It's a pity Beardsley didn't live to illustrate it – and it's also a pity the writer didn't live to grow up.

(Chris Gilmore)

## Home Sweet Cave!

Peter Crowther

Romulus Ledbetter, the eponymous protagonist of *The Caveman* (Little, Brown, £15.99; originally published in the USA by Warner as *The Caveman's Valentine*), George Dawes Green's literate, engrossing and wildly inventive debut novel, is a man beset by personal demons of such magnitude and ferocity that his solution has been to drop out of Society and live in a cave in New York City's Inwood Park.

It is from this protected vantage point that Romulus, dressed in little more than dirt, scabs, a few old clothes and a saucepan (his hat), is able to observe the activities of his imagined adversary, C.G. Stuyvesant, and defend himself against the dreaded Y-Rays (and even Z-Rays) that Stuyvesant sends out from his tower stronghold, known locally (in fact, known to all but Romulus!) as the Chrysler Building.

It is a simple and undemanding life during which Romulus occupies his time by "watching" a series of imagined and very personal programmes on his unpowered television set, checking his similarly inoperative telephone answering machine and enjoying hotch-potch meal concoctions salvaged from the trashcans outside fashionable Manhattan eateries. In addition, he strives to make sense of the waves of angst and anger supplied by the constantly fluttering moth seraphs which occupy his head, occasionally sharing his meagre facilities with Cyclops, an equally unfortunate female tramp beset by problems of her own.

One morning, a dead body lies outside the cave entrance and it is this discovery which, in his desperate need to investigate and prove it to be the work of the nefarious Stuyvesant, is to plunge the hapless Romulus into a helter-skelter of murder, torture, pornography and personal despair.

In the course of his investigations, Romulus revisits the family home he left almost 20 years ago, plays piano at the house of a noted and wealthy socialite photographer (regaling other guests while he does so with a torrent of paranoia and profanity) and endures a dizzying sequence of pursuits and attempts on his life... only some of which are imagined.

It is here that Green's prose is at its most effective, skilfully melding the fitfully surreal world of Romulus's imagination with the equally bizarre reality of late 20th-century New York, as events unfold and the true story behind the dead man and an insight into the Caveman's situation become clear.

Witty, eloquent and poignant, *The Caveman* is an absolute joy to read. As of end of May, this is strong contender for book of the year as far as the "dark suspense" category goes, and it's a cert for Best First Novel. Very highly recommended.

Ron Faust's *In the Forest of the Night* (Tor, \$5.99) caused quite a stir in the adventure-story field when it came out last year, picking up plaudits aplenty and earning Faust comparisons (from no less than five respected critics, including Robert Bloch) with Ernest Hemingway. The soubriquet of "the New Papa" may be a little premature but the book is an impressive testament to Faust's plotting and storytelling skills. The same goes for his follow-up novel, *When She Was Bad* (Forge, \$22.95)... only doubly so.

Although by no means "horror," *When She Was Bad* is the kind of noir suspense yarn that Jim Thompson and James M. Cain used to turn out so apparently effortlessly in the halcyon days of the 1950s, and the inevitable femme-fatale and gullible-male protagonist roles were never better realized than they are in Christine Terry and Dan Stark.

Inviting inevitable comparisons to Charles Williams's *Dead Calm* (and the recent *Adrift* movie), *When She Was Bad* does however soon veer onto its own equally stormy nautical course, a course which begins with cynical newsman/boat-owner Stark covering the arrival in port of the survivor of a beleaguered small boat which had drifted some 500 miles off its planned route. The woman is clearly affected by her ordeal...but Stark quickly suspects there's more to the story. What happened to her husband,



for example? And how did the boat come to be so far off its course?

Even as he begins his investigation, Stark is deeply attracted to the woman and she quickly talks him into embarking on a quest for the sunken boat and its valuable cargo. But he soon realizes that Mrs Terry isn't all – nor even whom – she professes to be. And she's not a lady who takes particularly kindly to partners.

The realization of this latter fact comes almost too late, when only Stark's ingenuity and determination manage to save his life. From then on, he follows her through a dizzying array of locations and identities – over the course of many years – to repay debts and set the records straight. Needless to say, he believes he has achieved this on more than one occasion but the redoubtable Mrs Terry is a resourceful and formidable lady.

Both this book and *The Caveman* (above) sit in that virtually uncategorizable middle ground which exists between horror and crime, a sub-genre already effectively plumbed by Thomas Harris (*Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs*) and the likes of David Lindsay (*A Cold Mind* and *Mercy*) and David Martin (*Lie To Me*). But *When She Was Bad* goes one step further by recalling all the style and verve of the old John D. MacDonald Gold Medal books and, by virtue of its unforgettable female antagonist, Cain's *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Thoroughly enjoyable and completely absorbing, it's another compulsory purchase.

There's another Stark, too, in Michael Marshall Smith's eagerly awaited debut novel *Only Forward* (HarperCollins, £4.99), which is a curious affair, particularly given the author's award-laden short fiction. Both "The Man Who Drew Cats" and "The Dark Land," the latter being Smith's contribution to Nick Royle's *Darklands* anthology, picked up the British Fantasy Society's Best Short Story Award for their respective years. And rightly so.

In a very short time, Smith has established himself as a singular and quite original voice, standing just to the side of the current vogue – affectionately known as *miserabilism*, one of those terms you wish you'd coined yourself – which permeates British horror short-fiction and pulling together the inner-city, cobbled-street anxieties of Ramsey Campbell and the surreal simplicity of Jorge Luis Borges. It is because of this that *Only Forward* comes as something of a surprise... sometimes a pleasant one, sometimes something of a disappointment.

The novel is a marriage of sorts, veering initially between an occasionally uncomfortable parody of hardboiled

private-eye narrative and the bleakness of Philip K. Dick's cautionary tales of far-out futures. Then, as the complexities of the plot thin out, with further doffs of the cap to even more sub-genres, the book assumes a strange and often ill-fitting mantle of existential and metaphysical theorizing to become, ultimately, a construction of allegory and invention which, in its scathingly detailed analysis of the destructiveness of imagination and the destructiveness of loneliness, is, it must be said, quite breathtaking.

After a brief prologue in which a headless man knocks on the door of a young boy alone in a house in order to ask the way home, the story follows the adventures of Stark, an occasional investigator with questionable ethics and a predilection for nicotine, as he hunts down a missing Actioneer. The subject of the investigation has apparently been kidnapped from the Centre, just one of many bizarre self-contained Neighbourhoods in The City, a sprawling Megalopolis set in an unspecified future. Others include Turn Again, Red, Io!, Colour (where the streets and buildings are programmed to correspond to mood and clothing), Sound (in which none is allowed), Cat (inhabited only by cats), Yo!, Sniff, Natsci ("sweet little men and women in white coats dashing about the place, twiddling dials and programming things..."), Fnaph (the inhabitants of which believe "that each man has a soul shaped like a frisbee and spend their whole lives trying to throw themselves as high as possible, trying to get to heaven"), Fat and Stable, a walled retreat populated by people who believe (by virtue of specially programmed windows which show only swirling red clouds of radioactive destruction) that their Neighbourhood is the only one on the planet.

Stark must follow the trail through many of these and, eventually, into the strangest Neighbourhood of all, Jeamland, the realm of dream which may also be entered by non-sleepers providing a strange ritual is first performed. Eventually, of course, things become clearer and all is explained. En route, however, it's an intoxicating trip, blending Joseph Heller and Douglas Adams with *2000AD* comic strips and Mickey Spillane crime capers. Here are walls that compliment you on your clothes, radical elevators that whisper conspiratorially, argumentative surveillance analysers, and condemned men who have their DNA neutralized so that it closes down in one year – many of them have display tissue bearing a digital read-out of the time they have left grafted onto their foreheads ("Often it gets them served quicker in restaurants because the staff can see the guy doesn't have much time to waste. Especially in the last

week, when the numbers flash on and off in bright red.")

*Only Forward* hits the finish-line as a book which, on reflection, spends rather more time showing off its smarts than in really preparing the reader for the very articulate questions and hypotheses it poses in the final 20 or so pages.

And, finally, one for the real dyed-in-the-wool Stephen King completist.

We all know of King's love of music simply from reading his books, and we've all seen how he's quick to stand up and be counted when something or someone he admires needs the golden seal of approval afforded by a few well-chosen in the way of an endorsement. The latest example of both of these interests comes with the release of Al Kooper's **Kooperation** (MusicMasters #01612-65107-2, about £14), for which King provides the sleeve notes.

*Kooperation* marks Kooper's return to solo recording after a break of 12 years. With such an impressive pedigree – organ on Dylan's "Like A Rolling Stone," founder member of The Blues Project and Blood Sweat and Tears, producer of Nils Lofgren and Lynyrd Skynyrd, and one-time partner of the late Mike Bloomfield – Kooper's all-instrumental comeback may be something of a disappointment to long-time fans but King recognizes the man's prowess on a keyboard. "This is an amazingly eclectic selection (try to say that five times fast)," he trills at one point, clearly enjoying both himself and the music.

So just how good is it? Well, it's good but it's not indispensable. But then, any appreciation of music – just like any appreciation of books (and, indeed, endorsements) – is entirely subjective. "A lot of years ago," King says, in typical story-telling mode, "Al Kooper played on Tom Rush's first electric album, and penned the liner notes. Of the song *Too Much Monkey Business* he wrote simply, 'Just a helluva lot of fun – God bless Chuck Berry.' The same could be said of *Rekooperation*: just a helluva lot of fun.

"God bless Al Kooper."

Quite so.

(Pete Crowther)

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## Small-Press Reviews Paul Beardsley

**A**lternities edited by Mark Rose, 39 Balfour Court, Station Road, Harpenden, Herts AL5 4XT. Bimonthly, A5, 56-64pp, £1.25 per issue, £6.50 for 6.

Insofar as the small press is concerned, complaining that there's too much science in sf is like complaining there's too much water in the desert. Given this, the letter writers of *Alter-nities* can be likened to the sandworms of *Dune*, which bothers me no end. What do they want, a literary equivalent of Saturday-morning cartoons?

Issue 15 has a psychedelic colour cover to mark a special occasion (i.e. the 15th issue). It serves up a couple of good stories, notably John Gaunt's Lovecraft pastiche, "Chill," and Mike Anders' "Can," in which a cyberspace cowboy goes for a fishing trip with his father. Most of the others are really quite bad. Stuart Hardy trundles out the cave-that's-really-a-giant-mouth cliché, and an author I won't name seems to think that Hell is a woman's private parts. Mary Scott-Parker provides a humorous story about a Bogrol – "like a Balrog, only longer, stronger, and... a touch more absorbent." This, alas, is as funny as it gets.

The non-fiction is much better. There's a serious computer game review, and a fascinating article on *Terminator 2*. Nigel Long's almost-non-fiction "Tuesday Telesoap Low-down" really does feel like a *Radio Times* from the future. Andy Cox has been given a regular comment column – here, he complains about too much science...

My verdict – good fanzine, so-so fiction 'zine – applies also to issue 16, which arrived within its bimonthly schedule, unfortunately plagued with typos. David Logan's "Shirley's Jesus," an unusually (for him) serious story about illness and faith, was badly afflicted – the mood is sort of lost when you learn that Shirley has "ling cancer." Of the comparatively unscathed fiction, D.F. Lewis' "Small Talk" stands out because it is long, lucid and witty. Stephen Smith's "Dancin'," a reasonable attempt at evoking an alien culture, wins the Bad Science award for its beasts that (somehow) metabolize helium from their food. The usually dependable Paul Pinn provides a bad Lewis Carroll pastiche, and Mark Cantrell has clerks turning into insects, almost as if it's never been done before.

*Red Dwarf* is given the scholarly once-over this time, and Andy Cox chooses *Interzone* as this issue's main target. Meanwhile, Cox's own magazine, *The Third Alternative*, makes it to second issue on schedule.

**The Third Alternative** edited by Andy Cox, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs CB6 2LB. Quarterly, A5, 52pp, £2.50 per issue, £9 for 4.

The thing that immediately impressed me about the first issue was Dave Mooring's cover. The second issue's cover, by Rik Rawling, of a gaunt, empty-eyed man and a printed line

from "Stairway to Heaven" is something of a backward step. Certainly it detracts from the fine, glossy presentation of the rest of the magazine.

The editorial and much of the letters page are taken up with a debate about Chris Kenworthy's "The Movement of Hands," the previous issue's "Comment" column (see review, *Interzone* 84). Generally, though, this Slipstream manifesto has little bearing on the magazine's contents, and no bearing at all on Kenworthy's own fiction contribution. His "White Carrier Bags" is a conventional (if pompous) piece of pornography: "I would kneel over her chest, the soft part of my thighs against her breast, wanking into her mouth while she rubbed herself." And so it goes on, the author doubtlessly thinking he's transcending a genre or something. David Logan's "The Giant Black Mouth of Possibilities," in the same issue, is similar – longer, less coarse, better observed, but equally pointless.

Then there's Peter Crowther's "Incident on Bleeker Street." The opening sentence begins, "With a sharpened crackle and a soft but resonant ping like a throaty memory hitting a far-off spittoon..." and continues for another 118 words. Contrived and obvious techniques like bloody ridiculous sentence lengths do not conceal the story's lack of content. "The Flicks" by Brian Louis Pearce is a mess of almost-random words; "Apple for Teecha" by Jim Steel is a mess of almost-random events. Experiments we've seen before and will no doubt see again.

There is some good stuff here. "Softly Under Glass," by Neil Williamson, is a coherent narrative about an art gallery owner getting his come-uppance. It's a good art story in its own right, possibly a comment on the attitudes of certain fiction magazine editors. Then there's a powerfully understated travelogue drama from Paul Pinn, and a scholarly piece about beer from Paul Di Filippo, which defies description but is easy enough to enjoy, possibly a comment on beer itself...er, maybe not. Howard V. Hendrix reviews Bruce Boston's novel *Stained Glass Rain* from a very personal perspective. To his credit, he does not condemn the book for its being "politically incorrect."

I had expected more than this, given the promise of the first issue.

**The Science of Sadness** (anthology), edited by Chris Kenworthy. Barrington Books, Bartle Hall, Liverpool Road, Hutton, Preston, Lancs PR4 5HB. 140pp, £4.99 (£5.50 inc p&p).

A slightly different version of Chris Kenworthy's "The Movement of Hands" appears as the introduction to his third anthology. Here he describes slipstream as "an emergent phenomena," so it is fortunate that this version omits the remark that genre writers

"don't know how to write." (I would be less picky if the claims for slipstream, made here and elsewhere, were less inflated – when people describe it as the interface between genre and mainstream, for instance, I wonder if they've actually read any mainstream.)

There are 14 stories in this book, most of them very short. The first, "Delirium" by Rachel M. Jones, is a nicely-textured piece about a woman who loses her lesbian lover but gains an animated stone creature. Well, it makes sense when you read it. Brian Howell's "She Stands in Flame," on the other hand, has no fantastical elements, and is all the more powerful for that – it's one of those horror stories that you can't quite believe didn't happen.

The imagery in "Pussycat" is one of the main selling points of the anthology – a daffodil stem pushed into an open wound, and the sea emptying itself of bodies. Unfortunately author Andrew Hook chooses to include some annoying "techniques," such as deliberately changing scene mid-sentence without telling the reader. That's followed by two half-stories by D.F. Lewis seamlessly merged into one: "The First Mover," a mix of the fantastic and toilet humour. To my shame I found it very funny.

There's bleak humour and startling imagery in Joel Lane's "Like Shattered Stone," about a sculptor who sculpts way beyond his own ability while he sleeps. Excellent stuff. As is Nicholas Royle's "The Mad Woman," about a man who (rather hypocritically, to no one's surprise) is desperately seeking a relationship with a woman who isn't a weirdo, following his bad experience with the woman of the title. The story meanders in a manner reminiscent of one of Ronnie Corbett's armchair anecdotes – except that the Royle is funny.

Caroline Dunford's "The Shadow Pane" is a story about bereavement seen in terms of an afterlife fantasy. Less powerful is Rick Cadger's "Clarity," a conventional fantasy based on a rather thin idea. Sarah-J. Evans' "The Parrot" is a portrait of bleak hopelessness, possibly intended as black comedy. "The Cog" by Conrad Williams is a tedious and unremarkable anarchy-in-the-UK piece.

The stories by Andy Cox, David Logan and Alyson Hallett are almost entirely devoid of content, but at least they're short. In the last of these, a woman punishes a man for being a man, which is apparently acceptable in the present PC climate. The last, least and longest story in the collection is Tim Nickels' silly and obscure "The Science of Sadness." I wonder if the editor included it just so he could use the title.

There's enough good stuff in here for me to recommend the anthology. It's got a satisfyingly literary feel, is easy to read and most of it is well worth re-



reading – the likes of “Pussycat” have to be re-read to be appreciated. Barrington Books, by the way, are also the publishers of Nicholas Royle’s novel *Counterparts*.

**S**ubstance edited by Paul Beardsley, 16 Blenheim Gardens, Havant, Hants, PO9 2PN. Details to be announced.

Call me an old reactionary but, much as I love a good slipstream story, my preference is for fiction with substance – rigorously researched, and about something concrete. Such fiction is woefully lacking in the small press, particularly with the loss (temporary or otherwise) of *New Moon*, *Far Point* and *R.E.M.* So I’m starting my own magazine, *Substance*, to be co-edited by former *Sound SF* producer Neville Barnes. If you’re interested, send an SAE for more information or contributors’ guidelines, to the above address. If successful, this may lead to the re-launch of the (long-forgotten?) *Sound SF: The Tape Magazine*.

(Paul Beardsley)

## Books Received

### May 1994

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.

Key to paperback descriptions: **A-format** = the usual small “mass-market” paperback (“Penguin size”); **B-format** = the larger “quality” paperback (“Picador size”); **C-format** = the still larger “oversize” trade paperback, usually a hardcover-size book bound in paper covers; **small-press paperback** = any unusual shape or size of paperback book used by a non-mainstream publisher.

Brin, David. **Glory Season**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-202-X, 600pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 74.) 9th June 1994.

Brin, David. **Otherness**. Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-29528-4, 355pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf collection, first published in the UK, 1994; proof copy received; it contains 13 stories, three of which – “The Giving Plague,” “Piecwork” and “What Continues, What Fails” – first appeared in *Interzone*.) 1st August 1994.

Brooks, Terry. **The Tangle Box: A Magic Kingdom of Landover Novel**. Legend, ISBN 0-09-931431-2, 334pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 19th May 1994.

Cady, Jack. **Street**. St Martin’s Press, ISBN 0-312-11455-9, 212pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; proof copy received; this American author seems to be a “literary” horror novelist, and has

been praised by Joyce Carol Oates and others.) *October* 1994.

Clarke, Arthur C. **The Hammer of God**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-229-1, 205pp, C-format paperback, cover by John Avon, £7.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1993.) 9th June 1994.

Covino, Michael. **The Negative**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-59498-5, 353pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Hollywood novel, first published in the USA, 1993; this debut novel by an American film critic and short-story writer is not sf or fantasy, but it’s about the making [or unmaking] of an sf movie, and it’s fun; you see, this seedy film-studies professor conceives the idea of stealing the final-cut negative of a Spielberg-type’s latest film, only to discover that the director concerned is only too pleased to get rid of what he considered an over-budget turkey; amusing complications ensue...) *Late entry: April (?) publication, received in May 1994.*

Edghill, Rosemary. **Speak Daggers to Her**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-85604-0, 222pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Crime/occult novel, first edition; it’s commended on the cover by Marion Zimmer Bradley and Tanya Huff; the American author has previously written four “acclaimed Regency romances”; under the name Eluki Bes Shahar, she has also written an sf trilogy for DAW Books; we’re not certain which is her real name, though *The Encyclopedia of SF* has her under “BES SHAHAR, ELUKI [1956- ]” with no other name shown.) *May 1994.*

Forster, Margaret. **Daphne du Maurier**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-933331-7, xviii+455pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Biography of the popular romantic/gothic novelist, first published in 1993; this book, although not the first biography of Du Maurier, has received an astonishing amount of praise.) *May 1994.*

Frost, Mark. **The List of Seven**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-930511-9, 426pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £4.99. (Horror/crime novel, first published in the USA [?], 1993; it features Arthur Conan Doyle as hero, and so belongs in the category of recursive “Holmesiana”; it’s a debut novel by a well-known screenwriter, co-creator of *Twin Peaks*, writer and director of the film *Storyville*; it looks to be good, and it’s a pity we weren’t sent a copy of the Hutchinson hardcover edition which appeared last year.) 2nd June 1994.

Furey, Maggie. **Aurian: Book One of The Artefacts of Power**. Legend, ISBN 0-09-927071-4, 611pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut book by a British writer who is being touted as “the new Queen of Epic Fantasy.”) 19th May 1994.

Gentle, Mary. **Left to His Own Devices**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-203-8, 282pp, C-format paperback, £8.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; proof copy received; it contains a new short novel, which is the title story, plus three other tales: “Black Motley” [1990], “The Road to Jerusalem” [1991] and “What God Abandoned” [1992].) 21st July 1994.

Goodkind, Terry. **Wizard’s First Rule**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85795-5, 573pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the accompanying letter from editor James Frenkel assures that this debut novel by a male American writer will be the biggest thing in fantasy since...er, J.R.R. Tolkien.) *September 1994.*

Green, Simon R. **Down Among the Dead Men**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05620-7, 221pp, A-format paperback, cover by David

Farren, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1993.) 23rd June 1994.

Harrison, Harry. **Galactic Dreams**. Illustrated by Bryn Barnard. Legend, ISBN 0-09-926151-0, 188pp, C-format paperback, cover by Keith Parkinson, £9.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1994; another Harrison sampler, similar in style to last year’s *Stainless Steel Visions*; it contains a number of older stories plus the new “Bill, the Galactic Hero’s Happy Holiday.”) 19th May 1994.

Jablokov, Alexander. **The Breath of Suspension**. Illustrated by J.K. Potter. Arkham House, ISBN 0-87054-167-6, viii+318pp, hardcover, \$20.95. (Sf collection, first edition; it contains ten stories, all of which were first published in *Asimov’s SF Magazine*.) 25th July 1994.

Janes, Phil. **The Galaxy Game**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-150-2, xii+212pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £4.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in 1993; reviewed by Mat Coward in *Interzone* 79.) *June 1994?*

Jones, Stephen, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Werewolves**. Robinson, ISBN 1-85487-268-0, xiii+496pp, B-format paperback, cover by Luis Rey, £5.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; it contains reprint stories by Clive Barker, Scott Bradfield, Ramsey Campbell, Suzy McKee Charnas, Manly Wade Wellman and others, plus original stories by Adrian Cole, Graham Masterton, Mark Morris, Kim Newman, Nicholas Royle, Michael Marshall Smith and other newer names.) 4th July 1994.

Kearney, Paul. **A Different Kingdom**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05713-0, 310pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Wright, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1993; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 81.) 9th June 1994.

Knight, Kelvin M. **More Miniature Magic: A Bilateral Collection of Arcane Incantations**. Knight [3 Saint Ronan’s Rd., Southsea, Hants. PO4 0PN], ISBN 1-899099-05-0, 54pp, small-press paperback, £3.50. (Fantasy collection, first edition; two long tales, self-published by a new writer; it’s a companion to his earlier *Miniature Magic*.) *No date shown: received in May 1994.*

Langford, David. **Irrational Numbers**. Illustrated by Jason C. Eckhardt. Necronomicon Press [PO Box 1304, West Warwick, RI 02893, USA], ISBN 0-940884-63-1, 34pp, small-press paperback, \$5.95. (Sf/horror collection, first edition; it contains three Langfordian tales, entitled “Deepnet,” “Serpent Eggs” and “The Lions in the Desert.”) *Late entry: April publication, received in May 1994.*

Laymon, Richard. **Endless Night**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4367-0, 470pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1993.) 2nd June 1994.

Laymon, Richard. **In the Dark**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0994-4, 313pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition (?).) 2nd June 1994.

Lively, Adam. **Sing the Body Electric: A Novel in Five Movements**. Vintage, ISBN 0-09-932281-1, 440pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1993; it’s commended on the cover by A.S. Byatt and Salman Rushdie, no less; the author [born 1961] is the son of novelist Penelope Lively, and this is his fourth novel.) 16th June 1994.

McCabe, Mary. **Everwinding Times**. Argyll Publishing [Glendaruel, Argyll PA22 3AE], ISBN 1-874640-55-6, 409pp, small-press paperback, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy [?] novel, first

edition; this first adult novel by a Glaswegian "successful writer for children" is not labelled as a genre book, but apparently the heroine time-travels into the future.) 5th May 1994.

McCaffrey, Anne. **To Ride Pegasus**. "The first volume in the epic saga of the Talents of Earth." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14180-1, 284pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1973; an old book which has since spawned belated sequels and thus become the first of a "new" series.) 30th June 1994.

McDonald, Ian. **Necroville**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05493-X, 318pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 21st July 1994.

Mann, Phillip. **A Land Fit for Heroes: Book 2, Stand Alone Stan**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05516-2, 288pp, hardcover, cover by Adrian Chesterman, £15.99. (Alternative-world sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 18th August 1994.

Marley, Stephen. **Shadow Sisters**. "A Dark Fantasy of Ancient China." Legend, ISBN 0-09-931481-9, 432pp, A-format paperback, cover by Trevor Scobie, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1993.) 16th June 1994.

Massie, Elizabeth. **Sineater**. Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-0061-0, 337pp, hardcover, \$21. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1992; proof copy received; this won a Bram Stoker Award as the best first novel of its year.) 27th June 1992.

Morrow, James. **Towing Jehovah**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-926301-7, 371pp, B-format paperback, cover by Mark Edwards, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994; about the discovery of God's corpse in the Atlantic ocean, if this one is as good as it sounds it may well be the book of the month.) 16th June 1994.

Park, Paul. **Coelestis**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21526-3, 261pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; reviewed, enthusiastically, by John Clute in *Interzone* 77.) 23rd May 1994.

Sinclair, Andrew. **The Sword and the Grail**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-928151-1, 249pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Occult non-fiction, first published in 1993; it has something to do with the Knights Templar, here "proved to be the true antecedents of the Freemasons," and their discovery of America, pre-Columbus; Sinclair [born 1935] is a hitherto distinguished British novelist, biographer, screenwriter and film director, author of the rather good semi-fantasy trilogy *Gog* [1967], *Magog* [1972] and *King Ludd* [1988]; so why is he producing this sort of semi-historical nonsense?; perhaps it's all true...) 2nd June 1994.

Smith, Karen Patricia. **The Fabulous Realm: A Literary-Historical Approach to British Fantasy, 1780-1990**. Scarecrow Press [distributed in Britain by Shelwing Ltd, 127 Sandgate Rd., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BL], ISBN 0-8108-2673-9, ix+521pp, hardcover, £55. (Study of British juvenile fantasy, first published in the USA, 1993; this is the US edition [published at \$55] with a higher British price; a big book, based on the author's PhD thesis, and one which may be of interest even if it's not quite what its subtitle promises - the word "Children's" should have been in there somewhere, as it deals exclusively with junior fiction, written for ages eight to 16; even *The Lord of the Rings* is considered too adult for extended treatment herein, although of course *The Hobbit* is analysed; a fuller review will follow in due course, we hope.) 25th July 1994.

Stephensen-Payne, Phil, and Gordon Benson, Jr. **H. Beam Piper: Emperor of Paratime - A Working Bibliography**. 4th edition. "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader Volume 6." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-40-8, 9+22pp, paperback, £1.50. (Sf author bibliography; the first edition was published in 1982.) *Late entry: April publication, received in May 1994.*

Stephensen-Payne, Phil, and Gordon Benson, Jr. **Wilson "Bob" Tucker: Wild Talent - A Working Bibliography**. 4th edition. "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader Volume 8." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-41-6, 9+29pp, paperback, £1.50. (Sf author bibliography; the first edition was published in 1982.) August 1994.

Tem, Melanie. **Revenant**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1072-1, 250pp, hardcover, cover by Larry Rostant, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition (?); although this may well be Tem's first book to appear in the UK, it's at least her fourth novel: earlier titles are *The Prodigal*, *Blood Moon* and *Wilding*, some of which have been praised by people like David Morrell and Dan Simmons.) 2nd June 1994.

Van Vogt, A.E. **Slan: Audio Movie**. Adapted by Bob E. Flick and Perry Jacob, and performed by Third Ear Radio Theatre. Ziggurat Productions [PO Box 292, Topanga, CA 90290, USA], ISBN 1-884214-00-2, two audio cassettes, \$12.95. (Audio adaptation of an sf novel first published in 1946; first edition; rather than a straight reading of the text, this is a full production job with a cast of 16, music and sound effects, hence the description "audio movie"; it's the first in an announced series of sf classics to be done in this format.) *Late entry: 1993 release, received in May 1994.*

Watling, George. **Claughton's Curtain**. Pentland Press [1 Hutton Close, South Church, Bishop Auckland, Durham DL14 6XB], ISBN 1-85821-152-2, 183pp, hardcover, £13.50. (Sf novel, first edition; set in the near future, this appears to be a debut novel by a new British writer.) 23rd May 1994.

Weis, Margaret, and Tracy Hickman. **Into the Labyrinth: A Death Gate Novel**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02392-7, 427pp, hardcover, cover by Stephen Youll, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993; sixth in the series.) 26th May 1994.

Weis, Margaret, and Tracy Hickman. **The Seventh Gate**. "The Conclusion to the Death Gate Cycle." Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-09647-8, 320pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 15th August 1994.

White, Michael. **Asimov: The Unauthorized Life**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-120-0, 257pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Biography of a leading sf author, first edition; it seems a bit on the slim side, given the vastness of Asimov's own output.) 12th May 1994.

Williamson, Philip G. **Heart of Shadows**. "A Chronicle of Firstworld." Legend, ISBN 0-09-931451-7, 312pp, C-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 16th June 1994.

Williamson, Philip G. **Moonblood**. "A Chronicle of Firstworld." Legend, ISBN 0-09-931461-4, 286pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1993; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 75.) 16th June 1994.

Wingrove, David. **Beneath the Tree of Heaven: Chung Kuo, Book Five**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-56415-0, xxi+409pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; this appeared late in 1993, but due to the changes of staff and general confusion caused by the merger of Hodder/NEL with Headline, it seems no review copies were sent out.) *Late entry: 1993 publication, received in May 1994.*

Zahn, Timothy. **Conqueror's Pride**. Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-56892-2, 389pp, A-format paperback, no price shown. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) September 1994.

Zelazny, Roger. **A Night in the Lonesome October**. Illustrated by Gahan Wilson. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-217-8, vi+280pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mike Posen, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993; an attractive package: nice title, nice cover, good Wilson cartoons, Bradburyesque text - and, above all, it's not another "Amber" book.) 19th May 1994.

Zindell, David. **The Broken God: Book One of A Requiem for Homo Sapiens**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21189-6, 862pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; reviewed, favourably, by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 77.) 23rd May 1994.

## Novelizations, Recursions, Spinoffs, Sequels by Other Hands, Shared Worlds and Sharecrops

*This is a list of all books received which fall into the above sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror (including non-fiction about shared worlds, etc).*

Allen, Roger MacBride. **Isaac Asimov's Caliban**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-168-5, 312pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ralph McQuarrie, £4.99. (Sf sharecrop novel, first published in the USA, 1993; copyright "Byron Preiss Visual Publications Inc.") June 1994?

Anderson, Kevin J. **Jedi Search: The Jedi Academy Trilogy, Volume 1**. "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40808-9, 354pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Alvin, £3.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 30th June 1994.

Costello, Matthew J. **SeaQuest DSV: Fire Below**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-212-6, 264pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV series novelization, first published in the USA [?], 1994; based on the TV series "created by Rockne S. O'Bannon.") June 1994?

Frost, Mark. **The List of Seven**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-930511-9, 426pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £4.99. (Horror/crime novel, first published in the USA [?], 1993; it features Arthur Conan Doyle as hero, and so belongs in the category of recursive "Holmesiana"; it's a debut novel by a well-known screenwriter, co-creator of *Twin Peaks*, writer and director of the film *Storyville*; it looks to be good, and it's a pity we weren't sent a copy of the Hutchinson hardcover edition which appeared last year.) 2nd June 1994.

Goldin, Stephen. **Trek to Madworld**. Introduction by David Gerrold. "Star Trek Adventures, 6." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-530-X, xii+178pp, A-format paperback, cover by Alistair Pearson, £4.50. (Sf television-and-film-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1978.) 23rd June 1994.



Lane, Andy. **All-Consuming Fire.** "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20415-8, 304pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jeff Cummins, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition; in which the Doctor meets Sherlock Holmes...; this is the first solo novel by an author who contributed articles on Holmesiana, Fu Manchu, etc, to the late *MILLION* magazine; among the friends he acknowledges here are well-known *Interzone* names Molly Brown, Liz Holliday, Ben Jeapes and Charles Stross.) 16th June 1994.

McCaffrey, Anne, and Margaret Ball. **PartnerShip.** "The Ship Who Sang is not alone!" Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-206-2, 323pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Harrison, £16.99. (Sf sharecrop novel, first published in the USA, 1992; sequel to McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang*, and first in a series presumably written by the less famous authors involved; it's copyright "Bill Fawcett and Associates," a packaging company; there is a simultaneous paperback edition [not seen].) 9th June 1994.

McCaffrey, Anne, and Mercedes Lackey. **The Ship Who Searched.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-210-0, 312pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf sharecrop novel, first published in the USA, 1992; second in the sub-series referred to in the previous entry; it's copyright "Bill Fawcett and Associates"; there is a simultaneous paperback edition [not seen].) 9th June 1994.

Marinaccio, Dave. **All I Really Need to Know I Learned from Watching Star Trek.** Titan, ISBN 1-85286-555-5, 128pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Non-fiction comment inspired by the sf TV series, first published in the USA, 1994; it's described on the back cover as a work about "Star Trek/Philosophy.") 23rd June 1994.

Wolverton, Dave. **The Courtship of Princess Leia.** "Star Wars." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03580-1, 327pp, hardcover, cover by Drew Struzan, £9.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1994; the fifth of the new "Star Wars" novels by various hands to appear in hardcover [although there is also a paperback-original series - see under Kevin Anderson, above].) 30th June 1994.

## Interzone Back Issues

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**No. 10:** interviews with Juliet Dymoke, Carl Hiaasen, Andrew Vachss, Jonathan Kellerman, etc; David Langford on Rex Stout; Leslie Charteris "Saint" feature; Brian Stableford on Bulwer Lytton; etc.

**No. 11:** interviews with Keith Waterhouse, Reginald Hill, James Herbert, etc; Garry Kilworth on Animal Fantasy; Graham Andrews on Richard S. Prather; Michael Crichton and P. Berresford Ellis features; Brian Stableford on Eugene Sue; etc.

**No. 12:** interviews with David Nobbs, Dinah Lampitt, etc; S.T. Joshi on Robert Aickman; *Saturday Evening Post* and Fay Weldon features; Brian Stableford on Robert Graves; etc.

**No. 13:** interviews with Clive Barker, Evelyn Anthony, Ed Gorman, etc; S.T. Joshi on Stephen King; Dracula and Biggles features; Brian Stableford on James Hilton; and much more.

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