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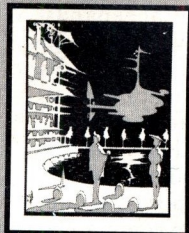
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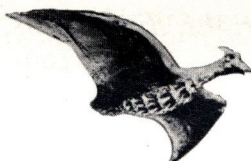
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Interface



At the recent 1995 World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow, Interzone won the Hugo award for "Best Semi-Professional Magazine." Other British nominees also won Hugos. Above we see, from left to right, Jim Burns, David Pringle, and David Langford holding their 1995 Hugo awards for, respectively, Best Artist, Best Semi-Prozine, Best Fan Writer and Best Fanzine (Ansible).



Interaction

Dear Editors:

I would like to offer my congratulations to you on your 100th issue of *Interzone* and your recent Hugo Award. I have been subscribing to your magazine now for a few years and I am still of the opinion that it is the best one on the market.

The fiction is of top quality, and the reviews also. Your magazine has introduced me to writers I would otherwise never have heard of: Greg Egan, Nicola Griffith, Richard Calder, Paul Park, etc, etc. Thank you for providing us mere mortals with an informative, intelligent, high-quality sf magazine. Here's to the next 100 issues!

Adrian Marley
Ireland

Dear Editors:

In *IZ* 99's "Interface" David Pringle makes some interesting comparisons between the history of the western and that of sf; however, I think he is being overly pessimistic in the predicting the virtual death of the genre, and for two reasons.

First, the western is a much more limited genre than sf, being constrained to one continent over one relatively short period of history. The western as we know it begins, at the earliest, with the Declaration of Independence, and ends, at the latest, in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution. A period of 150 years. In contrast, sf has not just the entire universe to roam in, but an infinite number of parallel universes, and all

of history, past, present and future. The range of plot material expands far beyond that of the western. Likewise, sf is much more capable of discussing philosophical, metaphysical issues, or dealing in such areas as surrealism or horror. Given the comparatively more limited nature of the western, it is in retrospect less surprising that it died as a commercial genre, especially as a cinematic one faced with high budgets, than that it survived for so long – a testament to the very high quality of many of the films in later years? Yet, essentially, they drove the horses till they dropped, utterly exhausted, and with nowhere left to go but to take the mickey (*Blazing Saddles*, or last year's *Maverick*). For decades the western was the mirror to American dreams, but then Americans moved to the cities, and moved on.

Second, the western, which began as a contemporary form – much as did the hardboiled detective novel in *Black Mask* and the other pulps – gradually became a historical form, and one finally of nostalgia. As American life became urbanized the western lost relevance, and became, for a while, merely the predominant form of escapist entertainment. Ultimately it became an elegy for a lost world, while other genres appeared which served much the same function of reflecting America back on itself: the Warner crime melodramas of the 30s, *film noir* of the 40s, and then sf in the 50s and 60s. The difference with sf is that its eyes are on the future, while the western had nowhere to look but the past. We will never run out of future.

Sf can reinvent itself much more successfully than the western ever was able to, having a constant supply of new source material denied to the western – any scientific paper may contain the potential germ seed of a future branch of the sf family tree. Who 20 years ago could have predicted the richness and diversity that computers, genetics or nanotechnology have added to the genre? Equally, what new, as-yet-unheard-of fields of science are waiting to become the new genre tropes?

Sf is by far the best medium for approaching the rapidly-changing technological society in which we live. Sf will change as science changes and grows. Perhaps it will change beyond our recognition, but it will last much longer than the western did, if only because its compass is so much broader.

Gary Dalkin
Bournemouth, Dorset

Editor: Well said! I agree with most of the points that you, and the following letter-writer, have to make about sf vis-à-vis the western. However, see my further remarks below...

Dear Editors:

Will sf go the way of the wild west? I found David Pringle's little musings on the future of sf quite interesting. I do agree with some of his argument, but I find that on balance his conclusion is probably wrong. The first point which he overlooked is that stories of the wild west grew out of an expansion into new territory, achieving a "popular" status in the first half of the 20th century. I think it would be safe to say that the genre only survived into the latter half through the introduction of a new medium (film, television, colour). Populist westerns as fiction are, as was pointed out, really a thing of the past. The wild west has been tamed, and we can all travel to Rodeo Land USA in half a day. The thrill of danger and unexplored frontiers has gone, because the frontiers themselves have gone.

In the 1950s the heroic explorers started to turn towards space, with the birth of the space opera. The technology promised new frontiers to conquer, and every schoolboy's eye turned to the stars. George Lucas, and Steven Spielberg are great filmmakers because they utilize that childhood longing in their images. Hence *Star Wars* [in 1977] had a bigger appeal than it might have had if it were shown, say, in ten years time – when the 40- and 50-somethings will have less excuse to go to the movies with their children.

This does not mean, however, that sf will cease to be a popular genre in the next 10-20 years. Unlike the western, space has no boundaries with which to confine the explorer's imagination. It may be in reality that most planets are balls of dust and/or gas, or that our sun is the only one with habitable planets; yet there is nothing to say, a bit further over the event horizon, that it *must* be so. Therefore I contend, ignoring our capability to produce the real technology, that the style may change but that space opera is the child of the western, and that unlike westerns it will continue to be the expression of explorers heart.

Also, if you consider the more allegorical works of sf, that deal with the impact of technology on society and individuals, then who, realistically, can see the doom of sf looming?

Craig Turner
Bristol

Editor: Both Gary Dalkin and Craig Turner are quite right to defend sf in the way they do: of course its potentialities are still enormous – that's why we're all here. But my editorial on the fate of the western was intended to point out that written science fiction as we have known it, as a book and magazine form, is after all a literary genre, a cultural artefact, and therefore may be subject to the same "laws" of growth

and decay as other genres, or publishers' categories, or whatever. Leaving aside the whole vast question of subject-matter and relevance, sf is a genre like every other genre – and less unique as an artefact of the entertainment industry than some of its supporters like to think it is. I too believe that sf will go on indefinitely, in one form or another; but it may be that the major forms that sf story-telling will take in the near future are the feature film, the TV show, the media spin-off novel, the cross-genre mainstream bestseller à la Michael Crichton, the graphic novel, the interactive computer game, CD-ROM or on-line hypertext, the virtual-reality scenario ... and while "original" sf paperbacks and magazine short stories, as we have known and loved them, may continue for quite some time to come, it's possible that they'll appeal only to an ever-shrinking specialist audience.

Dear Editors:

Neil Jones answers his own question (IZ 98, page 62) about the popularity of "spinoff" novels (*Star Trek*, *Doctor Who*, et al). As he rightly says, they trade in well-known characters with cult status, giving the books instant fan appeal. Before one of IZ's resident pseuds starts a diatribe against commercially-generated shared universes, bear in mind this strategy is hardly new. Doyle's Sherlock Holmes canon worked precisely the same way: compare the fan responses to the "death" of Holmes in "The Final Problem" and the more recent screen demise of Captain Kirk.

However, the fact that spinoff series are written by multiple authors rules out the possibility of genuine character development. The one series that attempts to reinvent its hero – Virgin's "Doctor Who New Adventures" – fails dismally for this reason, with the Doctor drained of his individual characteristics to become as boring a cipher as Judge Dredd. The best spinoff writers – such as *Trek*-scribbler Peter David, now a *Babylon 5* scriptwriter – simply round out the screen personae within the requisite sub-genre ("hard" concepts taking a back seat to action-adventure, as in screen sci-fi). If nothing else, the results are often better than what appeared on screen.

In the end, the market for *Trek*, *Who* and *Dredd* novels is as explicable, or otherwise, as the market for *Trek*, *Who* and *Dredd* proper.

Alan Neal
Ascot, Berks.

Dear Editors:

As an aspiring sf writer, I found Neil Barron's letter in IZ 98 rather depressing, especially if the statistics

for library book loans correlate in any way with actual sales figures (though I suspect, or at least hope, that more sf is sold than borrowed). Unfortunately, sf still suffers from an image problem in much the same way as romance or horror or westerns do. I firmly believe that many more people would be reading and enjoying sf if only the belittling "ray-guns and rocket ships" label could be removed. I recently lent Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* to my father – a lifelong thriller aficionado – and he is now stuck into his fifth consecutive sf book.

Your recent John Brunner interview (IZ 97) also painted a discouraging picture for the sf community (although I must confess that I haven't read any Brunner – I can't find any). It's very difficult to know what can be done to raise public awareness of science fiction, because if we could I'm sure it would be a much more popular form of literature. It's not all bad news, to be sure – you can find sf novels now with glowing praise from major daily newspapers – but somehow our genre still isn't as popular as it deserves to be. New British magazines like *Beyond* and *SFX* might help the situation – though it seems to me that the latter has the destructive habit of casting aspersions on the more serious, fiction-based magazines: not a happy state of affairs.

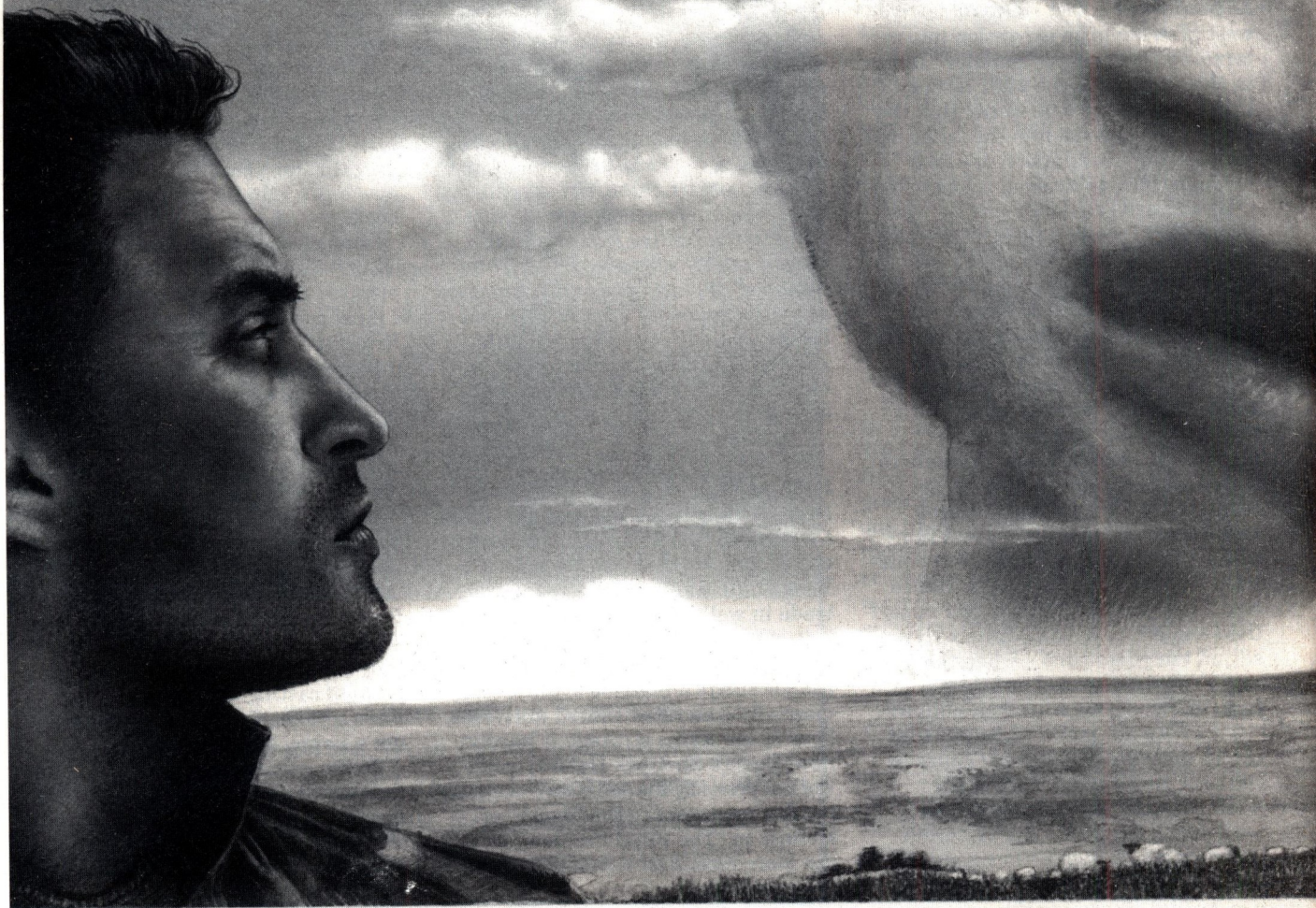
To the average reader of sf, I think that word-of-mouth is about the only means we have of raising the profile of science fiction. It's worth bearing in mind that if each of us manages to convince only one other person to read sf, then our readership in Britain will double. The barriers are coming down slowly, and sf certainly won't die. After all, there's always going to be a future to write about.

Finally, you asked for top tens from younger readers a while ago. At the tender age of 22, my list looks like this: *Ender's Game/Speaker For the Dead/Xenocide* by Orson Scott Card; *Hyperion/ Fall Of Hyperion* by Dan Simmons; *Doomsday Book* by Connie Willis; *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley; *Mythago Wood* by Robert Holdstock; *The Bad Place* by Dean R. Koontz; *The Little Country* by Charles de Lint; *The Forever King* by Molly Cochran and Warren Murphy; *Whispers in the Dark* by Jonathan Aycliffe; *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick. Praise is also due to Brian Stableford, Stephen Baxter, Eric Brown, Garry Kilworth, Geoff Ryman and a host of others for some excellent short fiction. Keep carrying the torch...

Richard Salsbury
Waterlooville, Hants.

Interaction continues on page 11

Brian Aldiss



On the first day, the Head was visible only to armies. Many armies of many kinds ceased to advance or retreat. Men crawling on their bellies stood to view. Boy soldiers eased their bandoliers and looked up.

It created a far greater disturbance than war. As it happened, I was up on the moor as usual. I saw the Head first by moonlight on a cloudless night, when it most resembled a giant cactus.

Of course its effect was fearsome. For a start, it was enormous. It seemed at first to fill the whole quarter of the western skies, as later it came to fill our lives. What we have never experienced always stands in our path like a land mine. Like the first time you have an enemy in your gun-sights. However, I speak for many when I say that apprehension was accompanied by a sense of relief. Without consulting others, I knew that here was a different mode of life for everyone, a spot of adventure just when you were growing a bit long in the tooth...

Between the stark alternatives of Life and Death, a third force was interposed – if that doesn't sound too grand.

It is not too much to say that I just stood there, transfixed. Couldn't keep my eyes off the thing.

Extraordinary. Bizarre. There were no words for it.

What I didn't realize was that all round the world everything was grinding to a halt. Pretty well the entire human race was staring upwards. Not a posture you usually hold for long.

In the first hours of its manifestation, no one had any conception of time as it related to the Head: was it a transitory phenomenon, or was permanence one of its unknown characteristics? The appearance of the Head was in itself so enigmatic, like a private dream, that other considerations took a while to dawn. Although I had been used to trouble all round the world, this was something entirely new.

My resolve was to stay observing the Head until moonset and daybreak. As the light changed and the moon in its third quarter sloped towards the west, the face of the Head became less well defined, while the bulbous nature of the skull became more pronounced. In saying this I do not express what my inner feelings were at the time. So novel was this grotesque thing, so far beyond nature, that I remained for some while uncertain as to whether we had received a visitation from a Head or a vegetable growth roughly resembling a Head. It occurred to me that this might be a new psychological weapon,

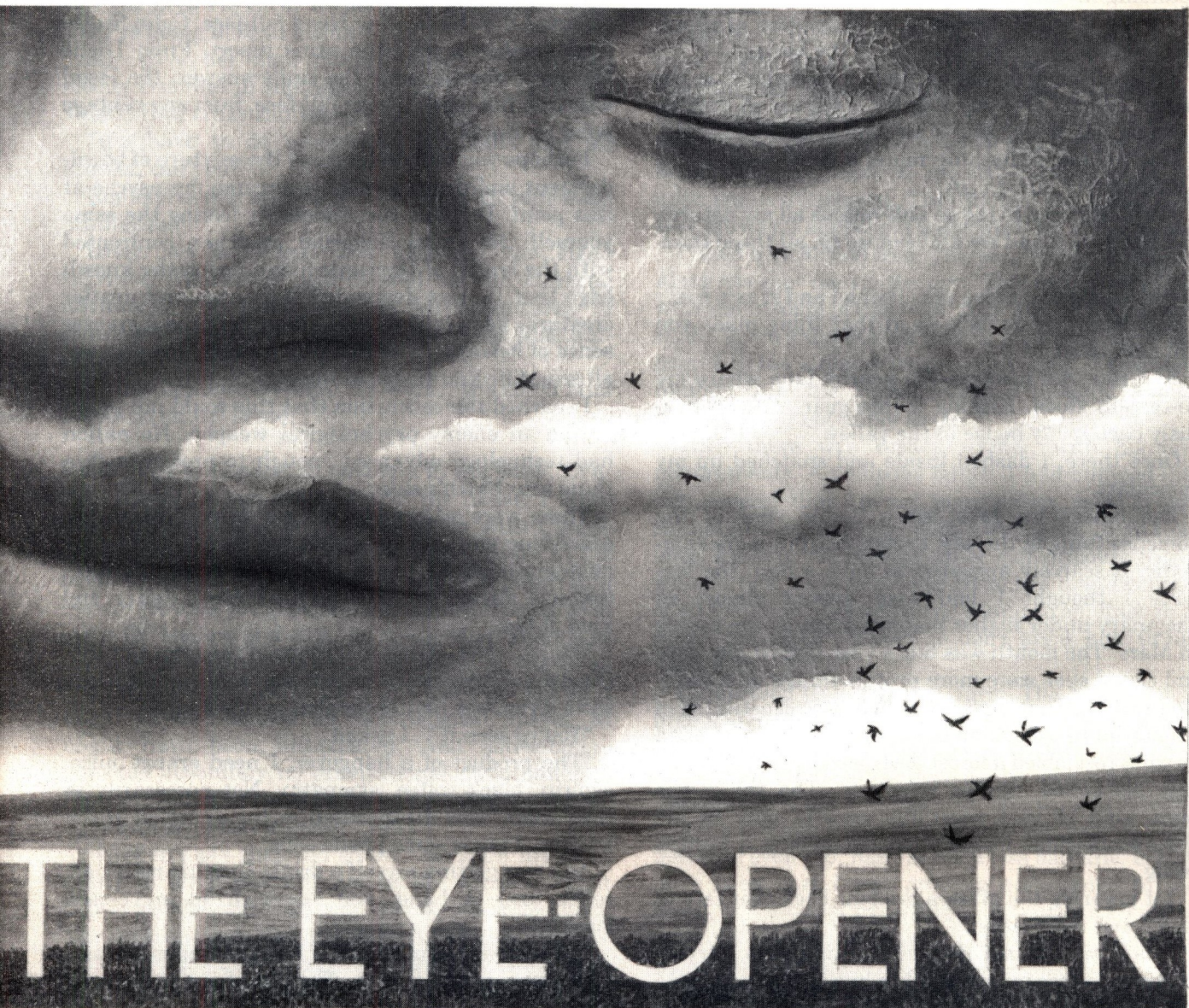


Illustration by Gerry Grace

THE EYE-OPENER

launched by some unknown enemy.

In which case, it might come in handy for some astronomical target practice!

Despite the mixture of elation and misgiving which filled me, I fell asleep on the moor. When I woke, a new day had barely begun; Earth's dewy shadow still lay over the moor. The Head was still there, immense in the pallid sky, bathed in sunlight.

I should explain that my worldly fortunes had varied greatly. I had joined the army at an early age. My family connections entitled me to early promotion. During the war with Groznia, I was made general, when my courage and grasp of strategy were instrumental in winning a swift victory. After the war, I entered politics on a tide of popularity. In two years I was made a junior minister and in five appointed Minister of Defence. Unfortunately, my so-called "illegal dealing in arms," undertaken purely for the good of my country, was brought to light and misinterpreted; this, coupled with my brief affair with the Kirghis princesses, brought about my downfall.

Disillusioned, I purchased a few hundred acres of this moor, to become a farmer of sorts, a calling some of my mother's ancestors had followed. At least it

kept me outdoors. There I reared the black-faced horned sheep common in this part of the country. I had the odd stag to pot at now and again, to relieve the boredom. Of course I retained my connections with the highest in the land. And with other lands.

After a swig from my hip flask, I rose to my feet and stared into the sky. Nearby, the sheep rooted about between heather and bracken, eyes to the ground, in the manner of all grazing animals. I looked up, in the manner of carnivores. All that interested my animals was what passed between their black lips.

The Head was turned full face in my direction. With all else that was strange, this did not strike me at the time as particularly strange.

Wispy cloud partly obscured the immense Head. I saw brutish lips, a large squashed nose, and eyelids heavy like unbaked pastry covering the closed eyes. The expression, it seemed at first, was one of an unutterable contempt. Yet at a later moment, as the vapours drifted, I perceived – or thought I perceived – an expression of calm resignation to sorrow. What sorrow I knew not. I'm not an imaginative man, I'm happy to say.

Such nobility as the face might possess was negated by a nest of stiff "hair" (so I must call it) sur-

rounding it. The chin sank into a neck much resembling the trunk of a sequoia. A suggestion of shoulders was obscured by the mists of the horizon.

I stared up at this apparition. I was alone on the moor, without even my dog for company. A sudden emotion seized me. Awe of an unprecedented nature, I suppose, but something more; *a dark sense of the artificiality of human life...*

As if I had been living on half-rations all my natural.

What in hell had we all been up to, all these thousands of years?

Just supposing those eyes opened and it saw me...

Somehow, just to look up at that thing made you feel mighty small.

So I ran, ran towards the nearby lane where my all-terrain stood. Kicking it into gear, I drove furiously back to my house in the valley.

Once there, I dashed inside and snatched up my binoculars.

The binoculars gave me a better view of the immense thing in the sky: better, yes, but more enigmatic. It scarcely appeared to have a face: the features I thought I had seen proved almost as imaginary under higher magnification as the canals on Mars. The mouth was but a vast furrow, the nose and closed eyes were mere protuberances on a wrinkled surface. That surface seemed to be constituted of a material like dried mud, impenetrably surrounded by what resembled a forest destroyed by fire, of which only blackened stumps remained. The thing was some kind of vast vegetable growth, only to my anthropomorphic imagination resembling a human being.

Yet lowering the glasses brought back that face of gloom and resignation.

It is typical of my limited thinking that I try to puzzle out these minor details while the major puzzle remains. How did this monstrous thing arrive? What order of monstrous thing was it?

Was it meant to be a caricature of someone living? I knew a Major Trapido once in Belize who looked somewhat similar. Couldn't help wondering what Cynthia (just temporary) would say about the thing.

Re-entering the house, I switched on my computer.

Already the Internet was buzzing. Reports of sightings were coming in from all over the world. At least the Head was no solitary creation of my own imagination, as I had almost been tempted to believe! It was clear no one knew more than I did.

I fed in a private number and spoke to well-placed friends in other parts of the world. Disquieting facts emerged.

Most estimates placed the Head in the upper ionosphere, where the ionosphere fades into the exosphere. Which is to say, about 250 miles above the earth's surface. This figure was arrived at by observing the times at which the Head entered and quitted earth's shadow. To an observer, the Head filled an angle of 22.5 degrees. By triangulation, it was established therefore that it measured all but one hundred miles across. So much for mensuration.

But numbers and figures, for long mankind's consolation, were soon to provide no comfort.

My contact in Vladivostok, Vladimir Mironets, reported that he saw the Head full-face. Colin Steele from Canberra gave the same report. From Leslie Howle in Seattle came the same answer: the Head was seen full-face. Always full-face, from any vantage point on Earth.

Perhaps you will understand the mixture of bewilderment and despair which overcame my psyche at this point. Perhaps you remember feeling the same yourself. No stolid Victorian preacher, confronted with the truths of Darwinism and facing the knowledge that he was descended from apes and mistier creatures back in time could have suffered a greater sense of betrayal. The Head by its very presence set all scientific knowledge at naught.

I reached the conclusion that this could not possibly be an enemy psychological weapon. No nation had technology advanced enough to project such a thing into Earth's skies.

There were others who did not despair. More disconcerting news revealed that the Head could not be photographed. As Count Dracula showed no reflection in a mirror, so the Head did not register on any kind of film.

Whilst I was sitting in a limbo of thought, Cynthia Goodwin-Jones came downstairs, wearing her white satin wrap, her hair entangled in towelling.

"You've seen it?", I asked.

"The product of a hangover. I need orange juice, aspirin, black coffee, sympathy. Not necessarily in that order." She disappeared in the direction of the kitchen. I made some phone calls.

As I was getting myself a drink, Cynthia returned, coffee mug in hand, and sprawled on my chaise longue.

"The bloody thing's about a hundred miles across – from ear to ear, as it were. The size of one of Jupiter's moons."

She said, "You were on the phone. Not calling any of Claude's friends, I hope?"

Goodwin-Jones was a cabinet minister, currently indulging in an affair with a female American rock singer half his age, name of Babbles. How he kept these affairs out of the tabloids I shall never know.

"Why are you always paranoid as soon as you get up? You should take more exercise."

She hugged her coffee cup. "Why go on about Jupiter's moons? That object up there is not an astronomical object. Surely you can understand that? It's just an image of some sort."

"Image?"

"It expresses religious anxiety, guilt – all the things people wallow in at present, me included. Not to mention sexual dilemma."

"You mean, like someone giving you head?"

She ignored my wit. "UFOs having had their day, along comes this new image. Who knows what? End of human egotism? Some hopes!" A tiresome woman in some ways, but with a good bone structure. Goodwin-Jones had never appreciated Cynthia enough. After a silence, she said, "The dawning of the age of philosophical life? Is that what it means? Or maybe it will come down here and eat us all..."

"I got on to Purvis in Washington. Remember him? They're going to send a shuttle up."

She gave her high pitched laugh. "Claim this bloody cranium in the name of the U.N.? Trust the Yanks! How crazy can you get?"

"You have to do something. You can't just sit around, can you?"

Her expression said, Don't bore me with your male platitudes.

Later, we went out and observed the Head together. The cloud had cleared as the morning advanced. The Head took on an appearance of pewtery lambency, as if lightly powdered with aluminium.

"In my opinion, for what it's worth, you could land a shuttle on it," I said.

I had to go to London on business in the week. Cynthia stayed in sole possession of the house. I managed to get a half-hour's conversation with Claude Goodwin-Jones in his Whitehall office. He sat at his desk, turning a pen over and over in his paper-thin hands. He said the government was consulting with other EC leaders and with the Americans. There was much to be optimistic about. For example, the Head had advanced no nearer Earth, as had been feared it might. It had caused no meteorological upsets, as might have been anticipated. And astronomers reported absolutely no gravitational disturbance to Earth's orbit. The Head had no detectable substance.

"Meaning in fact it doesn't exist."

"Wouldn't say that, old chum." He spun his chair round to stare gloomily out of the window. "That might frighten the populace. Bit too much for them. The populace can see, or thinks it can see, that the bloody thing exists, whatever instrumentation says to the contrary. Personally, I can tell you the PM regards the Head with a pinch of affection – takes everyone's minds off the financial crisis. Let's just say that whatever it is – well, you've seen the line we are putting out for general consumption – it exists in a different dimension of space-time from the rest of the universe."

Trying to put him in his place, I said, "It probably spells the end of human egotism."

Claude gave me a penumbral glance. "Where would that leave you, old chum?"

As I rose to leave, he treated his pen to another twiddle and asked after Cynthia.

"I do feel bad about her, you know."

Handing in my pass, leaving the building, I thought to myself, So you damned well should, old chum.

"The Ghost from Outer Space"... Was it first a headline in the *Miami Sun-Sentinel*? Wherever the phrase came from, it caught on.

Thus the unfamiliar, the outré, the monstrous, became familiarized – a kind of a joke, a child's bogeyman, a cultural reference. "Ordinary life" is an obsessive habit: something which must continue, even in the midst of war or catastrophe. Women in cities devastated by earthquake, their houses in ruin, still peg out their washing to dry in the sun. I've seen

them at it.

"Political life" also continued. Pronouncements were issued on all sides of the spectrum. The pronouncements always sounded like distortions of the truth, rather in the way that the most innocent person feels he or she is lying when talking to a policeman. Religious leaders, as was inevitable, called upon sinners to repent. They handle any kind of crisis that way. I suppose it must work for a day or two.

I liked a quotation from Thoreau, which a friend in Alma Ata sent me via the net: "Men can be wise only with the wisdom of their age; they also share its ignorance. Even the greatest minds must yield in some degree to the suppositions of their age." (I translate roughly from the Turkic.) True, I thought, though happily it did not apply to me.

Then there was Bishop Archer, with his pronouncements. A pompous fellow. I had bumped into him several times in my more palmy days. It was said of him he had slept with his mother. More than once, I mean. There were other evil rumours too, of which I took no notice. "The Head is a manifestation of all mankind's un-lived days..." And so on. Enough to make you sick. "Those who don't know how to use their lives..."

I continued to manage my farm. The Head loomed high above the moor. I studied it often. This is purely subjective, but it seemed to me that the face was undergoing subtle alterations as the season unfolded. The eyes remained closed, the mouth held its contemptuous pout. But a slow refinement crept over the features; even the "hair" seemed less barbaric. It may have been that I was growing accustomed to the Head, so that now I could see in it almost a kind of beauty. The way people used to talk about seeing the Man in the Moon.

When I said as much to Cynthia, I added – I thought modestly – that possibly I was alone in perceiving this beauty.

"You always were a conceited old thing," she said. "What makes you think you're unique? From the start, commentators have pointed out a delicate resemblance between that enigmatic face and certain races in the South Seas. It's a beauty to which we are going to grow accustomed if it remains there for long... You miss a great deal, reading those boring old military journals of yours."

With admirable patience, for the woman was still in a nervous state, I asked what I should be reading. *Home Chat*, for instance?

Cynthia tapped the magazine she was carrying. She liked to make out she was a bit of a thinker.

"This chap Brady has an interesting lead article in this month's *Art and Illusion*. He points out that every transitional age produces a major disturbance – wars, revolutions, or just deep psychological changes. We may be undergoing such a transitional period now. Faith in technological progress has reached its nadir. We are now, Brady suggests, leaving the Technological Age. What is coming cannot be foretold, but he claims that the Head may be produced by a kind of mass-myth-wish, as he calls it. The Head poses no threat beyond its mystery. Indeed, the threat of some-

thing coming from outer space has been one of the psychoses haunting the Technological Age."

"So what does this chap believe this thing is? What could it be, if not a threat?"

She gave me one of her tiresome you-dummy smiles. "Try and hear what I am saying. Brady believes that the Head is connected with our moral life, which could be reawakening."

"Then moral life is fast asleep!" I laughed. "I like that!"

"For those who can receive it, the Head speaks a secret language, the language of meditation. Some see human features on the face, others merely natural features. In short, the Head is there, quite separate from our physical world, as an object of contemplation. It is by its nature necessarily and testingly obscure: not an answer but a question."

"Whose question, for heaven's sake?"

"Our question, of course. 'Une grande port ouverte sur le mystère éternel...'"

"Ha ha! When in doubt, lapse into French..."

"Brady has his reasons. He likens the Head to a French symbolist painter called Odilon Redon. Redon painted isolated Heads, male and female, according to an inscrutable private code, intended to convey to those who might understand, 'les esprits de silence', and -"

"Oh, turn it off, Cynthia. This is all high-flown tosh, and you must know it. Besides, the Head's male, not female."

She arched her fine brows and regarded me with a hard gaze. "I certainly see it as female."

I said, "Anyhow, enough of all this. The Americans are sending up a shuttle next Thursday."

It was so vexing. I wanted to end the argument. Instead, another one blazed up. This time, it was about the feasibility of launching the US exploratory shuttle. Supposing, she said, the vehicle burst the illusion and the Head disappeared? Excellent, I said. Rubbish, she said. She said she liked it. Really, there are times when I can see how old Claude chucked her over.

Thursday approached. And on the Tuesday, President Yeltsin - never the most reliable of men - sent up three SS-20s from his vast stash of nuclear missiles.

Two of the missiles spiralled off into space, as you might expect. The third detonated somewhere near the bridge of the thing's nose.

Nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. The Head was unscathed.

Yeltsin quit the following Monday. Now lives in Oklahoma City, tending the Alienated People's Penitential Church.

I was out late that night, rescuing a ewe stuck in a ditch. Cynthia was having another of her fits of whatever it was, and I had phoned her sister, Judith, to come down to stay, thinking that the two of them looking after each other would make life a bit easier. Cynthia and I drove down to the railway station to collect her.

The all-terrain was bumping back to the house

when the moon rose, freeing itself from cloud.

Cynthia made us stop to look at the Head. Judith was keen.

There it was, immense as ever. I was growing pretty fond of it, to tell the truth. The resemblance to Major Trapido in Belize was always pretty remote. And a change was overtaking it. Even I could see that.

It was becoming a female Head. Altering in outline, becoming female. Or was that it? Perhaps the thing was disintegrating.

Of course I said nothing of the sort to the women, but in my heart I felt a deep sorrow to think it might be about to disappear. After all - ever since the war, really - the world had become pretty flat. Prosaic.

There had been something missing, an extra dimension it used to possess.

A vacuum not exactly filled by black-faced sheep.

We stood there by the vehicle, the three of us, watching. Luckily, we had a flask of coffee with us, plus my hip flask. Judith has not got half her sister's style. Smells pretty good, though.

The transformation taking place was uncertain. In the darkness, details were elusive, but it appeared that the hair was no longer hedgehoglike but smooth and flowing, outlining a more graceful shape of head. A woman? A man of a somewhat hippie type? Hard to tell. The sisters discussed it while I kept pretty mum, butting in only when Cynthia became too pretentious.

She was telling Judith of this fellow Brady's criticism in her magazine. Judith agreed most of the time. I took a swig of whisky.

"We aren't meant to understand," Judith said. "I have to say I have become quite a different person under its influence, less worldly. I used to be a Capricorn, too. To my mind, the Head represents something different to everyone who looks at it. To me, it's just a big conundrum, like - oh, like family problems - like the conundrum of human existence. I don't really feel I'm up to modern life."

People say things like that when they get on the moors by moonlight.

Long before dawn visited our part of the world, sunlight lit upon the Head. We saw now a more classical countenance. Long straight nose, small mouth, large eyes, closed as ever and shielded by pale oval lids. Hard to tell whether it was male or female. Neither, maybe. The ladies went on about Christ and the Buddha.

"Do you think she looks a bit like mother?", Judith asked, anxiously. "Something about the mouth..."

I could see a suspicion of a bare shoulder. The immense torso rose from a mist, pale and yellowish, much like thin cream, but with a hint of motion as if troubled. It was something newly born, awesome yet full of pathos. Unblemished, I'd say.

Now the new light softly illuminated the left side of the face. The temple, the cheekbone, the corner of the lips, that side of the chin, making the right side obscure. Something in that expression with the closed eyes made a picture of endurance and meditation and - well, I found myself so moved I had to turn away for another swig of the Glenfiddich. It would have been too ridiculous to have shed a tear. And for

what, exactly?

The women were weeping, heads on each other's shoulders.

The first birds began to twitter about us. The bracken remained dark. The sheep were grazing as ever, looking down all the while, munch, munch, munch. Silly things, sheep.

"You see, she's rising out of the seas of the unconscious," said Cynthia. "Oh, it's so sexy! She's – oh, I always hoped – I mean, to be redeemed – no, it's impossible, but –"

She stopped in mid-sentence. Without thinking, we seized each other and stood huddled, the three of us close, staring upwards in hope and fear at the great change taking place in the sky.

The thing's eyes were opening.

Then it spoke to us about those unlived days.

Brian Aldiss celebrated his 70th birthday in August 1995. To mark the occasion, he has several new books out this year, including a major story-collection from HarperCollins/Flamingo, *The Secret of This Book*, and a volume of essays from Liverpool University Press, *The Detached Retina*. He lives near Oxford.

Interaction *continued from page 5*

Dear Editors:

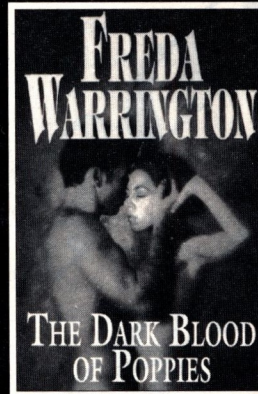
I share your suspicions regarding the figures for the circulation of sf in our libraries (your reply to Neil Barron, *IZ* 98). In addition to your own points about the absence of big names like Crichton and Ballard, I have noticed a general confusion in libraries about what constitutes sf and what is "general" reading. In my local library for example, languishing on the minuscule shelf they call the "Sci-Fi" section there is an obscure historical novel called *Moghul* which appears to have no sf connection whatsoever. Meanwhile Stephen Baxter's *Anti-Ice* is a part of the general fiction section: I can only assume the ladies who run that fine establishment took one look at the cover, saw that it contains a man on a horse, and so decided that it couldn't be sf. Even more curiously, on the same shelf there is Iain M. Banks's *Use of Weapons*. Now, quite apart from the fact that the library already has several of his other sf books all filed in their proper place, the book in question comes emblazoned with the words "A Science Fiction Novel" in large letters.

Even if the figures are reliable I believe it has more to do with library policy than sf's unpopularity. If only 1% of the books you purchase for your library are sf, and that 1% is tucked away in a dusty corner between the westerns and the large-print novels, then it follows that 1% of the total is all you can realistically expect to lend. Also, many sf books are parts of very long series: libraries have an annoying habit of only buying numbers 3 and 7 and then expecting people to borrow them. As long as libraries continue to see science fiction as a poor relation then I fear this will be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Rob Goodwin

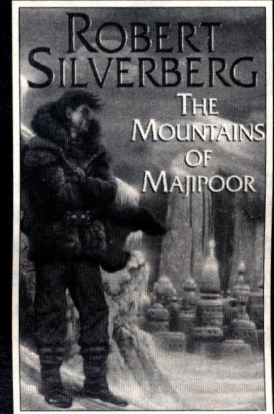
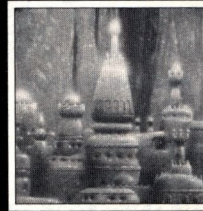
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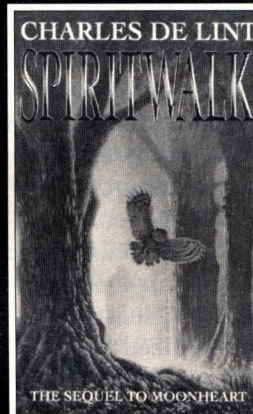
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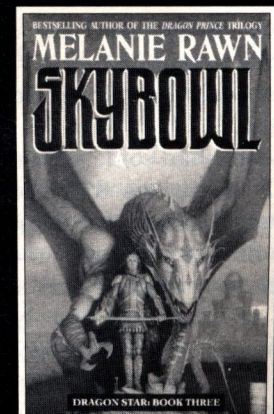
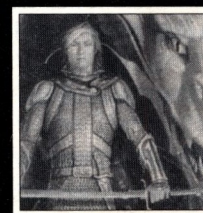
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Riding the Serpent's Back

Quetzi started to open up at the end of my fifth day riding the Serpent's Back. Until then he had been gruff, incommunicative, naturally wary of a newcomer from the north.

"Progress is slow," I said, into the glowing embers of the fire. We had only covered about 100 metres that day, barely enough to stay in the same place.

I was still frustrated that we had spent so long seeking out the least destructive path through the jungle, when in a few standard years these trees we had tried so hard not to damage would be incinerated in a sea of molten lava. To my young brain it all seemed futile, the relentless cycle of death and life.

The silence stretched and the sun grew heavy on the horizon, a huge ball of fire subsiding into the new lands ahead. Beneath us, the planet groaned.

"Progress?" said Quetzi eventually, glancing across at me so that the feathers tied into his long blue-grey hair danced briefly across his shoulders. "They still use such words up in your civilized part of the world?"

"I've rejected all that, I told you. I never felt right there." I wanted so much to win his trust that I was unable to see that his attacks were really veiled attacks upon himself.

Pointedly, he glanced down the slope at my neat little flier.

When I had come across this ragged vagrant band I had been surprised by the apparently primitive level of their lifestyle: the hand-carts, the motor tricycles with hugely inflated tyres, the crude plastic tents in which they slept. I had already argued with Quetzi that my flier was merely sensible equipment for a young man travelling alone. On this day I had even sent it on ahead and walked with the others, but still I felt that I was seen as a spoilt rich brat who was unlikely to last for long. I was yet to learn that these people's rejection of technology was a selective thing: Quetzi was merely using it as an excuse to taunt me again.

He chose to isolate me in a different way now. "Cotoche, here," he said, nodding towards a young woman who lay asleep by the fire, her position made awkward by the heavy swelling of her belly. "My little apprentice. I've taught her all that I know and yet she has never even set foot on the mainland. Under her own name she would be denied citizenship because of her dead parents' religion. She has spent all her life wandering the Burn Plain."

"Born to freedom," I said, with an adolescent determination not to be quieted.

Quetzi narrowed his eyes, about to argue, but then held himself back. "Jaryd and Bean," he said, gesturing towards a fiftyish couple who lay entangled in the entrance to their tent.

I looked, then turned away, embarrassed – as always – by the more liberal social mores these travellers displayed. Any physical contact at all was frowned upon in the northern lands where I had grown up. And these two were brother and sister.

Quetzi smiled. "If they ever returned to the Shelf they would be immediately arrested and imprisoned. And not for the reason you might assume."

I glanced again at the two of them to demonstrate the openness of my mind, then looked away immediately. "Why?" I managed to ask, fighting my discomfiture.

"One day, in the Square of the Anointed in Kohl, a newly instated troop of Acolytes decided to remind people of the authority of the Church by rounding up a few lowly criminals and teaching them a thoroughly biblical lesson. When Jaryd returned from some errand or other he found that Bean had been seized for begging."

"Is that all?"

"Jaryd didn't like it very much and he expressed

his feelings towards the Acolytes in a somewhat physical manner. He's been on the run ever since."

I looked across at the two of them again. Both were short and stocky, with dirty, stained clothes and real rats' tails tied into their hair. On the few occasions I had spoken to Jaryd he had struck me as one of the most peaceable people I had ever met, but nonetheless I made a mental note to take Quetzi's words as a warning.

I knew the travellers had rough backgrounds, as had most of the people who chose to live the hard life of the Burn Plain. I was also continually made aware that I stood out by virtue of my own comfortable upbringing, but I was still convinced that I had more in common with these people than I had with the claustrophobic, censorious society I had left behind. I had endured enough false piety to fill a lifetime. Quetzi's attempts to intimidate me and mark me out served only to reinforce my stubbornness.

"The others?" I said, in a conversational tone. "Do they all have something from which to run?" The tribe Quetzi led across the Serpent's Back numbered about 20 at present; the whole population of the Burn Plain was perhaps 30,000 – all the criminals and free spirits discarded by the supposedly cultured mainstream society of Wegener's World. I wanted to number myself among the free.

Quetzi shrugged and returned his gaze to the dying sun. "We all have our reasons for choosing this kind of life," he said. "We've all opted for the frontier."

"And you?" I asked. "Why are you here?" I knew by then that he had left a lot behind him – money, success, influence – but I had no idea who he was, despite his later accusations that I might be a spy.

It seemed that he would not reply, then, softly, he said, "I killed my son."

I swallowed. "And so you fled," I said, unsure how to handle this situation.

"No," said Quetzi. "First of all I brought him back to life again."

Four weeks before Quetzi first mentioned the death of his son I had still lived in the home of my parents in the northern city of Feststadt.

All I yearned for was to be free, to shake off the cloying inevitabilities of life on the Shelf. My parents had been reborn into the Church two standard years earlier, and the new expectations this imposed on me soon became too great. Ever since their conversion I was not only being groomed to take over the family merchantry business and with it the seats on the regional senate and various law-making committees, I was also expected to do it all in the name of the Lord.

As soon as my parents declared themselves to the Church all my tutors and social contacts were replaced and it seemed that every lesson revolved around the sanctity of the spirit and the ceaseless battle with the dark beast within us all. I was unable to argue it out with the trained reasoners of the Church, yet nevertheless I was certain in my heart that this fear of the body was wrong: personal growth could only ever come about by recognition and accep-

tance of our complex nature, I felt. What I failed to see was that the welfare of the individual was of less consequence to the Church than the acquisition of power.

As the culmination of a gradual revolution which had been instigated before my birth, the Church had finally secured control of all the ruling bodies and regional senates of the Shelf, the northern continent that held more than nine tenths of the population of Wegener's World. In my own lifetime I had seen Feststadt transformed from what was widely described as one of the most striking colonial cities of the outer worlds to a bland, dulled, provincial settlement: all decoration scraped away, all beauty torn down, all trees and greenery removed from within the city limits in a public statement of revulsion at everything biological.

Now, as I watched the sun go down over the Serpent's Back, I thought of the posters spread across the city: from these the printed face of a Government Minister would catch the eye of a passer-by and harangue him or her with the latest holy decrees. Emile Juarez, Minister for Moral Worth, or maybe Sandos or Schwartz, his deputies in the Justice Division, would yell passages from the bible, followed by demands that all good citizens must report any deviancy in public morals in their neighbours and colleagues. Quetzi's crime – his deviancy – was to intervene in the natural biological order. To kill his son was bad enough, but to do whatever had been required to bring him back to life was a moral crime of the highest order. Even to me – although I considered myself to have an open mind – such use of the biomedical arts was shocking, horrific even. When Quetzi told me of his crime I had to fight the instinctive suspicion that I must be seated next to a demon.

I slept that night alone in my flier, as I had spent the previous nights. I would never have admitted it, but that little machine gave me a shell of confidence with which to fight the darkness. It protected me from the paranoid fear that I might somehow sleep so long the Serpent would deposit me in the Burn Plain.

The Serpent – before my break for freedom I had called it by its official name of Erichsfloss, but now it would always be the Serpent for me – is a continental conveyor belt wrapped for 10,000 kilometres around the equator of Wegener's World. It is a great raft of solid ground surrounded by the sea of molten lava known as the Burn Plain. Its source is the Mictlan Ridge, running north to south for 1,000 kilometres, a gash in the planetary crust spewing out lava and debris which cools and sets, replacing the ground to either side in a continuous process. The newly-formed continent is displaced east and west at the rate of 100 metres a day, a perpetually moving landmass. Five thousand kilometres to the east of the Mictlan Ridge – and a similar distance to the west – the continent breaks up into islands, drifts, rock floes, which are eventually swallowed up by the Burn Plain.

For me that is the romance of this continually regenerating landmass: its sheer lack of permanence. In less than 150 years everything is gone, destroyed.

On the Serpent's Back, you have to keep walking

just to stay where you are, and as you do so a whole continent passes you by.

The next morning I decided that I would fly, a slave to my own stubborn defiance. My rest had been broken by the terrible sounds coming from beneath the flier – before I came to Erichsfloss I had been prepared for frequent seismic tremors and shocks as the thin crust rode its molten substrate, but I found the continual subterranean and almost subsonic groan deeply disturbing.

Quetzi was stalking about the encampment earlier than usual, exuding the arrogance I now saw as a carefully cultivated part of his veneer. “Come on, come on,” he kept saying, harrying his lethargic followers. “Let’s get ourselves moving.”

“Why the hurry?” I asked, twisting around in my pilot’s seat.

“We’re going to make up some ground today,” said Quetzi. “I decided last night. We’re going to get back to where we were three months ago.”

Fifteen minutes later we were ready to move.

I swooped up high into the air, wishing I could escape the oppressive heat, longing for the welcome cool of the north. For a moment I was able to forget that Cotoche was sitting by my side, able to push out of my mind the noises she had made with Quetzi in the night, the two of them adding to the planetary groan. Apart from the abdominal bulge, Cotoche was a slight woman with dark skin and exotically blue eyes. I found her immensely attractive. Today, as I snatched covert glances in her direction, she looked tired and drawn but I was still surprised that she had accepted my offer of a ride.

“Why so much ground to make up?” I asked her, aware that she was watching every move I made. This was the first time she had flown and her reply shocked me so much that it was almost the last.

“Braun’s Ague,” she said. She paused as I fought to regain control, not startled at all by my erratic flying. “Jaryd, Lucy, Digger and Sunshine fell ill. Me, as well.” She rested her hands flat on the bulge of her belly.

Braun’s Ague was a major killer in the population of Wegener’s World, a native viroid particle that disrupted the lymph system, leaving the victim fevered, suffering intense pain in the joints and vulnerable to a host of secondary infections. The disease was fatal in three-quarters of cases.

I looked sideways at Cotoche. “No one died?” I asked.

She hesitated, then shook her head. She pointed at her abdomen, which twitched with the movements of the seven-month foetus within. “Only the little man,” she said. “But Quetzi woke him up again. He would never let any of us die.”

I worked saliva into my mouth and tried to swallow. Nothing had prepared me for the revelation that Quetzi still practised the illegal arts of non-spiritual medicine. I did not know where he kept his apparatus, but I had often wondered why his belongings took up so much space in the trailer he pulled behind his antiquated motor tricycle. No wonder he still

feared capture by the authorities: the man was a shaman, a magus, an unreformed criminal.

I concentrated on the flying, spiralling up in a thermal to afford my passenger a better view of her world.

Below us, a snake-like procession of rag-tag vehicles climbed a steep fold in the continental crust. Ahead of them the jungle thinned, became scrubby and patchy. Perhaps this was merely a random fluctuation or perhaps it was an indication of the progress we were making: towards the Mictlan Ridge and so down the gradient of ecological complexity and progression.

We had been clear of the crest of the hill for several minutes before I spotted the approaching town. A grey scar on the next roll of hill, coughing black smoke into the sky like some great, malignant fumarole. I didn’t know if it was good news or not, but I tipped the flier forward and went down to inform my fellow travellers.

The tribe stopped just below the crest of the hill to decide what to do. The split was about 60:40 in favour of skirting around the town – supplies were high, we could do without the hassle, it was argued.

Quetzi, as was his way, changed everything. “You’re being very sensible,” he said, his first contribution to the debate. He swung his drink canister so that an arc of vodka sprayed out. “All I have to add is a reminder that we’re free people out here. We have nothing to fear from anyone.” Even when he was drunk, Quetzi could win any argument with ease.

Five hours later the ragged procession reached the fringe of the settlement. “Mining town,” said Jaryd, through his thick tangle of beard. “Maybe a hard time ahead, you hear?”

I nodded quickly. I had opted to walk with the others, sending my flier on ahead to keep it safe from criminals. The town had been built perhaps 15 years ago, near to the Mictlan Ridge; it would ride the Serpent’s Back for another century, and then all that could be removed would be transplanted to a virgin site near to the Ridge and the remainder would tumble unwanted into the Burn Plain.

The town stuck rigidly to a grid street-plan, square prefabricated buildings lining roads which intersected every hundred metres. All vegetation had been stripped from the streets and the verges and the people who came out to watch our ramshackle procession wore greys and blacks and whites, the women sheltering beneath peaked hoods that tied under the chin, the men in sturdy overalls and aprons. It reminded me of the worst aspects of life in the north.

This was a company town, a Church town. I had not realized, until that point, what a powerful force the new evangelism had become amongst the peoples of the Serpent’s Back.

The tribe dispersed, leaving Jaryd and Bean in charge of the chaotically parked vehicles. I tagged along with Quetzi and Cotoche, revelling in the curious looks this wild-looking couple received as they walked along the drab streets, past all the drab people.

"What do we do?" I asked, hurrying to catch up.

Quetzi half-turned, and I saw how tense he had become. "Test the limits," he said, and his dark eyes narrowed.

As we walked, a succession of posters tried to catch our attention, but Quetzi resolutely ignored their demands that he stop and listen. We came to an engineering works and he went to stand in the middle of the street, resisting the flow of the workers as they came and went through the building's tall double doors. "There's more to life than this," he said, to anyone who would listen. I had never heard such despair in his voice before. "Look around you... look *inside* you. Stand still and you're always dragged back." All around him the people walked on, heads bowed. Nobody would meet the wild man's look.

I stood with Cotoche to one side, enjoying the guilty pleasure of being momentarily alone with her in a strange town. "Why does he act this way?" I asked her after a little time. "Is it his drinking? Is that all it is? It must be so counter-productive."

"He's a little boy," said Cotoche, without hesitation. Quetzi must have been three times her age. "He bottles everything up, then has to let go. It's his way of denying that the rest of the world makes any difference to him."

"Thumbing his nose," I said, a phrase my grandmother had used a lot.

Like a child discovering something new, Cotoche raised a thumb and pressed it against the tip of her nose. I looked away, embarrassed.

Eventually, Quetzi ceased his rant and we walked slowly back to where we had left the carts. I felt dispirited, but relieved that none of us had been arrested.

We met Sunshine Fairfax on the way, a middle-aged hulk of a woman who had once been a prostitute in my home town. She had been driven out ten years ago by the priests who had once numbered among her best customers.

"I have just been so *patronised!*" she shrieked when she saw us, as if it was the worst thing that had ever been done to her.

Quetzi calmed her a little, then asked what had happened.

"I've just been detained at a Regulator's office for most of an hour," she said. "All I wanted was a little friendly trading, that's all I was after. 'Miss,' the man finally says to me... 'Miss, can I take a look at your card?' I have never, not once, been asked for a work card this side of the Shelf, I haven't, and I tell him as much and he says to me, 'Miss, then I'm afraid that will not be allowed.'"

When we rejoined the others we found that Sunshine's experience was a common one: without an official work registration card there would be no accommodation, no trading for food, drink or power – without a card we were non-people in this town. "Soon we'll be needing a card even to breathe," said Bean, and there was widespread agreement.

As we trailed despondently out of the town, I asked Quetzi if it was as bad as everyone made out: maybe one or two of us could register and trade on behalf of

the others? I was sure the authorities would have neither the resources nor the desire to send out arrest squads for every wandering criminal on the Burn Plain.

He looked at me wearily. "That depends on who you are," he said, and turned away.

We made good time in the few hours that remained of daylight. None of us liked the idea of lingering too close to a Church town.

"Why can't you go back north?" I asked Quetzi, as we sat together outside my flier that evening. I am not sure why he chose my company so often, although I suspect it was not so much my novelty as what I represented: the land he had left behind, a world he had rejected.

"Why should I want to?" he asked, defiant with drink again. Cotoche and most of the others were splashing about in a hot pool nearby, but Quetzi had drunk too much to join in, and I was still too reticent, still the nervous outsider.

"Is your crime so bad?" I had come to see as sheer paranoia his fear that the authorities would pursue him for interfering with the Natural Order so long ago. And he must be suffering from a persecution complex if he thought anyone would know – or perhaps even *care* – what dark arts he had practised out here in the wilderness.

"Think about what I did," said Quetzi, holding his anger back. "Emi was 14, and as rebellious as 14-year-olds can be. I was perversely proud of his rebellion, even if I could not understand the form it took: he declared for the Church and spent all the time he could trying to convert the rest of the family. I suppose as a politician and doctor I represented something of a challenge.

"One day he broke into my laboratory when I was away at Senate. He seemed to think that if he destroyed everything – all my work, all the experiments I had been running for years – then I would be presented with a clean slate and I would find the adoption of his religion easier to swallow.

"The session finished early and I caught the boy at it... I struck him so hard that the blood formed clots in his brain and he was rendered comatose. I worked on him for the next 11 years and in that time his brain shut down seven times. I resuscitated him every time, until at last I was able to copy an electronic analogue of his brain processes into the raw tissues of a replacement body. It could have been done by any competent physician: the hardest part of the process was researching the techniques, ploughing through the profusion of Church prohibitions. And then there was afterwards. I rebuilt my son from scratch and he has hated me for it ever since. It's as if that hatred is hardwired into his new nervous system."

I had never had to deal with a man's tears before, and I was at a loss as Quetzi came to the end of his admission. I still struggled to understand exactly why he should be banished to the Burn Plain like this – I knew such biomedical feats were both possible and illegal, but many years had passed since

Quetzi's crime. I still had the naive belief that the Church could be lenient, then. He must be inflicting his exile on himself, I decided.

"He left as soon as he was able," Quetzi continued. "My wife and daughter went soon afterwards. I had become impossible to live with, by that stage. The Church had been in power for a number of years already and I suddenly felt sick of life in perpetual opposition. I couldn't bear it. One night I got drunk, burned my house down, and fled."

"You can't keep running forever," I said.

He looked at me helplessly, and I sensed that I had displeased him, missed something vital. "What else can I do?" he asked, then turned disgustedly away.

Ten days later we came to another settlement. We had left the jungle behind by then, and the hills through which we passed were blanketed with scrub and grasslands, populated by continually migrating pastoral families and their enormous herds of cattle, sheep and goats.

The difference between this settlement and the last was marked: this town was young and friendly, set up by a loose commune of former travellers who had decided to try their hand at a little scavenge-mining. Coco Guderian, one of the Coordinators of the town, had even travelled with Quetzi back in the early days.

We stayed for a while, doing casual work, enjoying the change. It was a peaceful time, a time when I suddenly realized that the travellers were us and we rather than them and they. In a fit of belonging I allowed Jaryd to bleach my hair, which I was trying to grow long, and bought a patchwork kilt I had often admired on Cotoche. She had grown too large for it now, but it fitted me well. For the first time since early adolescence I began to feel comfortable with the person I am.

Our peace was shattered by a call from the mainland.

I was watching a holo-movie, enjoying the modern conveniences of the settlement, when Guderian barged in, asking where she might find Quetzi. I had seen him earlier and joined her in her search. We soon spotted Quetzi and Cotoche out racing their garishly coloured three-wheeled trail-bikes across the face of a scree slope just outside town. We waited for them to come down and then, before they had even turned off their trikes' whining engines, Guderian rushed forward and started haranguing them.

"Take it easy," said Quetzi, holding her at arms' length. "Tell me slowly, okay?"

Coco Guderian paused, then started again. "I've just had a tip-off. There's a police squad coming out from Kohl, maybe as soon as tomorrow. Coming to check us out for registration of the work-force, they say."

"Any names they're after?"

The town Coordinator nodded. "Just the one," she said.

We were on the trail 20 minutes later, down to 14 as two families had decided to stay back and work the mines.

"He's taking this seriously," I said to Jaryd, who was riding beside me in the flier. The others were on powered bikes and trikes, the hand carts and wagons left behind in our haste to make ground.

"Too right," he said, twisting fingers deep in his beard. "He always said they'd come for him one day. He used to be a big man. He matters to people in important places, both for what he's done and for who he is. Maybe they think he might still have ambitions."

"You think they'd really send a squad down here just for Quetzi?" I asked.

Slowly, Jaryd nodded.

"And Quetzi just runs?"

Jaryd leaned towards me, using his strident body odour to back up his argument. "Quetzi doesn't know what to do. He's had I guess 15 years down here. Fifteen years of freedom, of having responsibility only for the people he chooses to be around. After the life he'd had you can see how good that must have seemed. He'd started his life again, I tell you. Reborn, if you like. And now it's all thrown back in his face. You watch him closely, boy, and you try and see if he's really up to all this again. Ask me and I tell you he just doesn't want any of it, just wants to keep it in the past like he has all these years. He tells me so many times: he's done his bit, he's not going back.

"He's not running, boy, he's soaring like the eagle, and he just wants to keep on flying, you hear?"

Several weeks later, things had settled a little.

We found a routine, with the sun rising at our shoulders and setting ahead. We covered maybe 50 or 100 kilometres in a good day, 20 when the going became harder again. We'd left the scrub behind and now even the grassland could only establish itself where the rock microbes had created drifts of thin soil; everywhere else there was only bare, smooth basalt. The land was young now, barely 30 years old. We were still 1,000 kilometres short of the Mictlan Ridge, yet earthquake activity was almost constant and we had to pick our course carefully to avoid the volcanoes and deep rifts of this precarious new world. I kept expecting the land to suddenly open up beneath our feet and swallow us all.

I found it exhilarating to be where we were, and I lived for much of the time on an excess of adrenalin. Our progress was becoming slower, because of the changing nature of the terrain, but Quetzi stuck relentlessly to his westward course.

One day, incredibly, we came to another settlement. It looked as if it was going to be a mining town, although at this time it was little more than an encampment of labourers and several piles of prefabricated building units awaiting reconstruction.

Arguments erupted in what remained of Quetzi's tribe when the settlement was first sighted.

"We should turn back," said Sunshine Fairfax, tired from the travelling and suddenly looking far older than I had always assumed her to be. "We've never been this far west before. It's just crazy!"

Jaryd and Bean thought it might be worth sending scouts out to the settlement to test the response.

Quetzi just stared ahead, his eyes following the course of the sun. I think some part of me realized even then what was in his mind. "I'll do it," I said. "I'll go into town and see what they're like. Maybe they'll welcome some casual labour. Maybe we can trade for fuel and food." That last was the winning point: I knew how low our supplies had become.

I went down the next morning, riding a bike loaned to me by Jaryd.

Armed guards stopped me at the perimeter fence. Two levelled their blasters while another pair hauled me out of the bike's bucket seat and led me roughly into a building to stand before the desk of their senior officer.

"Hey, you can't do this!" I kept saying in my most petulant tone. "Let go!"

The security officer was a small man in Church robes, with a conspicuous holster under one arm. With a brief gesture he made the guards release me and go to stand ready by the door.

Immediately I was on the offensive. "What's this all about? What way is this to treat a person?" With more courage than I had expected to find I leaned forward, resting my knuckles on the man's desk so that I loomed over him. "I warn you now," I said. "My father sits on the Senate at Feststadt. When he hears of my treatment..."

The officer raised both hands and I stopped, fearful that I had overplayed my hand.

"Please," he said, and I knew that my act had convinced him. I had plenty of experience at the spoilt-rich-brat role, after all. "My men are over-cautious. This is brigand country. Dangerous for a young man on his own, no?"

I shrugged, and smiled, as if taking his words as praise for my bravery, and not a slight at my own ragged, androgynous appearance. "I can cope," I said. "I haven't had any trouble yet. Until I met your men, that is."

"I apologize," said the officer. "On my own behalf, and on behalf of the Church."

I put a hand obediently across my chest, as any devout young coward would do in that position.

"May I ask a few questions before you go?"

I nodded.

"As I say: this is dangerous territory for a young person alone. Why are you here?" There was a menacing edge to his voice which I tried to ignore.

I shrugged again. "Because it's here," I said, as if only considering the reason for my trip for the first time now. "I've travelled the entire length of Erichsfloss. I suppose I want to see how close I can get to the Mictlan Ridge. Foolish, I know, but..."

I knew the man despised my brash posturing, as all good churchmen despised the former aristocracy of the planet, but he seemed convinced by my act.

"We're looking for one man in particular," he added then. "A criminal." A holopic leapt up from the desk, cast out from a hidden projector. It was a younger and plumper Quetzi, his hair short and unadorned. The image was talking animatedly, but the sound had been cut. "Have you seen him in your travels?"

I shook my head, giving a helpless, goofy smile.

The security officer gave me a long, contemptuous stare, then cancelled the holopic and dismissed me with the same economical gesture.

My friends were arguing even before I had completed my circuitous route back from the settlement. They had seen the guards dragging me from the bike and that had been enough to set them off.

When I told them what had happened the situation became rapidly worse.

Jaryd and Bean wanted to stay and fight – it was a Church town and there weren't many guards – but most of the others wanted to turn back.

"We could make ground, lose ourselves in the hills," said Cotoche through her tears. "They're northerners – they'd never find us out here."

Finally, Quetzi joined the argument. "I'm going on," he said. "Right to the Mictlan Ridge." In his stubborn refusal to deviate I saw his resentment at this intrusion into the life he had led peacefully for so long. That they should chase him out here was not just a personal thing, it illustrated a larger truth: the inevitability that the outside world would try to extend its grip into territories that had always been free. The northern police squad on Quetzi's trail was a small-scale representation of the Church's plans for the disorganized communities of the Burn Plain.

I saw then that he was going to destroy himself.

I tried to intervene. "Cotoche is right," I said. "We can't pretend the rest of the world doesn't exist."

Quetzi turned on me, his anger fuelled by drink. "You!" he yelled. "Why should we listen to you? How do we even know whose side you're on? You could be a spy, for all we know. Your skirts and your hair don't fool anybody."

I turned away. I knew that it was only his anger speaking, but his distrust – after so long – hurt me nonetheless.

He didn't stop. "Why don't you all just clear off?" he cried, staggering unevenly about the gathering. "Just clear off and leave me. I'll go on alone."

Cotoche approached him and put a hand out to touch his arm, but he lashed out so that she had to sway out of his reach. "Just fuck off," he shouted. Then quieter, "All of you. Just fuck off."

By the time the sun had passed overhead there was only the two of us. Quetzi was morose, muttering to himself continually, and I was just plain stubborn.

I had travelled from one end of this continent to the other and in that time I had watched Quetzi transformed from the charismatic leader of his vagabond tribe to a drunken wreck. I wanted to help him and I suppose, in all honesty, I wanted to see just how far he would go. Over the years I have experienced all kinds of doubt and guilt about what happened that day, but I think I knew even as events unfolded that I was only an observer, I had no influence.

I sent my flier up high and rode in the spare seat on Quetzi's trike. Perhaps I wanted to be close to him in the belief that I would be on hand to help, perhaps I thought that simply being close was enough: a rock

to tie his string around.

We skirted the settlement and continued west, through a landscape almost devoid of vegetation. Smooth-flanked hills folded around us, fumaroles smoked freely, great fissures opened up in the ground, their depths lit from within by the menacing glow of cooling lava flows.

"What about Cotoche?" I asked him, unwilling to give up all hope. "What about your child?" I did not know, for certain, that the child was his but I was determined to provoke some kind of reaction.

"The child?" Quetzi laughed viciously. "The child's the future. I'm the past. I don't want to have any part in it, you hear me?"

We hit a ridge and jumped several metres before landing again. I looked anxiously back.

"Look where having children got me," added Quetzi. "Eh?"

"But..." I said, still trying.

"Think about it," said Quetzi, and then I made the final connection.

"The posters," I gasped. I knew the stories from before I had been born: a doctor, a politician who had supposedly died in a house fire. "Your son," I said. Quetzi's real name was Juarez and his son was Emile, the young Minister for Moral Worth. "But surely..." I said. "After so long?"

"Think about it," repeated Quetzi.

I did and then I began to understand the futility of Quetzi's position.

Emile Juarez was a minister in both Church and Government. His face was on hundreds of posters in hundreds of settlements telling everybody what they should and should not do. Yet in his own eyes he must be an abomination, a blasphemous creation. He must despise himself! And Quetzi was the one person who could expose his true nature. What if Quetzi chose to return to politics? It was all so difficult to grasp, but I knew one thing for certain: Emile Juarez must have been terrified when he discovered Quetzi was still alive after all these years.

I realized we were being pursued some time late in the afternoon. I suspect Quetzi had known a lot sooner. My strongest memory of that time is of my struggle to comprehend, coupled with a heavy sense of inevitability.

We crossed the flank of a low volcano, a river of thick lava edging slowly down its far side. I kept looking back and each time I did so the police fliers loomed larger on the horizon. At that point they were still moving slowly: we had not been spotted.

I turned, and suddenly the trike hit a boulder and threw us both clear.

I must have been unconscious for a short time, because when I looked up Quetzi was already 50 metres clear, scrambling down the slope on a diagonal course. I tried to get up and realized that I had become wedged in a small fissure. I eased myself round, trying to work out how to free my right foot.

Suddenly, I heard the unmistakable whine of a flier and I ducked my head low. When I looked out of my sanctuary two police vehicles had settled on the slope

and then I saw Quetzi scrambling across the flank of a rough ridge.

Ahead of him, a shape materialized in the air and I realized the police were using some kind of broadcast. I shielded my eyes from the sun and saw that a face was forming, familiar to me from the Church's posters. "Give yourself up," said its voice. "Accept the Lord's mercy."

Quetzi ignored the apparition and headed out along a high promontory.

I saw immediately that he would be trapped.

Behind him, the police were closing in. Ahead of him his son's face hung over a deep, smoking fissure.

I can remember the look on Quetzi's face so clearly it is sometimes as if I am still there. He was grinning, happy for the first time since I had met him and he had taken me, in his own curt way, into his trust. Happy for the first time in many years.

In a single casual movement he turned his back on the advancing policemen and said to his son, and the world, "I won't let you kill me. That's one thing I won't allow." Then he spread his arms and dived clear of the cliff. Emile Juarez's face vanished and for an instant Quetzi was suspended in the air, lit by the malevolent glare from below, feathered hair streaming out behind him, and then he was gone.

I cowered in my resting place for a night and a day. With Quetzi – and his sense of purpose – gone I was more scared than I had ever been before. I was certain we had crashed the trike before the police squad had spotted us, but still I lay trembling, in harmony with the tremors and groans of the rock, waiting for them to search the slope for Quetzi's missing companion.

In my more rational moments I tried to understand my sense of loss, my feelings for a man I had known so briefly. In his own terms, I supposed, he had triumphed. After years of running and hiding he had made his last action his own: by killing himself he had avoided being killed. He had travelled from one end of the Serpent's Back to another, as far as a man could go; then he had gone one step further. But he had died, nevertheless, and I saw no sense in it.

By the time the sun sank ahead of me the following evening, Quetzi's fissure had cooled and when I looked down into its depths I saw that a scabby skin had formed over its molten contents.

I called my flier in, calmer now. The police had seen their man killed and for them the job was over. All I had to do was slip away.

My flier came to me and I flew hard through the night. Distance was important to me then. I needed it all to be far behind me before I could really start to come to terms with what I had experienced.

It was nearly two years before I found Cotoche and the boy and took them under my wing. In that time I travelled many thousands of kilometres over the Serpent's Back. I came across most of the others in the course of my travels: Jaryd and Bean, wandering as free as ever; Sunshine posing as a missionary in a mining town on one of the oldest parts of the continent.

Eventually it was Coco Guderian who put me on

The hero of an action-adventure series can be expected to risk life and break limb at fairly frequent intervals. If he is starring in a space opera he may even be rendered clinically dead so that the wonders of a future technology can revive him, give him a medical fix and enable him to fight again another day. During his thus-far-chronicled 27 years all these things (especially the broken bones) have happened to Miles Vorkosigan, Lois McMaster Bujold's best known creation. But Miles is unique, for there cannot be another character in all fiction who has to fight a duel-almost-to-the-death with his four-foot-nine-inch identical clone brother on top of the Thames Barrier, as happens in *Brothers in Arms*, one of the novels in the Barrayar sequence.

Miles's creator returned to London and the Thames Barrier as Guest of Honour at "Confabulation," this year's Easter SF convention held at Docklands. During her time there she gave a reading from her novel-in-progress, *Memory*, the latest in the series. Following her favourite plot device of forcing her characters to confront the worst possible thing that could happen to them, she has decided that Miles must be relieved of his position in the Barrayaran security service. To understand why that is the equivalent of Room 101 for Miles, you need to know that his fragile self-esteem depends on his excelling in work and furthermore, according to his mother (and she should know) his very sanity depends on the ability to escape into his *alter ego* of Admiral Naismith of the Dendarii Free Mercenaries, and *that* depends on his keeping his job with Security. He is to be discharged as medically unfit due to some unexpected side-effects of being killed, frozen and revived in the previous novel.

"It's great fun" said Lois, smiling benignly. "I kind of know where I'm going but until I get there I don't quite ... I have a good feeling about it." But we are running ahead.

Lois McMaster Bujold was born and raised in Ohio. Her father was a Professor of Engineering at Ohio State University. He was a major influence on her life and writing. The award-winning novel *Falling Free* is inscribed "For Dad."

"This is the book that has the most to do with him because I made my character Leo Graf a welding engineer so that I could use everything I knew about my father's speciality which made research much easier. And really the book turned into my father's obituary. He died when I was about half-way through it. Leo's class lecture in, I think chapter two of *Falling Free*, is kind of a summation

of what my Dad did."

Her first novel, *Shards of Honor*, was published in 1986. It was followed swiftly by *The Warrior's Apprentice* (the first Miles Vorkosigan story) and *Ethan of Athos. Falling Free*, which came next, won a Nebula and this was followed by Hugo awards for the novella "The Mountains of Mourning" and the novels *The Vor Game* and *Barrayar* (and now a fourth Hugo for *Mirror Dance* — Ed). All of her books with the exception of the fantasy *The Spirit Ring* are set in the same combative future universe in which nation states have been replaced by myriad interplanetary governments and empires, many with military regimes. Faster-than-light travel is contrived by the traditional worm-



Picture: Roger Robinson

hole method. The stories have been described, sometimes pejoratively, as "space opera," and action-adventure yarns they certainly are, filled with cunning plots, battles in space and terrible weapons. But, as in the seafaring novels of C. S. Forester or Patrick O'Brian, the plots are character-driven, with the result that what happens inside the minds of Bujold's protagonists is vital to the development of the action and the reader becomes involved with the fate of even the minor characters, none of whom is seen as expendable. The major characters, reappearing in sequential stories, grow and develop in wisdom and maturity as they age chronologically.

"I have always liked character-centred series. Hornblower is one, Sherlock Holmes is another, Lord Peter Wimsey is another — an awful lot of mystery and detective novels are that kind of series, where you have the same characters through several

books and they get the chance to live and grow with a much wider scope than is available in a single novel. Those have always been one of my favourite kinds of literature — room for a character to really come alive, to give them more than one shot on stage."

Lois picked up her taste for science fiction from her father. He would bring home copies of *Analog* and *Fantasy & Science Fiction* in the late 1950s and early 60s, and leave them lying around and she would read them. She dates her discovery of sf to the age of nine or ten, "and after that it was all over." She read extensively in her teens; a great deal of sf and also detective fiction and all the Hornblower novels (her own stories have frequently been described as "Hornblower in space"). She started writing "imitative and reflective" pieces at about age 12.

"Probably one of the oddest things that lurks in my drawer is the start of an epic poem, a Tolkienesque-Spenserian verse tale, because I had read *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Faerie Queene* both twice that year. It's really incredibly bad. But everything that went in sort of churned around and came out again. I was writing imitation Heinlein adventures and would get to about 40 pages and lose track. Even at that time I had met a lady who is still one of my best friends, Lilian Stewart, now also a writer. We used to collaborate on story-lines throughout High School, some of this was written down, some just told to each other; like we were our first audience. When we were about 18 or 19 we discovered fandom and we made a fanzine and did all the fannish things.

"I went on writing during my middle and late teens and in college and then sort of set it aside, lost track of what I was doing — went off to be an adult, which was a mistake. But in my early 30s my friend Lilian had started writing again and I was inspired by her example. She had made her first sale and I thought if she can do it I can do it too. I was at that time stuck in Marion, Ohio, with no job. It was the middle of the Reagan recession. I had two small children — you know how that goes... I never really had a profession. I just had jobs. I had worked as a pharmacy technician for the longest period after college; that is a nurse's aide who gives medication on a nursing unit. So I have some medical or biological background on that side, which is why the science in my science fiction tends to be medical. I'm trying to bring something fresh to real-life experience. I started writing by economic necessity and desperation."

Did she try out the stories on other

people before writing them?

“Yes. I use a lot of test readers and there are a few people that I can ‘talk book’ to. That seems to be part of my creative process. I need to tell the story until I’ve worked out the details and I get excited about it because I get some kind of feedback. It works up to a certain internal pressure which comes out as writing. It’s not a process I can rush. There are some people who can’t talk book. I have an acquaintance in Minneapolis who is not allowed to tell anything about her books to her friends because if she does she won’t write them.”

Lois herself does not find this a problem. Relating the story to herself or to others in advance of writing it onto paper. In fact it helps her to work out her ideas and to test what excites people. “If there is a certain idea that I just won’t give up for anybody, no matter how they argue against, I know that’s the one that I should be going with.”

After starting to write seriously in 1982, she sold her first short story in 1984. “I was most of the way through *The Warrior’s Apprentice*, the second novel. The story was just a little short thing that I had spun off. I was trying a few short stories at the same time as trying to write the novels and it had gone out to maybe four or five places and finally arrived at *Twilight Zone* magazine where it fit their editorial needs and they bought it and it was very exciting. That was the first sale ever! The next sale was the three completed novels that went to Baen Books. I had sent several of the books out and back, rejected by various places. In retrospect those were blessings in disguise because when they did arrive at Baen they took them all. They didn’t leave any orphaned. They proceeded to market the series the way it’s supposed to be done and they’ve been a very good publisher. So that was extremely lucky.”

Reading the Barrayar sequence one has the impression that the entire saga has been thoroughly worked out in advance and that Miles Vorkosigan was always to be the pivotal character; but Lois says that this is not so. Each story is constructed as a separate entity and Miles was created only after the first story, *Shards of Honor*, had been written.

“I make it up one book at a time. One of the pitfalls of a series is if you block out your books in advance and then get tired of them half way through, so I’ve been very careful to do them one at a time. Every book is potentially the last one. I can walk away from the series. I’m never stuck writing the next book I can always wait and write the best book.”

“The nucleus of the ideas for the stories goes back to considerably

THE WORST POSSIBLE THING

before I started writing in 1982. I would make up long scenarios to entertain myself driving back and forth to work — sort of run the television set in my head. Or if I was doing some really boring work — I was on the production line of a pharmaceutical company for a while — I could sit and dream all day. So when I sat down in 1982 and decided ‘I am Going to Write A Novel’ I went back to the idea I had been working on six years before and that became *Shards of Honor*. I had no better idea about how to write a novel except to put a bug under the main character and turn her loose. So I wrote a hundred pages with no chapter breaks. It was very disorganized. I had to sort of feel my way into the organization of the novel. And then I found that what I had thought up was only a third of a book long and I had to stop and think of other ways the plot could go. It was a very unstructured book compared with the way I do it now.”

This novel tells the story of Cordelia Naismith, the Captain in charge of an exploratory and research project on a little-known planet. Her peaceful expedition is attacked by mutineers from a Barrayaran space ship. She comes into contact with Aral Vorkosigan, the deposed Commander of the Barrayarans and the two of them have to pit their wits against the dangers of the strange planet and the mutineers. The plot centres on the contrast of cultures and personalities; the pragmatic and humane woman from sophisticated high-tech Beta Colony and the proud, honourable nobleman from the militaristic and feudal culture of Barrayar. Their meeting is, to some extent, a traditional cold-war romance. The two fall in love. But they are not merely “types” representing East and West. Each has defining character traits, faults as well as good points and there is no hint of sentimentality. Cordelia is the viewpoint character in this book and

also in *Barrayar*, which comes next to *Shards of Honor* in the chronology of the series but was written quite recently. There must be quite a lot of Lois McMaster Bujold in her makeup; she is a redhead like her creator, and Lois admits that she can slip into Cordelia’s mind so easily that the character almost writes herself. In these two novels, with their female protagonist, the fact that the author is a woman and a mother adds considerably to their ability to move the reader. Certainly anyone with children who reads *Barrayar* can identify with Cordelia’s anguish when she realizes that her unborn child has been severely damaged by the toxic gas intended to kill his father. Cordelia refuses to give up hope and insists that everything possible is done to try to save the child although everyone around her advises abortion. This attitude is typical not just of Cordelia but of all Bujold’s work. In her stories there is always a noticeable absence of “shreddies,” those expendable characters who are included in the plot simply for the purpose of being wasted. For example Cordelia spends a good part of her time in *Shards of Honor* caring for a hopelessly brain-damaged colleague who is never going to recover. Is this a deliberate aspect of Lois’s work?

“Shreddies! Oh, I like that one... There is absolutely no point in killing a character that you haven’t troubled to make alive first. I think that’s the quickest way of summing it up. The whole idea of writing fiction is to cre-

Lois McMaster Bujold,
winner of the 1995 Hugo
Award for Best Novel,
interviewed by
Elizabeth Counihan

ate meaning.”

There is a passage at the end of *Shards of Honor*, and set apart from the rest of the narrative, in which a young pilot has to assist in retrieving frozen corpses left floating in space, the detritus of war. His disgust changes to respect and then compassion as he confronts each individual tragedy and realizes that he has helped a mother to find the body of her young daughter after a long and patient search. The effect is very moving and puts the whole story into perspective.

“That was actually written as a short story which I tried to market separately and failed to do. I was hoping that if I sold that it might be an advertisement for the novel. So I sent it along to Baen, who had accepted the first three novels, and Jim Baen came up with the idea of attaching it to the back of *Shards*. So it was an inspired thing that he did there. It fitted wonderfully well. Everything you had read up to that point — it gave a cross-triangulation on — hopefully a little unsettling.”

The rather unfashionable concept of Honour is a recurring theme in this and the other stories. “It isn’t fashionable and that was kind of on purpose. At the time that I was writing *Shards of Honor* in ‘82 we were still in the reaction period to the Vietnam War and all the military virtues had sort of been lost in the shuffle at that point. They were virtues despite being military, and looking back to historical periods like World War II, it seemed to me that something was being lost there that had a place, and I wanted to sort of reclaim that a little bit. I think that that period of correction is now over with, that it’s time to move on to other things.”

Most of the remaining novels chronicle events on or affecting the planet Barrayar, especially as they concern the Vorkosigan family. Barrayaran culture and politics are described in some detail.

“Barrayar has a couple of sources. Structurally it is based on Meiji Japan. We have the idea of an isolated country that is opened forcibly from the outside. The Barrayarans had about 15 years from the time they were rediscovered to the time the invasion came along. It’s a cross between Meiji Japan and Russia, because Russia, of course, has experienced invasion over and over. The colonists of Barrayar were Russian, French, British and Greek in national origin at the time that Barrayar was settled in what is now their distant past, so there is a certain Russian and European cultural trend there.”

And so we come to our hero Miles Naismith Vorkosigan, son of Aral of Barrayar and Cordelia of Beta

Colony, all four-foot-nine of him (on account of the gas attack detailed above). Miles is brave, determined and preternaturally clever; in fact he has all the manly virtues. He also manages, at times, to be very funny. We first meet him age 17 in *The Warrior’s Apprentice*, in which, cheated of his place in the Barrayaran Military as a result of breaking both legs on the assault course, he goes off to his mother’s home-planet to recover some self respect and finds himself catapulted into a series of wild and highly dangerous adventures which tax his ingenuity to the utmost. By the end of the story he has, with a combination of quick thinking, courage and barefaced cheek invented, realized, deployed and led a large army, and has adopted the persona of Admiral Naismith of the Dendarii Free Mercenaries. When he gets back home to Barrayar as a successful war-leader, he is finally accepted by his peers and admitted to the Military Academy.

Most of the other Barrayar books are about Miles’s further adventures as he fights or outwits everyone from minor criminals in the provinces to conspirators plotting against the Emperor of Barrayar, all accomplished with the utmost élan and breathless exuberance. Where did Miles come from?

“He was inherent in the situation of Cordelia going to the military culture of her husband. Using that useful source of plot ideas — ‘What is the worst possible thing you can do to this character?’ — and given Aral and Cordelia, one of the worst things that could happen to them would be to have a crippled child in their (Barrayaran) society, which is very inhumane in a lot of ways, and that kind of came out of their situation; but Miles very quickly took on a life of his own and proceeded to drive the thing in other directions.

“You start with an idea and it sucks up other things out of your personality. If it’s going to be a live character you end up putting more into it than you quite realize. You look back in retrospect and see where it all came from. At the time you just stick it in because it feels right.”

What about Miles’s extremely fragile bones, which break at frequent intervals and are — throughout the novels — to be gradually replaced by synthetics? In the story, the origin of the brittle bones was a side-effect of an antidote to the “Soltoxin gas” which had caught Cordelia during her pregnancy, but there exists a genuine but rare congenital bone disorder, *Osteogenesis Imperfecta* which is very similar to Miles’s problem. Is Miles’s medical condition based on knowledge of the “real” disease?

“Yes, I had heard of that, but I made sure to dissociate it from any real

medicine so I could cut it to fit my plot. And of course the medical technology available puts a different spin on it.”

Was Miles based on anyone she knew? “He has many, many sources and as he has grown as a character more and more has come from me. Certainly there is a little bit of T. E. Lawrence in him. I was in Junior High School when the movie *Lawrence of Arabia* came out, and of course went to see it seven times with Lilian and then proceeded to go read up all about him — and at age 15 it was way over my head. *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is a book I re-read about every decade because it keeps changing as I grow. Miles’s relationship with his father is very much based on my relationship with my father. He has this great-man’s-son syndrome. My father was this world-class engineer, was involved in life-saving engineering endeavours, and it was very hard to live up to that. He went to CalTech on a scholarship. He was a great believer in education, never quite connected with my own education. I think even then I wanted to be a science-fiction writer, and there was no course you could take that would lead into that!

“Now, what else goes into Miles? There was a hospital pharmacist that I worked with in my hospital pharmacy days who was a kind of physical template for Miles. The top of his head was level with my shoulder, which is where I got Miles’s height and he had the leg-braces and the sort of physique and was just a brilliant guy.”

Miles presumably inherits his go-getting pazz and common-sense approach to life, death and technology from his “American” (aka Betan) mother; his sense of honour and *noblesse oblige* from his high-born Barrayaran father and his wry sense of humour and compassion for the unfortunate from his own physical drawbacks. All these factors make for a very engaging central character. The “honour” factor is an important part of his make-up, especially in the story in which he makes his first appearance, *The Warrior’s Apprentice*. The woman Miles loves turns him down, not because he is dwarfish, but because she feels that she would be overwhelmed by him; that his “Honour” is far greater than hers.

“It’s one of those slippery things which can be defined in different ways by different people or different ways by people at different times of their lives. It’s shifting for Miles as he grows. As a 17-year-old young man he had a pretty straightforward view of what honour was and I think it’s going to get more ambiguous as he gets older.”

Did Lois, as a successful female sci-

ence-fiction writer, have any particular models?

"Not really. But I suppose that the career profile to which I aspire is probably Anne McCaffrey's. So many women have gone before me and beaten down the path. It was like a super-highway by the time I arrived. Ursula Le Guin proved that women could win major awards many times. Anne McCaffrey proved you could make the *New York Times* bestseller list. C. J. Cherryh is another role model for me. Sort of like, 'Waiter, bring me a career like that woman is having!' Their success showed it could be done, and most important, it made the publishers receptive. Once one person has got a best-selling female science-fiction author, all the other publishers want one of their own, and this creates opportunities for everyone.

"None of my books has really 'taken off' individually. There has been a gradual process of building slowly, mostly by word of mouth. It has been possible to do this because my publisher has kept all my books in print, even during the low periods. Every time a new book comes out they reissue some of the old ones. They do a wonderful job marketing. The more I learn about other publishers the more I appreciate how my stuff has been handled. *Shards of Honor* did okay for a first novel. *Warrior's Apprentice* did rather better. *Ethan of Athos* was kind of an odd book and went off in its own direction. *Falling Free* won the Nebula. *Brothers in Arms* was just an adventure book: it was the book that, if I'd been a better writer, would have been *Mirror Dance*, but I didn't have the experience at that time — so *Mirror Dance* was my second pass at the problem. The first book got hijacked by the supporting cast (and the Thames Barrier). Each one has built-in sales and cross-sells the others, which is what a series is supposed to do. But only if they are all kept in print!"

Perhaps we could hear more about the work in progress. (For new readers... Mark was cloned in order to appear as Miles's double but with murder in mind. Being a clone, he has normal bones, for Miles has no genetic abnormality and Mark was not exposed to the bone-destroying toxin. So the baddies have shortened several of Mark's so that he looks just like his brother. No wonder he is bitter as well as twisted....)

"I'm working on Miles's sequel to *Mirror Dance*. That was Mark's book; it was about Miles's clone brother Mark, and it finally did what I had failed to do in *Brothers in Arms* which was to give Mark the viewpoint. It became his book. You got inside his head, which was where all the interesting action was going on. But Miles had short shrift. A lot of important

things happened to Miles in that book, such as getting killed... If you get killed it should make a difference. But I did not have the space. It would have disturbed the structure of the book to do with Miles all the things I wanted to do as a result of the changes in his life that came down on him. So *Memory*, the new book, takes up about a year after *Mirror Dance* and studies the consequences in Miles's life of all the events that he went through then. I kind of know where I'm going, but until I get there I don't quite. *Mirror Dance* ran the same way. I had no idea what the climax of that novel was going to be until I arrived, and then it just chonked into place. It was very exciting. I hope this will run the same way."

Is Miles due to have any children?

"I have been thinking about that. I think Mrs Miles has not yet appeared on the horizon but she may be turning up fairly soon. I think she is probably going to be very much younger than he, which is why we haven't seen her yet. She's about 12 or something. That will probably come along, but not very quickly. I want to let it turn around in my head. I have to get through *Memory* first."

Were the awards a surprise?

"I was certainly delighted. I've been studying awards for years now, watching the process go by. In my more morbid moments I think the entire system is an invention to mentally handicap the front-runners and distract them from their work. I had high hopes for *Falling Free*, I thought it was a strong book. Over the years I've come more and more to think it's demographics. I do not believe in award politics. I don't think that you can herd Hugo and Nebula voters; it's like herding cats — they're such a bunch of individuals. But the book that sells 100,000 copies is going to be read by ten times as many readers as the book that sells 10,000 copies. So, everything else being equal, it's going to pick up ten times the vote. I've noticed that the only things that have ever gotten nominations or awards for me are things that appeared in *Analog*, where they are distributed and seen in a timely fashion by a large percentage of the pool of voters. Nothing that has not appeared in *Analog* has ever gotten anywhere near an award. The Nebulas have a kind of time-window that starts when you get big enough to be noticed and ends when you start to make more money than most of your colleagues. That's the point when you are considered to be having your reward in the market place and you no longer garner Nebula votes. And that seems almost appropriate to me. I think that's fair."

There is one non-Barrayar novel, allegedly published here last autumn,

but almost impossible to obtain. (My helpful local bookseller was told by the British publisher that it was already out of print, although it had never appeared on the official booklist.)

"Ah, *The Spirit Ring*? That's another thing that has a lot of family background in it. A book had come down through my family which was a scholarly monograph on a folk tale called 'The Grateful Dead.' I think it was my great uncle's PhD thesis. He was a professor of English at Princeton at around the turn of the century. I had read this thing and been fascinated by these little dried, desiccated raisins of stories that were in it — a collection of about 20 different versions from 20 different countries of this particular folk tale. I had seen the Ace and Tor adult fairy-tale books, and I thought this could be done as that kind of a story. I'd had that in the back of my mind for several years and I finally got the opportunity to write it. It was great fun. It has been published in Britain but no one seems to know. Almost everybody who reads me in Britain reads me in American imports, which is a little disturbing..."

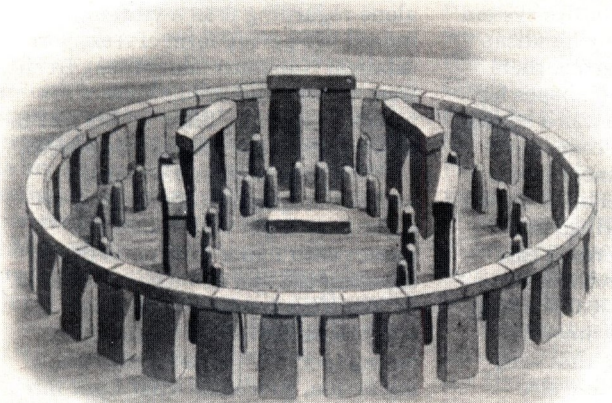
One characteristic and welcome feature of Bujold's stories is that they are unashamedly *fun* to read.

Cordelia, coming to Barrayar from a world which keeps horses in zoos, has some difficulty in working out how to board one (does one levitate?), let alone regarding it as a vital and indeed life-saving form of transport. Admiral Naismith (aka Miles), fresh from victory and in full view of his troops, is literally lifted off his feet to be kissed by the (tall) girl he adores. On another occasion his manly attributes are put to the test by an eight-foot virgin with fangs. He passes with flying colours. Is this aspect of the stories often mentioned?

"Yes. This is why I read books. If I want to be depressed I'll read the newspaper. This is not what I ask of my fiction, so it's not what I put into my fiction. There is always, if not triumph, at least redemption. Because sometimes fiction is the only place we can find that."

Editor's Note: A rather different, and shorter, version of the above interview appears in the current issue of Liz and Deirdre Counihan's small-press magazine *Scheherazade* (no. 12, with stories by Peter T. Garratt, Andy Oldfield and others; available at £2.50 from St Ives, Maypole Rd., East Grinstead, W. Sussex RH19 1HL). Lois McMaster Bujold's Hugo Award-winning *Mirror Dance* (1994) has just been published for the first time in the UK by Pan Books (£6.99). Her latest novel, *Cetaganda* (not the book referred to above as *Memory*, which is still in progress), is currently being serialized in *Analog* magazine, and is due to be published by Baen Books in the USA in January 1996; a Pan edition will no doubt follow later in the New Year.

Like a Rolling Stone



Peter T. Garratt

Somehow, I hadn't expected a Financial Plan Manager to be late. Not that I was a big client, but when I'd known him before Ambrose Gold had stopped at nothing to impress anyone who mattered at all. I'd been a postgrad then, teaching History only as a subsidiary, in his case to Economics. He'd always been on time, and though he mainly wanted to talk about modern economic history, and my speciality was early medieval place-names, he managed to give the impression that I'd broadened his mind.

His office was a reasonable reconstruction of a Georgian aristocrat's drawing room, and his PA looked like Miss Elizabeth Hurley. I tried to be impressed. When he did appear he was carrying a copy of my book. Not one of my academic monographs, but the popularization, *Was Merlin an Irishman?*, for which I'd used the pseudonym "Blay Z. Magus." That seemed to have impressed him. He shook my hand firmly, said: "Always the dark horse, Blaise. Top Hundred paperback non-fiction, Top Fifty in the US. We're proud you chose Arbroath Confederate to put the proceeds to work for you."

He seemed sound enough. I dismissed the idea that there could be any odd reason for a City whizz-kid of the 1980s to wind up in his firm's branch at a provincial place like Wiltencaster. His suit looked neat and expensive, if his tie was a rather lurid shade of green. But then I too was wearing a green tie, allowing that mine went well with my brown tweed jacket.

I explained that I didn't only have the royalties from the book to invest. "It was the near-cliché of the uncle in Australia. In fact I did know him a little, but he left me more than I expected."

He started to outline an investment plan, so I added: "I'd hoped to keep most of the bequest in eco-friendly trusts."

"Could think about it, old boy, but we don't go a bundle on these supposed ethical trusts. Truth is, they often have a rather low rate of return. But I could do you a portfolio which takes account of anything you strongly, particularly want to avoid."

"How about Usurer-Friendly? They make powerful arguments for the investments they suggest, with references to papers in refereed journals. I'm half-convinced, but as it's obviously out of my field, I do need a professional adviser to look over it."

I sensed he was about to decline out of habit; but he must have felt that to do so would be to risk losing my account, and he took the file, saying: "OK, I promise I'll give it a once-over – no, promise, a *twice-over*, give it my considered opinion." He glanced at his watch. I think I should have recognized the design, but it was just a watch to me. "Look, I'll put the money in a holding account, and we can do lunch, catch up a bit. There's a nice little place over at Great Wiltbury. The road goes right past Stonehenge, should suit you."

He buzzed the glamorous PA. "I'm off to do lunch with Dr Maurice. Care to join us?" She must have refused, because he led the way to the gravelled car-park. It was odd to see a Merc with mud on the wings and two unhammered dents, starting to turn rusty, but it drove smoothly enough, though it was raining,

and he went fast for the wet road surface.

I was curious enough to ask: "It was good to hear you were in the area, someone I've known for so long, but what does bring you to the provinces? I thought you were something in the City."

"Bit of a soulless job, old boy. Good package, but none of the things we've just been doing, going through a fellow human being's exact financial needs. Beats files and screens and odd characters hollering at you down the phone." He drove fast, too fast for the narrow, damp-bright road. "Besides, London can be soul-destroying at the best of times. Landed a plum job, found I needed something more, no idea what. Tried psychoanalysis, Jungian, all the stuff you get a couple of blocks from Harley Street, didn't do the trick. There are a few laid-back therapy centres in this part of the world and the firm were looking for someone to take on this office. Seems some of the staff were in danger of going native."

"Going what?"

"Getting a bit too laid back. Not pulling their weight. Mind you, I've had a glance at the books, don't see anything that out of order, business a bit slow, that's all. Hello, what's this?"

He rounded a bend and had to scream to a halt. The road ahead had been blocked by two police vans and a DIVERSION sign. A group of strangely-dressed people had stopped by the barrier: they had arrived on motor-cycles, but wore sodden homespun coats, or rather cloaks, the only leather being odd helmets. A thickset bearded man who wore a gilded chain and carried a staff was arguing with a senior policeman. Ambrose drew up: "What the Devil's going on?"

The man with the staff said loudly: "I'm Arthur Pendragon, and I'm trying to persuade these... officers that even under *their* law they've got no right to stop us celebrating Equinox at the Stones!"

The policeman shook his head. "Not quite so simple I'm afraid, *Sir*. Whatever your Round Table Druids say, it's quite clear that under the modern law of this country, no one is allowed near this Ancient Monument today!"

Ambrose said smoothly, "I'm sure that doesn't apply to us. My colleague is Dr Blaise Maurice, from the History Department of Wiltencaster University."

"No one." The policeman showed us a document, which read:

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL HERITAGE

By powers vested in me by the Criminal Justice Act

1994 I declare that no person whatsoever may approach within four miles of the designated Ancient Monument Stonehenge within two days of 21 March.

I. Maude-Redd, Minister of State,

Department of Environmental Heritage

Ambrose exclaimed: "Well! Is this a free country or not! What do we pay our taxes for?" Without waiting for an answer, he slammed into gear and roared off down the diversion. He went on: "D'you think that Arthur-something is the man who thinks he's a reincarnation of *King Arthur*? I've seen him on the box."

"What little I know about King Arthur is ten times more than I know about reincarnation."

"I'd have thought it'd be up your street. Arthur, anyway. But then, maybe Arthur isn't any good without Merlin's help." I thought he was joking, but he went on to discuss the supposed link between Merlin and Stonehenge. His reading of even my popular book hadn't got beyond the sales figures!

I explained patiently that the Merlin legend had its roots in the last of the pagan shamen of Britain, a tribal leader from the Selkirk area, who lived a generation *after* that when Arthur may have flourished. "Arthur seems to have been a *Christian* leader. But there is very interesting evidence from place names and genealogical tables to suggest contact between the Selgovae and the last pagan tribes of Ireland."

"Hmm. That's not exactly the same as him *being* an Irishman!"

"No. That's why I used a pseudonym. I was starting to realize that it's almost a rule of academic life that any book you sell that does more than break even is almost a liability. Anyone who makes serious profit is without honour in his own university."

He grinned and drove on to Great Wiltbury, a market town whose character has been shaped by its nearness to Stonehenge, not to mention the ruined abbey of St Vivian and a connection to a couple of other historically dubious Celtic saints. Ambrose pulled up outside a pub in the High Street, the "Holdstock." Instead of going in, he darted across the road to look in the window of a shop-front with a sign: WILTSHIRE AND WESSEX HOLISTIC THERAPY CENTRE. He said: "Hey, here's... what do you call it... synchronicity! A series of Reincarnation and Past-Life Therapy Workshops!"

I spent the next month worrying about the effect on my academic reputation of entrusting my money to an adviser who attended past-life workshops. Ambrose was even later for the next appointment. He looked as rushed as if he had never left the City, and came to the point: "Look, I read that prospectus, eco-friendly investments, and I totally see the point. We've really got to start thinking more carefully, more long-term, about how we invest. So, half your money is in Usurer-Friendly now, and if you like, I'll put the rest in."

I was relieved, but still curious. We again went for lunch: the dark-haired PA, whose badge said she was Ms Viv Nimmo, did join us. We drove through fine rain toward Stonehenge, and this time we were able to approach the stones, though there was an entry charge, and we weren't able to walk right into the circle. Viv said: "Don't you have special rights, you know, as an expert?"

"No." She was smartly dressed, like an air hostess turned junior manager, but her trace of local accent gave her an innocent sound. It was tempting to try and impress her, but I couldn't work out how to. "I specialize in a much later period."

Ambrose sighed: "I'm afraid Dr Maurice won't allow you the romantic illusion that Merlin brought these stones from Ireland by magic for King Arthur's

predecessor Ambrosius Aurelianus. He won't allow that Merlin ever met either of them."

"In fact," I expounded, "the supposed earlier Merlin was given credit for certain adventures which were originally ascribed to Ambrosius himself. As in: 'Merlin, sometimes called Ambrosius.'"

They weren't interested, instead stared at the stones through the fence and the drizzle. She said: "It's awful not being able to go up to them. I understand why the hippies get upset. It's like looking at some noble wild animal in a cage."

We drove to Great Wiltbury. Both looked in the holistic centre window. Over lunch I grasped the nettle of the past-life sessions and asked how they were going. Ambrose shrugged: "The hypnotic bit is very relaxing, but I've had no luck breaking through to real memories of a past life. It's there though. I can sense it."

Viv added: "I've not had much luck either. I get the barrier too. But there's something. Every time they tell me to remember a previous life, I get this really odd feeling of flying."

I considered. "You mean, it becomes a typical dream of flying?"

"No. I remember being a bird."

Ambrose smiled. "A really groovy chick! A 60s swinger!"

"No! A feathered... actually, I remember being a woodpecker."

This was too much! My precious inheritance was entrusted to woodpeckers, who could peck away at my nest-egg in any mad way they fancied! Ambrose was saying: "More synchronicity! Woodpeckers keep coming up. Did you hear about the one which delayed a Shuttle launch? It took it into its little head to start pecking at this rocket, and somehow did enough damage to hold the whole thing up!"

She said: "I did have a weird dream around that time... felt I had to peck... something that wasn't a tree..." She noticed my sceptical expression, and said nervously: "Funny things, dreams. Never know what to make of them!"

Ambrose didn't share her caution. "Isn't it marvelous, that such a seemingly innocuous creature could incapacitate a monstrous technological carbuncle like a space rocket!"

She shrugged. "Maybe. I'd hoped I'd remember being something a bit better than a bird! Tell you what... I'd hoped I might have been someone like Saint Vivian! I was named after her!"

I found this very difficult, perhaps because I'd been bracing myself to be told again that my desire to invest in Usurer-Friendly was naive. Instead, Ambrose had picked up the ball and run with it way beyond the fringe, taking his assistant with him. I commented sourly: "I hope not! St Vivian isn't a well-attested saint. As a matter of fact, there are grounds for supposing that she's a Christianized version of the Celtic myth-figure Vivianne, or Nimue, the enchantress who tricks Merlin into teaching her his secrets, then binds his spirit into a rock. Or in some versions, an oak."

Ambrose said: "Really? The false Merlin or the Selkirk Shaman?"

Viv was looking shocked: "Is that what the story of Merlin's Oak is all about? The one in the middle of Wiltbury Woods?"

"There are so many strange connections!" Ambrose exclaimed. "I've heard that story!"

I hadn't heard that particular one. Blay Z. Magus might have been a bit of a folklorist, but Blaise Maurice was a serious historian. The two didn't mix. In my case, they didn't need to, provided I kept my investment safe. I wasn't sure I was doing that.

It was raining more heavily as we drove back. Ambrose commented: "You know, I don't think we've had a dry day this spring. Farmers say it's gone on too long. It's a good thing we didn't put anything in that new agri stock."

"Maybe it's because those hippies aren't allowed to do their thing at the Stones," Viv said. That was it. I was going to pull out. Then she smiled at her joke, smiled directly at me. She had incredible white teeth, like wave-caps. I decided to think it over.

I went away on the conference circuit, still thinking it over. I gave my paper on the classification of Saxon place-names in Wessex twice. It was politely received, but whenever I asked anyone about financial advisers, I provoked sneers about the Merlin book. The last conference was in Australia, which gave me a chance to sort out my uncle's affairs and take a holiday. When I got back, there was a note from Viv asking me to make an appointment at the office.

She looked even smarter and wore a badge identifying her as now being an Acting Financial Plan Manager. She spoke stiffly with less of her local accent: "Mr Gold isn't available, and the new manager suggested that I check his work on your portfolio with you."

"At the moment, I'm very happy with Usurer-Friendly."

"You wouldn't like to try Amalgamated Metal Mining? Or a few shares in Sword of Truth Military Exports? Both are doing well."

"What is this? Where's Ambrose?"

"He's... he has made a few unorthodox investments on your behalf. Did you know he'd bought you a field?"

"A what?"

"A field. It's about five miles from Wiltbury. It's called Circle Field, because there have been a lot of crop circles there. It seems it's an investment in tourism, people pay to see the circles. Also, you're now a big investor in FoamRock Replications. They..."

"This is weird, even by his standards. Gold's Standards. He was never like this as a student: he was so... careful! When can I see him, get to the bottom of all this?"

"That'll be difficult. He's not exactly *with* Confederates at the moment. I'll tell you over lunch."

She swept out to the car park, not bothering with a coat, even though it was raining heavily. As soon as we were in her Clio, she said: "It's been really, really awful. He was puttin' lots of time into the sorts of things you told him to, readin' up on the Green shares. He didn't notice some of the other folk here were on the take. He trusted them!"

Her accent was back like the west wind and bad weather: she was burring and rolling her Rs like a barmaid in a west-country theme-pub. She slammed into gear, almost in tears and drove off towards Stonehenge and Wiltbury. "They *suspended* him, and just coz the firkin' firm lost a few quid while he was startin' out as manager they froze his cards. He's lost his flat, everythin'!"

"Lost his flat! How on Earth..."

"It was part of a kind of hotel they've got shares in. No security, but you'd never... they think he was in on that scam, but I know he had nothin' to do with it!"

"So where's he living now?"

"In his car. In the car park at the Holdstock mos'ly. He's got no credit, so he's borrowin' cash."

I assumed mainly from her. From her protective attitude, I was surprised she hadn't taken him in. A small, over-optimistic part of me was glad.

Ambrose was already in the bar when we reached it, reading a battered copy of *The Limits to Growth*. He had long stubble, presumably not designer, and slowly nursed a pint. He still wore his suit, but it was clear he slept in it. He apologized in equal measure for his appearance and his inability to attend in person to the greening of my portfolio. "It's been rough, old boy. You expect some sort of fair play from chaps you've worked with for years."

"It's amazing!" I replied. "I thought the academic world was bad... How can people get away with things like this?"

He shrugged. "You get ahead of the game, you hear people talk about losers in a way you don't like, but you can't do anything about it, it doesn't apply to you anyway. Then you have your own reasons for stepping down a bit, some kind of mob instinct makes them want to push you a bit further. They're afraid you'll come back so they push you right over the edge. You know it could happen but you don't think about it. You use a company card and a service flat in a company hotel. You don't read the small print because it doesn't apply to you. Then something goes wrong, and someone has to be to blame, and the only someone around is the one who didn't think it might be a good idea to lie low for a while."

"What are you going to do!"

"I could get another job, but it *would* be a step down. I don't know if I could cope. I don't think I've got much choice about seeing how the other half lives." He emptied his glass, said: "Don't get me wrong. I've taken good care of your investments. You matter to me. You're the only chap who stimulates me into thinking, instead of just making me watch my back. I did too much of that in Town. I've got you into a new heritage concept, FoamRock. They make replicas of hard-to-access facilities like Stonehenge out of this amazing new material... it's hard as rock when it's set, but only just heavy enough that the wind doesn't blow it away. There'll be a new Stonehenge which will be for everyone. Even if you only charge the wealthy visitors, you'll make a fortune."

And lose the last of my academic credibility. I could

imagine the Dean introducing me as the proprietor of Stone-Foam Fairground! I said sourly: "I suppose that's why you've bought me a field!"

"Spot on, old man! Circle Field is in a valley between two hills. It runs East-West. Circles appear there every year, and they have the exact dimensions of Stonehenge! What's more, the hills add to the observatory effect of the stones! Midsummer sunrise is from a point just before the hill starts to rise to the north, Midwinter is the same to the south. And the sunsets the same the other way. Not that the sun's been very visible *this* wretched year!"

Viv said complainingly: "But you can't get the foam stones *into* the field. There's only footpaths!"

"Public Rights of Way. The FoamRocks are so light, we'll be able to carry them in triumph! Drink up, and we'll take a look."

I decided to humour him and consult a psychiatrist later. We drove in Viv's car through pouring rain. In the fields, nothing was ripening: some crops were going to seed. I nearly made a remark about Global Warming, but thought better of it. I didn't want to hear Ambrose's views of the unseasonal weather. And it certainly wasn't warm as we toiled up one of the hills which flanked the field I unwillingly owned. It was somehow cold and humid.

It was a very green field. I supposed it would be worth something, though from the position there would be no chance of developing it. Ambrose said: "I gather it's early in the year for circles, but if you look, they're there already."

The sun broke through the cloud above the field, though all round it was raining. I could see the circles in the sodden crop: I even fancied there were darker patches where the foamstones would be erected. I said warily: "It's not my period, but I think circles in a field can indicate some kind of archaeological feature."

"You mean, there might have been a prototype Stonehenge?"

That wasn't quite what I meant. As I thought how to answer, an amazing thing happened. The sun was shining through a gap in the cloud onto the circle, so it looked as bright as an emerald necklace on a pool table. We were looking down from above through rain, and as we watched, a rainbow formed, or rather a formation of rainbows. They didn't arch across the sky, but made perfect circles above the marks in the wet crop. Ambrose exclaimed: "That's it! Did you ever see anything like it? Perfect synchronicity! This is the place for the once and future Stonehenge!"

I couldn't deny him. They were so beautiful, those shimmering bands of pure colour in the damp air. I *hadn't* seen anything like it. As we returned, he said excitedly: "Y'know, I've been reading up on Merlin, on the things you said about legends attracting elements from different periods, different individuals. Did you ever hear the theory that the Round Table idea wasn't newer than Arthur and the Selkirk Merlin, but much older? That whatever ancient genius designed Stonehenge, what, centuries before Arthur, *originated* the idea of the circle, the Jungian archetypal circle, as a symbol of wholeness and completeness? That Stonehenge was the original Round Table,

and its designer an early Merlin figure?"

I had heard the theory, but didn't want to admit it, so I said: "You're wet through. Look, I could maybe put you up for a couple of days. Then, we could maybe see if the council or someone..."

"Thanks, but not needed. If we're going to get this show on the road, someone's got to go on the road!"

He left the Holdstock car park, and spent the next few weeks driving with groups of travellers, trying to persuade them that his Foamhenge would suit their need for a centre at which to worship and hold festivals. He communicated mainly through Viv, who gave me the impression that the plan wasn't working, and that the best we could hope for was a commercial site. I slept badly, worrying about my investments, about Ambrose's health and sanity. Nevertheless, most of my money was still in Usurer-Friendly. As a major shareholder in FoamRock, I was sent progress reports of the new stones. By mid-June, they were almost ready, but there was no word as to how they could be transported to Circle Field, or who would celebrate the Solstice around them if they got there.

The weather didn't improve. It rained every day: the price of food rose, that of farmland fell. On the evening of the 19th, Viv came to my lodgings. She wore black: raincape, shoes, minidress. The black dress was very little, but there had been no sun to give her a tan. Her pale face was wet: I thought there were teardrops as well as rain. She said: "You've got to talk to him. He's flipped a bit. I'm not surprised, he's firkin' lost ev'rything again!"

"I didn't think he had much left to lose!"

She shook her head. "He was livin' in the car. He was with some hippies in buses, they were all goin' to the Stones. You know this big football match, European Cup?" I nodded. I don't follow sport, but even I knew the whole country was talking about the football. "Well, lots of police are off at matches. England vee Scotland, Ireland and Northern Ireland and Russia vee some place that used to be part of Russia. Well, they thought it would be a good year to get to the Stones. Then that Ian Maude-Redd came on the TV."

I'd seen the broadcast. The Minister for Environmental Protection had announced that whatever hooliganism happened at football matches, no traveller would be allowed to desecrate any Ancient Monument. He had refused to take questions about environmental influences on the weather.

"They turfed them all out of a layby near Wiltbury this morning an' took their cars an' buses. They took them to the council dump and *trashed* them with their belongin's *inside!*"

"That's... surely that's illegal!"

"They don't care about *legal!* Legal's *months* away! He's got nowhere to sleep, my folks won't have him at ours, so I got him a tent an' some dry clothes, an' he's gone and made himself a treehouse in Wiltbury Woods. Says it's Merlin's tree an' he has to protect it. He won't listen to me, talks like I was that Vivian who put him in the tree in the first place!"

"You mean, he thinks he's a reincarnation of Merlin?"

"I think so." She led the way to the car without

waiting for me to agree to come. We drove through the gathering dark and the rain. It was nearly nine, but the sky was so heavy with clouds it didn't seem like midsummer. We parked on a suburban street on the edge of the woods, then she led the way into the dark, dripping shadows under the trees, running, kicking off her shoes when they stuck in the mud. I toiled after her, breathing hard, fearing an asthma attack, but even so nearly losing sight of her several times.

At length she paused under an enormous oak. I didn't know if an oak could have existed since Merlin's time, but this one had tried. She called up into the branches: "Ambrose! It's me! Let down the ladder!" Nothing happened, so she hung her cape on a broken branch and started to climb nimbly up. I looked after her, and could just see that a rough platform had been built in a fork of the tree, with the tent above it. She reached it, and a minute later a wire ladder unfurled down, its end landing at my feet.

I had no choice but to climb. It was slippery and I could hardly see the rungs. When I was near the top, it swung right round and I thought it had come loose and was about to drop me 20 feet onto the ground. My feet came loose from the rungs, I kicked wildly trying to get them back in, couldn't manage it, desperately hauled myself up with my arms. I found the ladder running over the edge of a sort of wooden pallet, hauled myself onto it.

There was more light there. I could see Ambrose sitting with his back to the main trunk of the oak. His stubble was now a beard. His new clothes consisted of a joke magician's outfit: black hat, cape, and tunic, all decorated with moons, stars and zodiac signs. He groaned and said: "I have to relax, to meditate. My spirit is in the tree, and I must get to it to be reborn into this world."

I could think of no answer to this. Viv began: "You..."

"No, *you!* Great enchantress and false pupil! Since you imprisoned me, I cannot truly be a man! I have been a wolf, a salmon, a stoat, an eagle, but I cannot be a woodpecker!"

"No. I see what I must do." She stood up and pulled off the little black dress: I saw it was her only remaining garment. She walked naked to the edge of the platform, beyond the meagre shelter of the tent, beautiful, but very vulnerable in the unremitting wet. I moved to remonstrate, and she said: "No! I have to fly!"

She started to climb rapidly further up the tree. It was huge, and although I could see dark grey sky, I lost sight of her white nimble body. At one point I almost thought I saw her launch herself off a high branch, as if diving, but nothing fell past. I tried to climb after her, couldn't see properly, slipped almost at once and fell heavily back to the platform. It rocked wildly but didn't fall.

I turned furiously to Ambrose: "You're insane! That girl will kill herself... you'll be responsible..." I moved to the wire ladder. "I'm calling the emergency services!"

"No. You'll see. I have to... listen, I know this is a bit outlandish for you. Academic prophet and all that." He seemed to be trying to compose himself, suppress the delusions. "Just humour me for a little. Give me one night, one night to prove Merlin did

exist... all three of them, maybe more, all with the same spirit, all connected to the stones, returning again and again to the stones. But Vivianne was young in those days, I could give her knowledge but she hadn't learned wisdom. She bound the spirit into the tree, it's been getting worse and worse, people seeking power without glory... the stones need Merlin now, not this soulless City-boy shell..."

It was almost completely dark, but he must have had some awareness of my expression. "OK, you think I'm off my shoulders, gone wacky, you want to call the boys in white coats. Well, let's cut a deal. Let's try things out, do a little experiment, compromise. She's different now, Vivianne. She's a pretty face, yes, but these got the wisdom... there's such depth in that girl... she'll help me now. Give her one night. Till it's light, and you can see to get down that ladder without falling off it."

"How can she help? She's as bad as..."

"She's a woodpecker. In her way, she's more powerful than I. She can have both her natures... you too are vital. Stay with me till morning. It's nearly Solstice. It won't be so long, so hard."

It didn't seem much to ask. By staying on the spot, I might be able to offer some unimaginable help to him or Viv. Otherwise, I would likely get lost in the dark wood. I signified my usual reluctant assent by moving to a more comfortable and slightly drier position. He said, "You'll see. Now, I must meditate." He sat cross-legged and closed his eyes. An expression of incredible peace and hope passed over his face. I was about to remonstrate again about his absurd faith in Viv the were-woodpecker, when by an irritating coincidence or synchronicity, a real woodpecker appeared and started pecking loudly on the oak from a branch just above his head. I sat down and waited for him to come to his senses. Or for the morning, whichever was first.

It was a long night. The rain was incessant. Ambrose had somehow got a large wooden pallet into the tree to form his floor, but the tent he was using as a roof was a very small one. Wherever I sat, water leaked onto me. Ambrose meditated quietly. I shifted to try and stay dry. There was no sign of Viv. The woodpecker pecked away. The night got colder. It did feel like the eve of a Solstice, but not summer.

It must have been around midnight. My watch had stopped. Moonlight broke through the clouds, a glacially cold light diffused by the branches of the great oak. I couldn't tell if it was still raining; water dripped from every branch and leaf. There was no sound but the drips. The woodpecker had stopped. Something fluttered under the tent: I thought it was the little bird. Very tame, it settled and perched on the far edge of the pallet. Then Ambrose stirred. He opened his eyes, and they seemed to glow brighter than the moonlight. He stretched, and his cloak rustled. I don't know what material its moons and stars were made of, but it must have been highly reflective, because they too glowed. He seemed to be waking up slowly, but he suddenly rose to his feet alarmed.

I realised Viv had rejoined us. She crouched in the

position previously occupied by the woodpecker. She must have slipped silently down from the branches above, like a tree-dwelling daughter of Tarzan. She was still naked: I noticed her body had been marked or dirtied in some way, before looking away in embarrassment.

Ambrose glared at her, said: "Through you, I dwelt in the tree. My spirit could not be reborn as a man."

His moons and stars were glowing so bright it could not be reflection, it had to be some trick woven into the fabric of the outfit. The zodiac creatures were glowing too, the crab and the lion seeming to glower angrily at Vivianne, as if anxious to nip her white flesh with their teeth and pincers. She in turn rose to her full height. I saw her body was not dirtied: what I had noticed had been raindrops. They too glowed like moons and stars with reflected light. She said: "You were too powerful, and I alone could master you."

I felt very afraid. The glowing points of light on her body were not raindrops. Some had the shape of the moon in its several phases, others were stars. They were the signs of the zodiac in their original star form, tiny pitiless points of light. Her astronomy was far brighter than his, and more frightening, for there could be no artifice about it. Her pale skin was in shadow, and the moons and stars shone brightly against it as if it had been the night itself. Her whole body was outlined in stars, as if it was a doorway to a part of the night far above the clouds. She spoke on, her voice no longer that of a PA or a barmaid: "During your waiting, I too have not worn human flesh."

Ambrose said, no, stated, pronounced: "I was a wolf. I roamed the forests and uplands of Britain. I hunted and was hunted, but there is no home for wolves there now."

Vivianne replied: "I was a woodpecker. I pecked the standard-pole of Mordred the false king, and later, I pecked out his eyes."

"I was a salmon. I swam the seas of the world and the rivers of Britain. But the seas are polluted now, and the rivers fouled."

"I was a woodpecker. I pecked the doom of a Saxon king at his gates, and his enemies left but one eye for me to peck out."

"I was a stoat. I prowled the hedgerows of Britain, but hedgerows are few now, and there is no home for me as a beast."

"I was a woodpecker. I pecked at the waterlines of the Spanish king's ships, and later, the storm took them."

"I was an eagle. I soared on the wind above the fields and mountains of Britain, but the air is thin now, and the rays of the sun burn brighter than they did."

"I was a woodpecker. I pecked at the hull of a great rocket on a launchpad, and even that gave way to me. Then I pecked an oak, and I released a spirit only I could release."

The next day, the 20th, was overcast, though no rain fell. I no longer felt like a minor academic with large, but scarcely secure, investments. I had seen enchantments. I made my way to FoamRock, and arranged the delivery of the replica stones to Circle Field.

Ambrose, or Merlin as he now wished to be known, indicated that I should lead the convoy of flat-top lorries which carried them down the road towards Wiltbury and Stonehenge itself. I asked if the road would not be blocked that close to the Solstice.

"That is likely, yes. But there are blockages and blockages."

It was almost sundown when we reached a field where a large group of travellers had gathered. A few were dressed as Druids, but the majority wore the variegated multi-coloured rags of the road. Some had children or dogs, but there were few vans. Either the authorities had impounded these, or the people were mindful of the draconian limits on numbers of vehicles and had come a long distance on foot. There was only acoustic music, guitars mostly, but there was a smell of joss in the air. A few hundred yards down the road was a barricade, more substantial than that for Equinox. No one was yet interfering with the gathering in the field, but I could see lines of police vans and men in riot gear.

Arthur Pendragon was only just arriving. He carried a paper from some European body which offered a forlorn hope of getting access to the monument. He started visibly when he saw Merlin and Vivianne. The latter stood close to her mentor now, as though in apology: she wore her black cape and dress, and on these moons and stars had mysteriously appeared, though they did not yet glow brightly.

Merlin said to Arthur: "You would not accept my plan for a Foam Henge at Circle Field. Know that it was a site I prepared at the beginning, 4,000 years ago, but even then I knew it should be kept for a time when the need would be greater. When the power of the soulless would imprison the Stones, would hide the sun. What do you say now to taking the Stone Henge to that original site?"

Arthur looked startled. "How could that be, man? The place is crawling with bill! We'll be lucky to get a just a handful in to go through the motions at the Stones!"

Merlin said solemnly: "Did I not bring these Stones all the way from Ireland by the power of my mind?" I looked at him, amazed. Even the previous night's startling events could not unlearn in me the habits of a sceptical lifetime. He noticed me and said:

"Have you not heard of the Great King of Ireland, Niall of the Nine Hostages? Did you think the hostages were men? No, Niall took nine of these stones, with a hundred men and three big ships to transport each, so that his dominion over both islands could be asserted. But in the time of Ambrosius, last of all the Romans, I returned them to Britain with no hundred men and no big ships."

He said to Arthur: "In a previous time, I summoned you into the world by giving your father the likeness of Gorlois, Lord of Tintagel, his greatest enemy, whose wife he loved. Will you now accept the power of my dissimulation?"

Arthur shrugged. "Worth a try, I suppose."

I did not see exactly what Merlin did then, but his moons and stars glowed very brightly, and he said: "I was there when Uther Pendragon rode the causeway

to the High Castel of Tintagel, in the likeness of its Lord Gorlois, to the arms of his love Igraine."

Suddenly I literally could not believe my eyes. Where the eccentric Arthur Pendragon had stood, I now saw the apparent twin of the Right Hon Ian Maude-Redd, MBE, MP. He even seemed to wear a pinstriped suit. Hippies from the field were streaming over, but as soon as they came under Merlin's influence, they started to resemble Ministry security men. They began climbing onto the flat-tops, which now carried, instead of foamstones, what looked like coils of wire. I raised my hand to wipe my brow, found my brown tweed cuffs were now also pin-striped. I was dressed like a Minister's assistant. Only Merlin and Vivianne retained their own appearance, or rather that of their long-ago precursors.

Arthur approached the barrier. Merlin whispered in his ear, and he said loudly, in the voice of Ian Maude-Redd: "I'm here in person with added security personnel and equipment." No one seemed to doubt him. The barrier was raised and the procession went through: Arthur, Merlin, who was also called Ambrose, the lorries with the disguised hippies and foamstones. Last through was Vivianne, to maintain the illusion. As the last flat-top passed through, she looked regally around the police position, her moons and stars brighter than the sky, and said: "I was there when Merlin, the fatherless, son of Ambrosius, reached the height of his powers, when he passed them on."

They ignored her weird appearance totally, lowered the barrier, and went about their business, as if no one had passed through. Then Vivianne gave me her little white grin, and flapped her cloak like wings, as if to say that she had a triple nature: as well as Enchantress, she was also girl and woodpecker.

We followed the procession towards Stonehenge, caught up with it when the trucks had to stop and the people unloaded the foamstones, carrying them easily. We pushed over the last barrier and walked on. The sky was as grey as the stones, as grey as tombstones. Merlin walked up to the central ring and said: "These old monoliths will not be carried as lightly. Nevertheless, it must be done."

Vivianne came up and stood beside him. Arthur and I flanked them; the rest of the people made a great outer circle, holding their foamstones. Merlin began to speak:

"I was here when the first circle was prepared, and left to wait;

"I was here when the Blue Stones came hither from Prescelly;

"I was here to raise the Hanging Stones and make the circle whole;

"I returned to return the stones stolen by Niall of Ireland;

"Now I return again!"

As he finished, my eyes were drawn to the nearest of the hanging stones. It seemed to tremble, then imperceptibly it rose from its supports. Merlin walked round the circle. He repeated the formula, and one by one the other hanging stones rose also, then they started to glide away through the darkening air like massive

zeppelins. Next, the standing sarsens began to shudder and then pull themselves away from the earth. Lastly, he walked round the outer circle of bluestones, and these too shuddered and rose silently. As each rose, the bearers of its foam replica came forward and slid it into place. Vivianne was walking backward at the head of the column of floating stones, beckoning them like a shepherdess. It was almost dark, and the vast, strange procession moved off toward the East, the stones floating on their sides, just above head-level. It was like looking through a periscope at a great fleet, the sarsens in the middle like dreadnoughts, the bluestones their escort of destroyers.

We walked through the night. It was totally dark: there were moons and stars on the enchanters' capes, and later these appeared also in the sky, but they were not true stars, and shone from the undersides of clouds.

It was midsummer, and the night was short. There was a faint haze of bluish light on the clouds in the east by the time we reached Circle Field, our destination. Merlin looked exhausted. Nevertheless, he reformed the human circle, and said:

"I was here when this circle was prepared;

"I saw these stones raised;

"I saw them stolen and returned;

"Now they are stolen and returned again!"

The light was now clearer, pink as well as blue. The clouds were dispersing. One by one the stones found their new homes, prepared 4,000 years before,

and settled to their rest. Lastly, even the hanging stones settled exactly onto their uprights.

We entered the inner circle and looked East, The sky was now bright, the clouds had gone. A ray of bright sunlight flashed over the horizon exactly beside the northern hill. It shone into the circle, and the stones were suddenly bright as pink marble. I realized that it was the first clear sunlight I had seen all year. Over the fields, coils of mist rose lazily into the clear air.

Merlin exclaimed: "This is it! How it was meant to be!"

Time was no longer a barrier. All the Merlins were reassembled, had reassembled Stonehenge. From now on, the tourists and security men would unknowingly admire my foam replica. Merlin's followers would resume worshipping in their old way. The weather would improve.

For that matter, the price of farmland might go up.

Peter T. Garratt last appeared here with "Yuletide Karaoke" (issue 91), though perhaps his most popular story for us was "The Collectivization of Transylvania" (issue 81). His stories have appeared in several other small magazines of late, including Liz Counihan's *Scheherazade* and Paul Beardsley's *Substance*. He is a clinical psychologist, and lives in Brighton.

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DAVID LANGFORD

THE SCOTTISH CONVENTION

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times: it was Intersection, the 1995 World SF Convention, in the hangar-like halls of the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, Glasgow. Total attendance: 4,800.

I was there for seven days of riotous fun. Parties, panels, restaurant meals, horrible fast food, chatter in bars with countless old friends and new, all punctuated by shuttle-bus and taxi rides between city-centre hotels and the SECC in its distant post-industrial wasteland amid car parks the size of Kansas. Thus few coherent memories remain – just a handful of snapshots. First and saddest:

John Brunner, bustling suavely through the fan area. A quick exchange of Hellos and he's gone forever: a stroke, death within hours on Friday 25 August, a flood of memorials and regrets. Numbness spreads. He would have been hugely tickled by the idea of making his exit at a major convention... but not just yet.

Drummers and Pipers... marching through the SECC concourse and into the gigantic Hall 4 with its weirdly assorted fannish litter (bouncy castles, play areas, a perpetual Aliens presentation with bloody awful music, etc, etc) to launch a lavish opening wine-party apparently financed by Glasgow's grateful ratepayers.... A partly convincing Nessie also features in the parade and nearly eats Peter Morwood.

Samuel R. Delany (a guest of honour) with a beard more splendidly patriarchal than ever, encountered at a HarperCollins celebration mysteriously sited on a moored Clyde ferry miles from anywhere.

Ian and Judy Watson's masterly retelling of a fire evacuation from the Moat House Hotel (whose showers' steam triggers alarms if you leave the bathroom door open). "We thought

you had to run to the car park in your pyjamas!" gesticulates Ian. "We were the only ones! Everyone else had anoraks and camo gear!" To make it more interesting, Judy adds: "And of course Ian had this enormous erection."

Terry Pratchett magically converting the same fire alert into a 4am signing session when he encountered a fan carrying (all together now) a Rare Unsigned Copy. Terry's antics with a pop-up dildo during a panel with Tom Holt remain veiled in diplomacy.

John Clute on the Fantasy Encyclopaedia panel, miraculously conveying his theory of fantasy's basic pattern of Wrongness, Thinning and Healing against near-impossible odds. The problem is the SECC acoustics. "Rooms" are little, non-sound-proofed, roofless enclosures; voices float upward into murmurous, echoing vastness. To use the sound system is to compete with adjacent "rooms": since the entrances face one another, John finds himself staring down the aisle at his hated sonic rival across the way, who is Gardner Dozois of *Asimov's*. Each manically succeeds in drowning out the other.

Michael Swanwick musing, "I like gratuitous sex and think it has a place in fiction as well...."

THE 1995 HUGO CEREMONY

Vast crowds filing into the "Extravaganzas" hall and the usual atmosphere of sweaty paranoia exuding from nominees whose pose of Total Cool is fast eroded by delays and minor presentations (e.g. Cordwainer Smith finally gets a "Japanese Hugo" for the 1961 "A Planet Named Shayol"). Robert Silverberg's spoken memorial for John Brunner is simple, word-perfect, and causes a four-minute standing ovation for the late great man. This feels right – as does the John W. Campbell award for best new writer, presented to our very own Jeff Noon.

Then the H4 ugos proper... Fanzine, my own *Ansible*. Fan artist, Teddy Harvia. Fan writer, me: I realize I love all these voters. Semiprozine, *Interzone* – and suddenly this award's impartial presenter Kim Newman is leaping gleefully around "like a demented Muppet," as David Pringle marches to the stage... this particular Hugo "always" goes to glossy US news magazines, and British surprise and delight are about equal. Original Artwork: *Lady Cottington's Pressed Fairy Book* by Brian Froud and Terry Jones. Pro Artist: Jim Burns. Pro Editor: Gardner Dozois. Non-fiction: *I. Asimov: a Memoir* by the late Isaac Asimov. Short Story: "None So Blind" by always-popular Joe Haldeman. Novelette: "The Martian Child" by

David Gerrold, who with memorable tackiness hauls his embarrassed young son on-stage and eulogizes him as the Real Martian Child. Novella: "Seven Views of Olduvai Gorge" by Mike Resnick – who is nominated in four categories and thus becomes, in inscrutable US phrasing, the first person to bat .250 in the Hugos. Novel: *Mirror Dance* by Lois McMaster Bujold.

Then wild parties, fireworks, tears, embraces, sighs of relief and, all night, the throbbing undertone of gloating from a select few.

LAST SNAPSHOTS

Christopher Priest, bemusedly discovering that his squib *The Book on the Edge of Forever* ended up a mere four votes behind the Asimov non-fiction Hugo winner; also that mild-mannered Norman Spinrad has confessed to carrying a commission from Harlan Ellison to "punch Priest out if he won."

Baltimore, winners of the 1998 Worldcon site selection vote (defeating Boston, Atlanta and Niagara), mercilessly following through their "pirates" bidding theme by naming the convention "BucConeer." Oh dearie me. Details: PO Box 1376, Baltimore, MD 21203, USA.

Balanced Reporting. The *Sunday Mail* attacking nasty anorak-wearing sci-fi fans in a patronizing story headed *Weirdos' Show Is Branded A Rip-Off*. This is justified by (a) locating a woman who owing to media misrepresentation had expected a free *Star Trek* exhibition and didn't like what she found after paying the high entrance fee; (b) moving on to lengthy descriptions of oddball fans "looking as though they were on drugs" without finding space to report that the complainer got a rapid refund.

Bob Guccione of *Omni* infamy being revealed, according to page 79 of the very splendid-looking *Science Fiction: The Illustrated Encyclopaedia* (just out from Dorling Kindersley) to look uncannily like the photograph on this very page. Separated at birth? "Not my fault," grovels the book's compiler John Clute.

Typo of the Convention: Wizards of the Coast, purveyors of expensively addictive card games like *Magic: The Gathering*, billing themselves in one of their own ads as "Wizards of the Cost."

The End. Sore-throated, Hugo-burdened and still euphoric, I am toying with a final drink in Glasgow and telling an even more hungover fan (Tony Berry) about last night's super-excellent Indian restaurant meal. Slowly he speaks: "I was there. At the same table. You twit." It seems time to leave....

The word and the world have long since moved on, but "epic" used to be the name of a proper film genre. People wrote books about it, argued about its blurry definition, disagreed about whether Lawrence of Arabia and Hercules Against the Moon Men should be included. It was, till the early 60s, the gaudy aristocracy of popular film genres, flamboyant, expensive, and charmingly dimwitted, until along came (depending on whose assassination theory you buy): Cleopatra, spaghetti westerns, 2001, spiralling union rates, the death of the auteur and the rise of the production accountant, and/or a sudden mass outbreak of inability to take biblical and Roman sagas seriously. Even now, hubristic film-makers in their 40s who grew up with these movies still feel a powerful nostalgia for some of the lost values of old-style film epic, because the great selling-point of epic was that it didn't cheat. The sets were full-size, the locations were real, the casts of thousands were actual human beings in actual costumes at actual bottom-of-scale day rates. Background paintings, matte shots, miniatures were compromises of last resort, despised work-arounds for the kind of total WYSIWYG spectacle that could only be delivered by big men with big visions, big megaphones, and majorly gullible backers.

Now, for obvious reasons, this isn't how sf film has traditionally been done; but it's an ideal to which the genre has always surreptitiously aspired, because the *feeling* of epic is precisely the quality in written and graphic sf that gosh-oriented cinema aches to capture.

What the paper-sf blockbuster can do that everyone wants is to visualize the vast and unfilmable, to shoot planetary and cosmic vistas which deliver the big conceptual fix to the wondersense. And because sf cinema is ultimately all made from tricks, this is precisely the stuff that's diminished on film by the audience's savviness about mattes, morphs, and models: that little voice saying "I'm not fooled" that for some reason isn't so activated by equally illusive devices like (say) acting. Perhaps for this reason, unabashed sf gosh-movies have been consistently mistrusted in Hollywood, except on those scarce occasions when a *Star Wars* or *Star-Gate* comes along to demonstrate the existence of an exploitable audience.

Hence *Waterworld*: an event whose historical and commercial significance has been so relentlessly dissected that hardly anything's been said about its significance as sf cinema. The guiding intention, which seems to have been honorably shared by all the warring factions involved, was clearly to resurrect the gosh-movie using steam technology: to make a future movie that would turn to the resources of old-epic spectacle to knock your eyes through the back of your head into the lap of the couple behind. For *Waterworld* is a



Nick Lowe

MUTANT POPCORN

perversely nostalgic, even reactionary, piece of film-making, eschewing the digital shortcut as far as possible in favour of traditional epic techniques. It has, to be sure, its share of blue-screens, paintings, miniatures, studio sets and animation, but mainly in the notoriously-afterthought third act, and they take up surprisingly little of the credits; the bulk of the spectacle, and the budget, is old-fashioned (and phenomenally expensive) mechanical effects, location shooting, full-scale outdoor sets, and mass real-time stunts, with the scarcely-disguised suggestion that all this is some kind of moral achievement. (Notice, for instance, how self-conscious it is about the heroics of technology, with the forces of darkness using motorized, environmentally-prodigious new watersports like powerboating while our hero outruns them all with the skills of old-fashioned yachtmanship and the benign energy

of muscle, wind, and wave.)

Not surprisingly, what we get from this nostalgia for a future past is a film of fascinating incoherences, which run much deeper than the familiar catalogue of nonsensicalities of detail. (Blah blah tobacco, blah blah rust, tobacco, accents, oilwells, volume of water locked in ice-caps &c., &c.... I shan't tax your time, but has there been a film since *Plan 9* so universally ridiculed for so many, many servings of Swiss-cheese logic?) It's impossible to read an American survivalist movie in 1995 as anything but an expression of the deep popular yearning for a state-free world, confirming the touching persistence of belief in the possibility of a libertarian utopia without government but with a limitless abundance of guns, gasoline and smokes. In this frontiersman future, where life is one endless day of blue-water sailing, there will be no more place for evil (diffused, persistent, intrac-

table), but only for villainy (personalized, eliminable, and given to snappy wise-cracks of the "Don't just stand there, kill something!" school). Nevertheless, for those who dare to look beyond the boundless ocean horizons, there will again be new lands, new virgin wildernesses to claim and tame: new Americas to build.

And yet *Waterworld* wants simultaneously to wear itself a liberal, multicultural heart. Even more than with its high-and-dry Reynolds/Costner predecessor *Rapa Nui*, the mythic under-text to *Waterworld's* setting, story and images is the Polynesian diaspora: probably the great historical saga of widescreen adventure and endeavour, but a subject so completely unfamiliar in the western imagination as to be thus far unfilmable in anything but a metonymic disguise (usually interplanetary), so that it has to have all this Dennis Hopper nonsense and environmental slobberedgook smeared on top before anyone in the western world will buy it. "If there's a river we'll dam it and if there's a tree we'll ram it," rants dastardly Den in the course of a very long and pointless speech to his henchpeople, "because I'm talking progress here, I'm talking development... Dryland is not just our *destination*, but it is our *destiny*..." (Either they ran out of script and let him improvise, or the rewrite man was very, very tired.) If anyone can explain the paraphrasable content of the Exxon Valdez gag, they're doing better than the movie.

But if you can peel off the layers of muddled portentousness and the overlay of preposterous action movie, the images of open ocean and the narrative of questing for landfall are genuinely, science-fictionally resonant. At its sporadic best, it's the nearest thing we're ever likely to see to a Jack Vance movie. Sadly, though, Hollywood has little experience in this kind of sf, and a lot of the lessons learned the hard way are old ones in worldbuilding novels. Even if it had started shooting with a script that knew where it was going, *Waterworld* was always doomed to be ballasted by one of those great-universe-shame-about-the-contents plots. Its weird blend of sublime grandeur and cheesy tack betray its proletarian origins in a script for Corman on a dated genre template, never quite shaking off the vulgar accents of low-rent concepts like mutants and surf-oriented action, and overpeddled on a cocktail of Hollywood-pharmacopoeia generics (toughguy loner humanized by induction into the familial; jeopardy-prone kid with McGuffin stapled to back; and so it goes, and goes). A problem with the whole setting that doesn't seem to have been squarely faced is that open ocean has no *structure* - so that the map of the plot that everyone's pursuing needs to be indecipherable even to the audience, and the promised Dryland has simply to materialize *ex machina* out of the mist.



Previous page: Miette (Judith Vittet) and One (Ron Perlman) find themselves stranded in the water, and above: Miette's gang of street urchins, in *The City of Lost Children*

The verdict on *Waterworld* has tended to be that it's a largely victimless crime, from which nobody, including the audience, comes out anything like as badly as expected. But in the future, when production accounting has gone meltdown, those who survive will have to adapt to a new world; and anything that looks a little too much like epic sf is that much less likely to swim.

How embarrassing, then, for the men called Kevin, whose defence rests principally on a plea of working with water, that a rival waterworld movie on the same Urplot (laconic tough loses heart to cute/smart kid in flight from child-abducting nasties) should come in on schedule, on a budget that would have covered half of Costner's front payment before points, and at 24 Rembrandts a second of the most eye-popping images ever seen on film. But then Jeunet and Caro's *City of Lost Children* does it by embracing everything that *Waterworld* shunned: studio-bound sets, digital warlockry, two directors who get on with one another and with their separate portfolios, and a disdain for the ordinary that extends beyond contents and texture to basic assumptions about film-narrative structure. An undisguised feature-length homage to Terry Gilliam, it's full of fantastic zooms of perspective and *Supersense* viewpoint shots, wordless set pieces and bravura sight gags plotted by storyboard rather than script, and a deliciously overstuffed, episodic plotline whose many longueurs and flatfalls are easily forgiven when there's always something along the next moment to spin your head in three directions at once.

I can see, though, why as many people have been disappointed as enchanted. It is, *mutantibus mutatis*, much the same film as the more acces-

sible *Delicatessen*, or rather the later-written *Delicatessen* is the same film as this: a sideshow assortment of Jeunet oddballs, innocents, and dastards turned loose to pursue their half-dozen randomly-tangled plotlines in a drizzly Caro environment of dilapidated overworld and sewery underground, until all paths climactically converge in a manic action finale where the innocent are saved and the wicked messily and wittily dispatched. *City* has a much denser, stranger, and generally less involving story, impossible to summarize without making it sound like either twee fable or whimsical twaddle, neither of which bears the least resemblance. Driven more by the poetry of image than by any kind of conventional plot logic, its first half is frankly heavy going on first view; it has the characteristic image-led narrativity of French sf and bd that might generously be termed a shade right-brain, all too given to lines like "Why not seek the reason for your torment in the molecular structure of your own tears?" But as the characters warm and the strands start to knot it smoothly crescendoes from tiresome to magnificent, and by the final half-hour you largely stop minding that you've never really caught up with the sense of what's supposed to be going on, to the extent that the ending seems if anything premature and abrupt. The cast are, in every sense, extraordinary, especially the kids; Gaultier and Badalamenti give their very best, if excess of it in the latter case; and the digital effects, especially at the climax, are very, very good. It is - for good and bad, and again in every sense - unfollowable. But then nobody's queueing up to pitch *Waterworld II: With a Vengeance*.

Nick Lowe



Giant of Japanese Film and Chinese Sky

Jan Lars Jensen

Foreshadowing. Thinking about it now, there were signals from the start to warn me of what would come later. Commodore Polanski supplied the first indication. When we met on the gangway, the Polish film-maker was in an even greater state of agitation than usual.

"Good evening, Roman," I said to him.

"Admiral Bretton," he muttered.

Polanski's black flightsuit was crisp and clean, the epaulettes gleaming, boots and belt polished to a black as glossy as undeveloped film. Generally he kept himself excessively tidy, but as he fussed with one of his jacket buttons now I suspected he was avoiding eye-contact with me.

"I don't understand why we can't wear more colourful costumes!" he suddenly blurted out.

"Black is the sum of all colours," I replied. "And they're uniforms, Roman, not costumes."

"Yes, well, I prefer not to think of myself that way."

"What way?"

He waved an arm at our surroundings. "The *military* way."

"It's not an issue in which you have much choice."

"I want my art to immortalize me, not military cam-

paings in some queer nation."

"Surely you can be remembered for both," I suggested, but received only a grimace for my trouble. I would have pursued the topic but we had arrived at the bridge, so instead I bowed with a flourish and opened the door for Polanski, allowing my second-in-command to precede me into the head of the airship.

Our vessel had been fashioned from a prop left over from the Japanese film *Rodan*. We had taken a life-size model of the titular pterodactyl and made it flight-worthy. The modifications included mounting 24 engines across its wings – discreetly, of course, so as not to disrupt the majesty of the giant wingspan – and re-structuring the interior to meet the requirements of a first-class airship. The interior had to be buttressed with a system of lattice and truss, and within this complex balsam geometry we'd built the crew's living quarters, a dining room and lounge, power-stations, and bays to hold the necessary pods of gas. All these compartments were under the jurisdiction of the small room within Rodan's head, the nerve centre of our craft and domain of the Commodore and his sole superior.

"Admiral Bretton," said one of the attendant flight officers, "I believe we are approaching a Chinese city."

I strode over to the tele-video and saw we had indeed crossed into Chinese territory.

On the screen, the landscape below appeared as tiny blocks of buildings and a network of roads in hairline. In Japan, it had been almost impossible to determine whether or not a city was authentic from this altitude, as much of the country was now covered with elaborate sets indistinguishable from the real thing. Our aerial view of China suggested much simpler folk, untouched by the ideas of urban planning. I was reminded that China lagged far behind Japan in sophistication, and hoped this was also true of its defences.

"I think we should make a preliminary run," I said. "Drop to 1,000 feet."

As the *Rodan* swooped downward, I leaned over the monitor and watched the land rush toward us. Polanski slowed the vessel again and the screen resolved into a wealth of Chinese detail, unfamiliar scrub, clay statues and floating bamboo bridges, a multitude of strange pans, which I soon realized were some kind of hat worn by a multitude of people, rivers of people, fields of people...

I heard Polanski say, "You should be looking at this."

"I'm amazed by the sheer number -"

"Sir," said a flight officer. "We have been *anticipated*." The *Rodan* slowed to a hover. I looked to the window, and all I saw was cranes.

Sixteen birds, splendid white. On closer inspection, I realized they had been outfitted with harnesses of red silk which lashed them into a single team. Polanski and I stepped forward. Although the animals pumped their wings furiously with our approach, they moved no further from the point in the air where they were suspended - the harnesses fed into a long red tether, and the tether ran all the way to an odd Chinese aircraft which had apparently risen to meet us.

Three voluminous hot-air balloons suspended a long gondola, a rickety construction perhaps 100 metres in length. It seemed woven from wicker and rope, and through the weave of its walls I saw silhouettes flashing through the interior.

Chinese airmen.

The cranes must have served some kind of navigational function or possibly acted as a means of propulsion. Their leash was manipulated by a Chinese airman who sat on an outer terrace with his legs dangling over the edge. Beneath his deck was a second, jutting out much further. A group of men stood here with their arms folded before them and their faces set in grim frowns. The drab olive tunics and breeches they wore suggested they were military officials, and they looked understandably concerned about the presence of the *Rodan*.

"Turn on the external speakers," I said.

Polanski snorted. "They won't understand English, and you certainly cannot -"

"Turn them on please, Commodore."

He grudgingly complied.

I took the mike and cleared my throat. "Good evening, people of China..."

At first the Chinese seemed to listen to my mes-

sage of goodwill, then I realized they'd only been startled by the volume of the broadcast. Presumably the technology was outside their realm of experience. Soon enough they launched back into their discussion, and this time, seemed to arrive at a consensus. The tallest of the group spoke to a subordinate, who retreated into the craft.

Polanski said, "Are we just going to sit here?"

"I want to wait and see how they'll respond."

"Like ducks," muttered the Pole, "sitting on the water and staring at the hunter."

As we waited, evening darkened the sky. Soon it became apparent that a message had been relayed to the ground, because a second balloon-craft rose before us.

The balloon rotated as it rose, turning its huge face in our direction: painted eyes and mouth, bundles of straw representing shaggy eyebrows, moustache, goatee. Rather than a carriage or gondola, this balloon hoisted beneath it a long bamboo body to match in scale its unpleasant face. The figure came complete with spindly arms jointed in too many places, and legs that trailed off like the tail of some inconceivably long kite. Locked inside the ribcage of this huge construction was its sole passenger, the operator. He was harnessed into a system of ropes that ran through the structure, and he furiously pumped wooden pedals at his feet - and when he lifted his arms to either side, the huge figure which enclosed him did exactly the same.

The Chinese diversion, it appeared, was an advanced form of marionette.

"Incredible," Polanski said. "Magnificently primitive..." I nodded. "I think we should respond with your latest effort, Commodore."

He turned to look at me. "You are making some kind of joke?" "Absolutely not." The marionette's assignment was obviously hostile. As it drifted toward us, the wooden arms opened to make threatening gestures. "Please roll the piece."

Polanski shook his head. "I refuse. I *refuse* to have my work compared to this."

The flight officer turned to stare at him.

"Your insubordination is wearing on our nerves," I told the Pole as I strode to the control panel and did it myself.

We had several external film projectors mounted upon *Rodan's* body but the one I opted to use was housed within its beak. I turned it on, and the beam of light flared through the darkening sky before us.

"I won't watch." Polanski crossed his arms and turned from the windows. "I refuse!"

For a screen, I chose the arrangement of three balloons which kept the Chinese aircraft aloft. The white silk received the light brilliantly,

10 - 9 - 8 - 7... "It's starting," I said. Polanski exhaled and turned around in time to see the grainy black and white begin.

It was a claustrophobic short piece about a young man driven to insanity by a portrait of his father - I had found the film self-indulgent and interminable but it served us well here; I even found myself grateful for Polanski's use of extended close-ups. The three

balloon "screens" made the actors appear bloated, twisting, contorted: truly monstrous.

The film had a profound effect on its audience. The Chinese officials squawked and gestured at the images, which to their naive eyes must have seemed the manifestation of some demon spirit. They pleaded to their enormous marionette for a response.

The marionette complied.

Swatting at the images, it easily tore open two of the balloons. Even inside the compartment of *Rodan's* head, I heard the whoosh of hot air accompanying the exhalation of shredded silk and bursting rope. For a moment, Polanski's film played over these frayed ribbons like black and white fire.

One balloon remained intact, and so the ship took a long time in its descent. We could see the airmen within scrambling to reach the end of the craft which remained suspended. Inevitably, a number of them dropped out of doors and open decks to plummet to the ground far below. The marionette made an ambitious attempt to save the lives it had jeopardized – it grabbed the lame end of the ship and tried to hold it aloft, but soon enough the weight of the larger craft won out, and the two constructions circled toward the ground together, like partners in some dizzying waltz. The last I saw of the airship was its team of cranes, red reins taut as they beat their great wings and struggled to stay aloof from the imminent calamity.

The projector beam dissipated into open sky. Polanski closed his eyes.

"So," I said. "This is China."

At that point I thought nothing about the voyage could surprise me.

I liked to think of myself as cosmopolitan.

That was why I had chosen Polanski, Polish by birth, as my second-in-command, and that is also why I had opted to fashion an airship out of a famous Japanese icon. In fact, I tried to incorporate something from every country we conquered into our vessel, and I hoped to soon include an element of the Chinese culture – this nation had been closed to the world for too long.

I was committed to rectifying that situation.

Daytime, we would pilot *Rodan* to an altitude that put us out of reach of their air forces. Sometimes we dared to swoop low, and if no clouds intervened I could turn on a monitor and see *Rodan's* silhouette against the Chinese landscape, the shadow of wingspan rippling across forested valleys, rice paddies, the dimpled hillocks – a leviathan in silhouette!

This also served to grab the attention of the population for what was coming at night.

Film.

Polanski made a pessimistic comment every evening before we began. "I do not see what good this will do. They're too unsophisticated. My work is beyond them!"

"Just because you can't see the results of what we do doesn't mean that it is having no effect," I would answer. And then, remembering a word I learned during our Japanese campaign, I shouted, "Banzai!"

We swooped to a lower altitude and strafed their villages. Sometimes it was difficult to locate a functional screen, but if there wasn't a temple with a broad white surface or a brick wall available, I contented myself with projecting the film directly onto the bodies and faces of the startled villagers themselves. A bizarre sight – people became bright points of light, each of them a constituent part of the larger-than-life drama washing over them. From our vantage, it looked as if the earth had been transformed into a rippling television screen.

Repulsion.

Frantic.

Pirates.

The Tenant.

We served them Polanski's films for five nights straight before the Chinese responded with real force.

He and I were in the control room arguing about some arcane point of film theory when the night exploded before us – reds, greens, blues, whites, a dazzling bouquet of colours blossomed beyond the window.

My senses recovered from the initial explosion and I realized what had happened.

"Fireworks," Polanski breathed.

"I don't like that tone, Commodore," I warned him. It sounded too much like admiration, and he quieted with the knowledge that even a perceived shift in loyalty was grounds to be sent to the brig. But secretly, I too was impressed.

More explosions erupted across the sky, adding to the chaos of light left over from the first volley.

But this wasn't simple chaos. Now I could see that the fireworks actually formed a picture: an oriental warrior battled a serpent that coiled around his body, and the serpent wound itself further with each successive explosion. The ploy on the part of the Chinese, I realized, was to distract their population from our films as well as bamboozle the crew of the *Rodan*.

"This can't go unanswered," I said quietly.

"We have nothing in the armoury to compete with this," Roman stated. "My films are not such... spectacles."

"Oh, but we do have something."

He grunted his disbelief.

"Don't forget, Commodore, that our vessel has been a star to many satisfied millions of Japanese."

I took the controls of the *Rodan* and directed her into the heart of that fiery display. Chemical cinders streamed against the windows and were sucked after us, pulling the firework picture into a distorted version of itself. We could smell the rich cordite from the lingering explosion as it was scattered by our craft.

But the Chinese wouldn't capitulate. More pictures were lobbed into the sky, another serpent, the symbol of yin-yang, two roosters locked in bright combat. As they became increasingly vivid I realized the fireworks were detonating closer to our vessel. Nonetheless I forged on, tearing through picture after picture.

And then all was dark again. Darker, it seemed, than before. And quiet. I turned to Roman and the two of us blinked at one another for a silent moment.

"Well, that certainly was exciting –"

Suddenly we were thrown to the floor as the *Rodan* lurched and shuddered, as if it had been rammed by one of the Japanese giants which plagued its celluloid career. An alarm sounded, emergency lights flooded the room. We had been hit.

"Good God," I said. "Roman, are you all right?"

"Nnh..."

I got to my feet and hurried over. He lifted his head and gingerly touched the bloody cut over one eye.

"Are you all right, man?!"

Polanski shook his head. The emergency lighting made him appear washed in blood. He blinked at me.

"Charlie? Charlie...?"

"I'm not Charlie," I snapped. "You're delusional."

"Oh God, Charlie's come for me..."

I shook him by the shoulders and slapped his face and helped him to his feet, told him to walk it off. I steered him out the door and into the gangway, with the intention of getting him to the infirmary before he collapsed altogether. Emergency lights also lit the interior of the craft and alarms continued to bleat.

"Charlie, please... you've done enough for one career..."

I half-dragged, half-pushed the Polish director along until we'd reached the central chamber, where evidence of the Chinese attack was more plain: a gaping hole in the hull. Already crew members scrambled to repair the ruptured chicken wire and papier-maché, while others looked confusedly at the scattered debris. Lieutenant Krantz hurried over, and in her flustered state almost forgot to salute.

Polanski said, "Sharon... Sharon, get away from him..."

"Enough!"

"Admiral," Krantz said. "We've been hit."

"Evidently. What did they use?"

"That's what puzzles us. There's nothing inside the *Rodan*. We've got a hole but can't find evidence of the projectile that must have made it."

"Strange." I mulled this over for a moment. "Lieutenant, see that the Commodore gets to the infirmary. He received a blow to the head and isn't feeling himself."

"Yes, sir."

As she guided Roman away, he reached back and clutched my wrist, hissing: "*Charlie's come for us all!*"

The next day we took the *Rodan* to an altitude higher than usual so the engineers could finish repairing the rupture. I spent much of the day in the smoking compartment, reflecting on the life and times of my second-in-command.

From the beginning of his career as a film-maker, Polanski's work contained an underlying suggestion of imminent doom, or, as the great critic Augustus Lorde put it, "watching these films, one is struck by the sense that an event of great personal tragedy lies just a scratch beneath the surface of his medium." This comment was made six years before Polanski's wife, Sharon Tate, was butchered by minions of Charles Manson. Perhaps for Polanski's fans the shock of the crime was diminished somewhat by the fact it seemed to have been anticipated by Polanski's

body of work. *Foreshadowed*, that is. It is difficult, sometimes, to separate a person from his medium. His comments the day before suggested something I myself often suspected: that he remained haunted by the spectre of Charles Manson and the possibility he had some psychotic work as yet unfinished.

Of course the idea that he was *here*, on board the *Rodan*, was ludicrous. Everyone knew Charles Manson was doing hard time in some Walt Disney correctional centre, forced to paint endless animation cels for upcoming children's films. But what did Polanski himself think? When he entered the smoking compartment with a gauze bandage taped to his head, I had my chance to find out.

"So you gave yourself a holiday yesterday," I said.

He mumbled something to the effect that he felt much improved.

I nodded. "Commodore, do you remember what you said to me after your fall?"

"It is all quite murky..."

"You called me *Charlie*. Then you said Charlie was coming for us all."

Polanski coloured. "Surely you will not hold me to statements I made in my dazed condition."

"It's your general condition that interests me," I replied. "Do you believe Manson still threatens you?"

"No," he said. "No, of course not." But he had faltered before answering.

"Very well," I said, and sent him to the control room.

I looked out a porthole and studied the Chinese landscape. I saw a balloon-craft floating above a lake – people sat on the decks with fishing lines run all the way to the water far below. I saw a basalt cliff carved with the faces of four entertainers, apparently the Chinese equivalent of vaudevillians. I saw a young girl hanging on to a kite and laughing as the wind carried her up and juggled her over treetops; she laughed and waved at friends on the ground.

I contacted the bridge by intercom. "Polanski – I want you to find out what the Chinese hit us with. Lieutenant Krantz thinks it must have been some kind of projectile although she's found no evidence to support that theory. You are to determine what happened last night and report back to me."

"Yes, Admiral."

In those two words I thought I heard him swallow back fear.

I ordered the engineers to bring out the heavy artillery, and so it came to pass. I stood in the anterior gangway and watched as the huge drums of film were rolled along the corridor toward the central projecting unit by men in sombre grey uniforms, the noise of canister over floor like a mountain range full of thunder.

"We've found something," Lieutenant Krantz said, and brought me her discovery: a shell of pounded iron, with triangles cut for eyes and a circle of perforations at the mouth.

"A mask," I said. "Tragedy or comedy?"

"Neither sir." She slipped the object over her head. "A helmet."

"Why shoot a helmet at us?"

"A human cannonball," Krantz said. "We believe someone was wearing this when it breached the vessel."

"Really?" I considered the crude face of the helmet. "Is there a possibility, then, that this individual is still aboard?"

"Most certainly."

"Then you'd better organize a search party."

"They're already searching the ship."

"Good." I thought for a moment. It had been quite some time since I'd spoken to Roman and I asked if she had seen him during her search.

"The Commodore? No sir."

I turned to a porthole and looked to the landscape far below. The film had already begun, a beam of light now linking our vessel to the earth. Opening credits were superimposed over a shot of a man sitting alone on a park bench and feeding pigeons. Hard to see from up here but I knew the scene well. *Twitch. A Film by Roman Polanski*. Nasty. The events of the previous night had soured my attitude toward the Chinese, and with this film I hoped to shock them into a more receptive state. Far below, the man on the bench was murdered in broad daylight as a crowd stood and stared. What had my Polish friend been thinking when he put this scene together? What waking nightmare had inspired him?

After a moment's consideration I said to Krantz, "Tell your search party to keep an eye out for Polanski as well."

"Is he in danger, sir?"

My focus dropped down the beam of light to the colourful murder playing out beneath our feet, and I had no satisfactory answer for the Lieutenant.

When Krantz and her underlings failed to find either the intruder or Polanski, I was outraged. How could two people go missing aboard a single film prop? This inexcusable state of affairs led me to undertake a search of my own.

I made my way along the central gangway and tried to ignore the paper phantasms dancing outside the portholes. The Chinese had taken to plaguing the *Rodan* with kites in the shape of various monstrosities: beetles and octopuses, dragons, naked eyeballs, demons coloured like boiled beets. I vowed to respond later with a certain Luis Bunuel film I'd been saving for just such an occasion.

I walked the length of the gangway and past the central projecting unit, all the way to the pods of gas which helped keep the *Rodan* afloat. Because they required little maintenance, the troops tended to forget they existed at all. Even less commonly known was the existence of a ladder providing access to the crawl-space above.

I climbed up.

Being a tall man, I had to stoop to avoid hitting the ceiling. I cursed myself for not bringing a flashlight and was about to turn back to retrieve one, when I saw movement at the far end of the crawl-space. I removed my shoes and stepped carefully onto the spongy surface of a pod. The material sank under my weight, and I became assured of another presence as I felt him or her stepping across the pod, changing

the quality of my footing.

"Roman...?" I whispered. "Roman - ?"

"Over here."

"Where?"

"Here."

Now I could see someone, a shadow draped in a shadow. And as I moved closer I could make out a second figure, one sitting up while the other lay supine on the floor. Which was our interloper? Both were silhouettes, impossible to distinguish who was who. What exactly was I interrupting?

"Roman," I warned. "One of the Chinese got on board."

"I know. He's right here."

"Damn it, what's going on?!"

Slowly, cautiously, I walked over and looked. The Chinese cannonball. He lay on the ground. He wore an orange silk jumpsuit with boots of woven lamé. His eyes were open but he didn't seem to be moving. Or breathing. He stared upward. Dead. I could see terrible bruises over his face and arms, no doubt suffered when he came through the wall of our craft. The contusions were as striking as the observation Roman now made.

"Only a boy. Maybe 12 years old."

"This is the Chinese idea of a soldier...?" I said.

Polanski gave a sick laugh. "Look. He had this with him."

In one hand the Commodore held a sheaf of rice paper and with the other he bent it back. Using his thumb as a stop-gap, he released the pages one at a time. Each was illustrated, and when I relaxed my focus, I could see each illustration acting as a single still in a crude film. It depicted the flight of a great bird, swooping over hills and valleys, and I realized it was meant to be a Rodan. Jerk jerk jerk. A little movie about our ship.

"He wanted to show us his work," Polanski said through clenched teeth. "Probably thought we would like it."

I looked at the boy. In the pocket of his shirt, he had more folded papers and a quill.

"So," Polanski said. "We have our first Chinese convert."

"You believe we're responsible for his death?"

In response he again ran the crude flip-book movie. "Well, he did impress me," Polanski said. "I can work with this. It does have potential. It does."

He returned to his own sketchpad, on which he was roughing out storyboards for a film based on the boy's illustrations. I left him to it.

When I returned to the control room, I announced that we would be turning around and leaving China. Events seemed to have been leading me step-by-step to the discovery of the dead boy. Moreover, they had led me to this realization: I could no longer serve as an effective agent of the conversion, because I'd seen that art had ramifications even I could not withstand - or inflict.

Bagged 'n' Tagged

Eugene Byrne



Call me stupid – I deserve it – but when Phyllis persuaded me to join what she called “the movement” I really thought she fancied me. I didn’t realize how treacherous she was until it was too late. And no, we never did get to do the nasty. She saw to that.

They came for us all in the wee hours of a Sunday – a slack day for news, and with a General Election due the Thursday after. I saw some of it at the Ealing branch of Cop-U-Like. Me and a few of the others were handcuffed to the bull bars of the vandal-proof Pepsi machine in the reception area when that oily bastard of a Home Secretary came onscreen to say a major terrorist group had been busted, that it was a great day for Law and Order, vote for us on Thursday, thank you and goodnight.

You’d swear the Water Margin were Sword of Allah, Angry Brigade, Sons of Glendower and Scots NLA all mixed up. Those of us not preoccupied with irregular bowel movements managed an ironic titter.

I knew this wasn’t about due process of law as we were each hauled into a little white-tiled room with a stout chair and some sinister looking equipment in

the middle. It was as though a dental surgeon had set up in a public toilet, only with more blood on the walls.

We were being tagged before we’d been tried.

My turn; a pair of mountainous rentacops strapped me into the chair while the doc lit a cigarette and explained it was best not to struggle as it hurts more that way. He was at least 70 and didn’t offer a general, but to smell the Bulgarian Scotch on his breath you wouldn’t need one. I got a local on the back of the neck, and one on the finger.

I’d heard that Phyllis had grassed us up. I didn’t blame her; one of the guys had said they’d waved actual prison, or maybe the fruitcake tin at her. So she sang. I’d have done the same. Wouldn’t you?

The man in white lifted away most of the nail on my left index finger. I screwed my eyes shut and tried not to yelp. I failed.

Somewhere else, a few of the others sang a dirge about how they would overcome some day. This while a £4-an-hour backstreet Kildare was mutilating me in the name of the law.

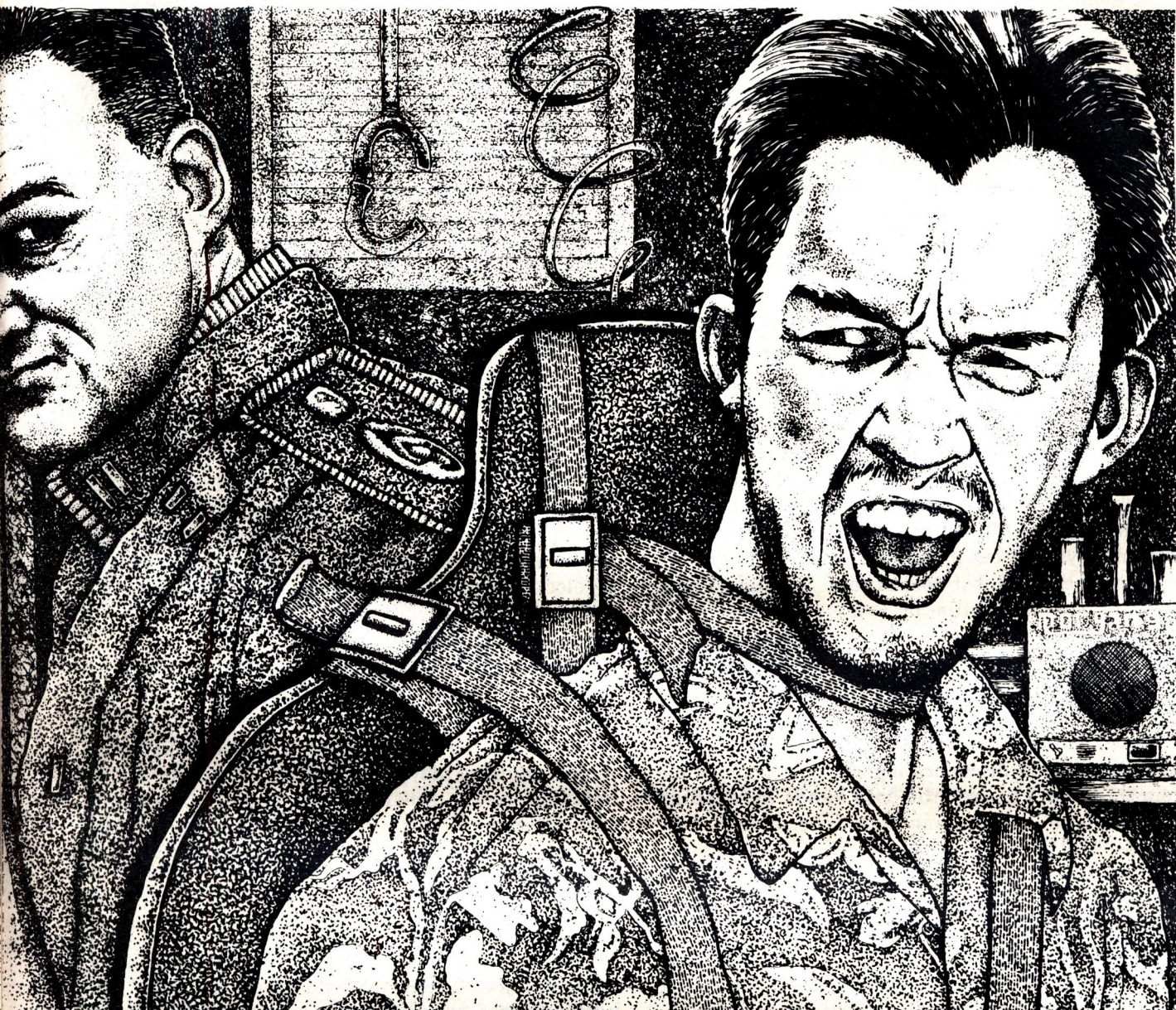


Illustration by Russel Morgan

Phyllis had been handing out leaflets on a street corner; from the way she talked I could tell she was a hot revolutionary babe – who fancied me!

So I went to a meeting of the Water Margin.

Someone said the name had been dreamed up by Iron John, the nearest thing this strictly non-hierarchical organization had to a leader. Someone said you got a Water Margin on high-quality writing paper, but I didn't buy that. "IJ" was late-40s, a veteran of countless green campaigns who had spent too much of his leisure time with his head in the pharmaceutical cupboard, so he wasn't really capable of dealing with an 8mb concept like that.

There were about 30 of us scattered around London; cypunks, phreaks, eco-anoraks, earth mammas, elves, fairies, ravers, hippies, sociopaths, crusties, dolphin-fanciers and me. Each wanted something a little different from the next, and the only way they avoided long nights of futile ideological blether was to focus on non-violent direct action.

That was hard enough; at the first meeting I'd been to, an elf suggested a kid might chase one of their flyers across a windy tube platform and fall on the rail.

So the manifesto was changed to "relative nonviolence."

There is nothing relative about having all your property confiscated (no big deal in my case, but IJ would surely miss his Velvet Underground vinyl) and being tagged. Babylon and market forces can't handle relativism.

The Marginals I agreed with wanted to show people there was an alternative to junk consumerism, junk entertainment and junk religion. That meant letting the corporations wither, creating sustainable communities and ensuring that everyone who wants it gets some kind of real inner life, blah-de-blah-de-blah.

I had no problem fitting in, but for all that, I'd never have joined if not for the commotion Phyllis was causing in my underpants. I was sort of getting by; I still got occasional supply-teaching jobs, though school budgets got smaller every year. I'd also do a bit of cash work here and there, cramming some rich kid, that kind of thing. And I had a half-decent flat that hadn't been burgled for 18 months. No, it was simply that I was in between girlfriends, and Phyllis

came along and...

"This will hurt," snarled the smaller of the two goons, his nose two millimetres from mine.

At the back of the Chair was the gizmo that sticks the chip in. It was just as well. If the drunken doctor had been using his hands, I'd be paralysed or dead.

For a nanosecond, the pain was intense. The agony started in my back, went into my head, then shot on down through the rest of me.

Then it was gone again, before I'd had time to think about screaming.

Now the doc (I assume he *was* a doctor, although he'd probably been struck off at some stage) was in front of me with my fingernail shaking in a pair of tweezers in one hand, and a small paintbrush in the other. Agonizingly, the quack brought nail and brush together to paint on the magical glop that would hold it over the hole in my neck and stop it deteriorating.

Hacking off most of your fingernail is supposed to be humane; the chip is very sensitive to pressure to stop you trying to cut it out. So the nail gets grafted on as protection. But it doesn't take Sigmund Freud to figure out that mutilation is a way of impressing the full majesty of the law on the reprobate.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention as the nail got stuck into place, and a Band-Aid got stuck on top of that.

"Next!" slurred the Finlay. In a flurry of strap-undoing and wire-disconnecting, the goons hauled me from the chair. I noticed the doc's hands were falling to pieces; he had eczema like Siberia has tree-stumps. And he wasn't wearing gloves. He had probably left a quarter of his healing hands in the root of my brain.

I was kept with some of the others – all men – in a bare cell with a couple of buckets, one for drinking water, the other for the bog.

We swapped notes; how much the implant hurt, what Babylon would do next, how long we'd all be sentenced for, how Amnesty International would save us. But after the first couple of hours, nobody said much. Some tried to sleep, some used various meditation techniques to chill. Some just stared at the wall. I tried to sleep as much as possible. I'd already figured that the local on my finger wasn't going to last and it'd get jolly sore. I was right.

In two days, they fed us once. A nice old duffer came in with a big box of Tesco sandwiches. There was lots of meat and fish, but as we were starving we just threw the animalstuff away. The butties were two or three days past sell-by. They were supposed to go to the roofless, the shanties and other first-quadrants, a charity handout. I guess the manager of this branch of Cops R Us had told the Sally Army he didn't have the budget to feed us.

A.M. on day three, we got sentenced. Our brief was a brisk young woman done up in pearls and navy pinstripe who said: plead guilty or spend ten years on remand – i.e. in prison. Plead guilty, she said, and you'll be out in a few months.

The courtroom was empty apart from a few rent-a-cops and suits. The press and public galleries were empty. Since Babylon was marketing the bust as a major victory against terrorism and declining family values they invoked state security to keep media, friends and relatives away. My eloquent defence would impress no one. I pleaded guilty.

"Brian Harper," said His Honour, consulting the terminal on the bench, "the grave offences to which you have pleaded guilty are in no way mitigated by the misguided, and if I may say so, intellectually sloppy, ideology to which you and your co-defendants adhere. However, in view of your comparative maturity – you are... let me see... 28 years old – and your hitherto clean record, I am prepared to be lenient in the hope that when you have served out your sentence, you can make something of yourself..."

This was good.

"I sentence you to three months' reparative custody for criminal damage, three months' reparative custody for conspiracy to commit criminal damage, and twelve months for being an accessory to trespass in an electronic communications system. The sentences will run consecutively."

Eighteen months! Aaaaarrgh!

"The crimes were all committed against Southern Cable PLC," continued His Judgeship. "They will take custody of all defendants in this case..."

This might be good. Often the victims don't want their taggies, so they get privatized. You could end up breaking rocks, breaking the necks of chickens, assembling hardware... Working for a cable TV company didn't sound too dirty or dangerous. And we'd all be together.

In the past, Marginals had tied themselves to trees on development sites, thrown paint at objectionable edifices, injected sloe juice into supermarket TV dinners and run around gridlocks stuffing Christmas pudding up the exhausts of petrol-driven cars.

Babylon knew this but didn't care. Babylon also knew of the Margin's greatest coup. A while before I joined they'd put Satan – Iron John's creation – into the stock system of Homeworld. Satan tumbled all the swipe numbers to one, the number for a gift-set of leatherex-bound novels by Jeffrey Archer – exactly the thing Mrs Burbiton would put in her front room to convince visitors she was a person of taste.

Homeworld had a just-in-time setup. Satan went live at 2.30pm on a Sunday, and all over the country, stores – and the Homeworld Virtual Store – re-ordered nothing but these books from the merchandising mini, which automatically showed the supplier a legally-binding contract. The Late Lord Archer's estate ended up a lot richer, and a printer somewhere ended up very rich indeed.

The Marginals never got busted for that. Homeworld was not a contributor to Conservative Party funds.

We were bagged and tagged for the Cable job. A couple of the zits had come up with the plan; wire is very vulnerable to elves and goblins and long-legged beasties. So they rigged up a van with a generator

and all their magic boxes. My role was minimal – touring scrapyards picking up lengths of co-ax cable. When everything was ready, they cut into the Erotica Channel at 3am with just a superimposed caption: “YOU’LL GO BLIND.” The van injected from waste ground a mile from the borders of the nearest gated municipality while the rest of us watched at IJ’s house.

It worked.

My trial lasted four minutes. Some of the others took longer to protest at what a travesty it was, but most pleaded guilty. Only a few were missing from the pen when they gave us some more vintage sandwiches, some bottled water and prodded us onto a bus.

We met the women on the bus. There was a lot of hugging and chatter and a sort of feeling of relief.

It amounted to this: nobody was going to prison (excellent), we were going somewhere together (good), we were going to be given to a cable company (probably good) and we were all going to the West Country (there are worse places).

Mo sat down next to me, managing a smile. Mo was about my age, five-and-a-bit feet tall with short, red hair and several layers of unkempt clothing.

“How’re you doing?” she asked.

I shrugged. “How’s your finger?”

“Fine. You can control physical pain easy enough. It’s all this shit that’s hard to deal with.”

“Could be worse,” I said fatuously.

The bus set off. Mo and I chatted. She, too, got 18 months as she’d had little to do with the cable scam. Mo was no fundamentalist, but distrusted technology. Man-stuff, she called it. Computers work by machine code, she said, which can only handle on or off, right or wrong, yes or no. Same thing with what they put up on screen; the only way to deal with a game-nasty or virtual enemy was to kill it. No room to be kind to it, no way to change it; machine code has no maybes, said Mo.

I wanted to tell her she was behind the times, but I guessed it would be pointless.

Instead I said, “Poor Phyllis,” noticing she wasn’t on the bus.

“Bitch,” said Mo.

“Oh, come on,” I said, surprised. “They’d have given her a terrible time. You can’t blame her for breaking under pressure.”

Mo looked at me like slantwise. “Haven’t you heard?”

“Heard what?”

“Phyllis was a plant. She works for Safe ‘n’ Sound Security. She was an infiltrator, a mole. Her job was to give us away in time for the election.”

“Oh,” I said, then said nothing for quite a while.

“Once we could freak around with the wire,” Mo went on, “what were we going to do? Broadcast programmes about whales and dolphins? Run meditation workshops? Tell people the government were liars? We’d not decided. We tried to cast a spell without visualizing the result.”

Just beyond Chiswick, I realized I fancied Mo. It was no big deal; I fell in love at least twice a week (as

I was only too painfully aware). Every time I felt it would be different.

This time I felt it would be different. Mo had strength and sense and, with all that witchstuff she had an aura of serenity, and mystery. I closed my eyes and in rushed this weird idea of her and me having babies. And I *liked* that. How very odd.

I told her what I’d been thinking. It was clumsy, but there was no time for the usual etiquette. Besides, I’d tried this ploy before. (“Hi, my name’s Brian and I’ve chosen *you* to have my babies.”) Sometimes they hit me, or whistled up 15 stone of muscle-bound drongo boyfriend. Usually they just laughed and ignored me.

Mo put her head on my shoulder. I put my arm around her, and we said nothing.

An hour later the bus was still bowling along the guidelane when a guy at the front, a tall, nervy bloke with a beard, stood up and speeched.

“Okay folks, listen up. My name is Daniel Organ and I’m your probation officer. I’m not supposed to do this, but it’s only fair to let you know what’s going to happen...”

Everyone looked up.

“Southern Cable has accepted custody of you all, but only a few will be with the firm directly, taking the jobs of their cleaning staff and some of junior technicians... The company does not require a large workforce, so the rest of you are assigned to individual members of the Board and to some senior managers.”

They took this in in silence. “Sounds like a roll of the dice to me,” I said to Mo at last. “You might end up with a good family, or a bad one.”

She snorted. “This isn’t justice.”

Tagging was the Law & Order magic bullet of the moment, a cost-effective way of dealing with convicts. If someone had mugged you, or burgled your house, they became your property for the term of sentence. You could use their labour to make some kind of restitution. A lot of people liked the idea because victim and perpetrator looked each other in the face; it helped them deal with it. In tests, it turned criminals into more useful people than being locked in a prison cell 23 hours a day did. And if people didn’t want to own their own personal criminal, the taggie would be sold to some firm as a labourer for the term of sentence and his pay would go to the victim. Not that the pay ever amounted to much.

But this was wrong; we were being handed over like a basket of party-favours to people we had not harmed directly.

“You want to put the big pink ribbons round our necks now or later?” said someone behind us.

Daniel Organ produced a small box with a keypad, like the remote control for a Drudge robot or a Home Entertainment System. “This is colloquially known as the Bastard Box, the Pain Pack and several other things. This particular handset can control all of you, which is why there are no guards on this bus. I’m not going to demonstrate even the minimum extent of pain which can be inflicted via your implants, but

what I will do is show you how it can be used to immobilize you. Please brace yourselves... “

He squeezed his thumb against the keypad, and everyone stiffened. Some of the others even stood to attention.

I couldn't move. No matter how much I told my arms and legs to do something, anything dammit, they would not obey.

Daniel Organ squeezed the pad again. Instantly, my limbs resumed obeying orders.

“You are supposed to have certain rights, but forget them. We don't have enough people to visit you even once during your term. If you're lucky, you might get a visitor from the Howard League, or a nice old lady from some charitable organization. If they do visit, and you have a problem with your owner, don't bother complaining. You'll only make things harder for yourself. You are the property of the person into whose custody you are transferred, and that's that. On the plus side, most of you are being assigned to private individuals. You're not being given to a hazardous waste-cleaning company, or a quarrying firm. And I don't imagine any of these nice folks are going to try setting up gladiatorial combats between pairs of you...”

“You are not permitted visits from family and friends. You can write to them once a month via the Probation Service. Your letters will be read by the censor and any attempt to disclose your whereabouts will be removed from the letter...”

The censor needn't have worried about me. My mother died years ago, and I never got on with the old man. And I didn't have any friends who'd be the sort to risk springing me.

“Don't imagine that you or any expert can tamper with either your box or the system,” continued Organ. “The codes are immense and it's never been done yet. And don't believe any stories you hear about people who can reconfigure the box to give you orgasms instead of pain. It's not true. Which is probably just as well.

“By the way, don't get too upset if nobody comes to release you on the exact date your time's up. That's just the way things are. Someone will remember you eventually.”

When the bus left the motorway the signposts were for places like Bristol and Weston-Super-Mare. A short while later it pulled up at a well-lit gatehouse, with two heavily-armed rentacops dressed like New York's Finest, a robot dog, surveillance cameras, the lot. The sign said WELCOME TO HINTON LEAZE.

If none of us had heard of Hinton Leaze it was because 10 years ago it didn't exist. It was one of those gated villages that sprang up after the government scrapped the green belt, privatized the Forestry Commission and forced the National Trust to sell some of its landholdings for golf courses.

You, too, can get away from city smogs and crime and be just like the folks in *Country Living* or *This England* for a down-payment of £150k.

A few of us were to be dropped here, while the rest were to go to other burbforts hereabouts.

I was the first. I shook a few hands, slapped a few backs and hugged Mo.

“See you on the other side,” I smiled.

“Yeah,” she said. “I'd like that. I'll send you any strength I've got to spare.”

So I'm on the step of this three-bed semi-detached thing; a parody of a Victorian Gothic Revival town-house, the home of someone with no taste at all. My possessions amount to a prawnless prawn sandwich and a half-full bottle of Malvern Water, and Daniel Organ is reading my rights to the guy at the door who looks at me like I'm a bowl of cold sick with a cherry on top.

It's ten at night but it's spring and quite light and I can tell a lot about him.

He's about 35. His hair is too black to be not at least partly out of a bottle or implant. He is wearing shorts and a vest with the name of some poncey designer on it. This garment is almost not worth wearing as it's designed to reveal luxuriant expanses of depilated and roid-grown muscle.

“... You will ensure that he is fed at least three adequate and nutritionally-balanced meals a day,” says Daniel, but my new owner is looking impatient.

He has a moustache like Saddam Hussein's. Mum always said never trust a man with a moustache.

“... you will provide access to adequate sanitation and washing facilities.”

Oh goody.

“... you will not physically or sexually abuse him.”

A wolf has just appeared at his side. Correction, it's a very big dog, the sort that bites criminals. He pats the dog absently.

“... you will ensure that he is provided with adequate warmth and shelter, you will...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he says. “Just give me the zapper and the manual. I'm missing the golf...”

Organ hands over a bubble-wrapped remote. He also presents Mr Universe with a glossy booklet on the cover of which is a cartoon of a man in a convict suit digging a garden, while in the foreground sits a sweet little old lady in a deckchair enjoying a cup of tea.

“You will ensure that the tagee's welfare is adequately...” “Yes, yes,” interrupts Mr Impatient. “Where do I sign?”

My new owner speaks with the accentless, precise voice of somebody who spends a lot of time giving dictation to machines.

As soon as the bus has pulled away, he unwraps his handset, sets it to maximum, and tries it out.

I can feel the pain starting in my back and shooting down to my toes and across to my fingertips. I yell a lot.

It's set for a max five seconds before it cuts out automatically.

I collapse on the doorstep.

“Wow!” he says, “nearly woke up the whole street!... Let's make sure we understand each other, my friend. I don't like people like you. I don't like what you did to my company. You're scum. You fight against a system which has the best interests of

everyone at heart, when you should be helping yourself and helping others by getting a job. But now you're here we're going to have to get along. Keep your nose clean, do as you're told and we'll do just fine."

He leads me to the garage at the back of the house. In a corner is a tatty mattress and a few blankets. "This is where you'll sleep for now," he says. "My wife is nervous about having you inside. Now, where are we..." He consults the manual, flips over a few pages as I stand around admiring his collection of power-tools, wondering if it's possible to kill a man with a sander.

"Got it!" he says, pushing a few buttons on the box. "The immobilizer cuts in if you enter the house, or move more than 20 metres from this spot. "Good night."

With that, he returns to the golf on the HES. He hasn't asked me my name, told me his name, or informed me where the bathroom is.

Later I slip out and piss on one of his flowerbeds.

Jeremy Henderson was not a member of the Southern Cable board, or even a senior manager. He wasn't clever enough. He was an area sales manager, though he'd avoid using the title outright and tried to give the impression he was more senior, more highly-paid and more *in-dis-fuckin'-spensible* than that.

When the company found they had some of us left over after sacking the cleaners and giving us to senior management, they had a lottery. Jeremy Henderson won 18 months of my life by racking up the highest score in a game of Bushido.

Jeremy Henderson had few paper books in his house except the Bible, a bound set of Jeffrey Archer novels, a beginner's guide to Go and a copy of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, which was presumably fashionable reading for proactive corporate pants at the time.

He worked in the weights room daily, and roided up as well. Mrs (and she *was* a Mrs, you better believe) Henderson did not work. And the less work she had to do at home, the more proud Jeremy was.

For a while before he got married he flirted with that church that thinks Freddie Mercury is God and is coming back soon in a spaceship. Queen was JH's idea of classical music.

Now he was a Christian because everyone else who mattered was, and because deep in his soul he needed something to Total Quality Manage his moral superiority over first- and second-quadranters and anyone else who didn't live as he did. Jeremy's most primal fear was that someone might get one over on him.

In the SWOT analysis he did on me, I guess I represented both an opportunity (status symbol, labour-saving gadget) and a threat (I might get one over on him).

Mrs Henderson, Natasha; you know you can tell the age of trees by counting the rings? If I cared about fashion, I could have told the age of Natasha by studying the plastics and implants. I'd have bet my liberty that 70% of the women her age in Hinton



Leaze had the same hairstyle, same breasts, same nose, same lips, same dental work, same shaped ass, same flawless complexion.

Natasha looked like a soap bitch, but before her husband and master she was a self-effacing little mouse. She had met hubby 17 years previously, had married two weeks after leaving school. She had never had a job, had probably never been out with any other guy. She wasn't the sort to cheat.

She had all the domestic electronics a decorative little hausfrau could desire, including a Moulinex Andy to do all the cleaning. She had no interests in life beyond watching soaps and talking about diets with her women friends over tea and cake. She was also partial to the bottle.

For a week, I cleaned windows, did a bit of painting (Jeremy didn't trust me with anything tricky), cut the grass, and even got let out to do a bit of shopping. For almost every minute I was awake I thought about legging it. It would have been pointless; the tag has a beacon that the filth could home on from miles away, and cutting the tag out is a non-starter, they say. And I wasn't about to try surgery on myself.

A week into my captivity, JH held one of his "famous barbecues," at which the most interesting piece of meat was not (literally) being cooked.

Come seven, the garden was full of the cream of Hinton Leaze society. Men in t-shirts and tight shorts contrived to show off their bottled muscles stood around drinking bottled Budvar and Sapporo and talked about cars, golf, Suitplay and management, all pretending they were more important than they really were. The women, mostly little wifeys who hadn't worked for years, or who maybe did work part-time but tried to hide it, talked about kids, cosmetic surgery and pretended their husbands were more important than they really were. There were a few kids, half of them running around laughing and screaming, the other half standing around like clones of their parents, either perfectly behaved and polite, or affecting languid boredom.

My role was to swan around with the drinks and the nibbles. I'd been dreading having to officiate over a heap of charred, stinking meat, but I'd forgotten that looking after the barbie is Real Man's Work.

My mission was to be seen by everyone. People would ask JH who I was, and he'd nonchalantly say, "You mean Brian? He's our taggie. A little present from Sir David." Technically, this was true in the sense that the Chief Executive had raffled the remaining members of the Margin, but no way was Jeremy going to say he'd won me by pretending to be a Mangaflick hero.

The price of Hendersons hit an all-time high. His mates grinned and said he'd soon be too good to mix with them, then retired into little knots to bitch about him behind his back.

As the sun went down, most of the women drifted away to put kids to bed, or talk in the living room. The males huddled closer around the dying embers of the barbie to get maudlin and trade philosophy.

Maybe JH had stopped being the centre of atten-

tion for a moment, but suddenly I felt a tingle down the back of my neck, turned and saw him holding the remote.

"Brian," he said, "c'mere."

I wandered over. The others stopped conversing and looked at me.

"There's one burger left on the barbie, Brian," he said. "Would you like it?"

"No thanks, JH," I said brightly. The others sniggered and dug one another in the ribs. They hadn't heard him called "JH" before.

"No, s'allright, you can have it," he said, slapping the lump of dead cow into a bun.

"I don't eat meat, JH," I said coolly. He knew it.

"Why's that, then, Brian? Think it's inhumane? Think you're better than the rest of us?"

"I don't like the thought of eating dead animal flesh," I said.

He slopped some relish into the bun, and held it out. "You want to overthrow our way of life, don't you? You and your weird mates want us all back in the middle ages, don't you? You'd rather we were all living in mud huts and eating grass."

I hadn't realized how drunk he was; it was unwise to challenge him, but I did. "All I want is a world in which the planet's resources are more evenly distributed and where everyone can achieve their full potential as a human being."

Don't forget I hadn't even heard of the Water Margin three months before this.

He sneered the last sentence back at me. "And what about us here? Aren't we striving towards our full potential as human beings?"

I didn't answer. "See!" he said to the others, "I told you he thinks he's better than the rest of us." To me again, "eat the fucking burger. Do I have to make you?"

I took root. He punched the remote and the pain shot through me.

The pain stopped. Some of his chums were laughing. Others looked at the ground uncomfortably. "You going to eat the nice burger, Brian?"

"No," I said as evenly as I could.

He turned it up. I fell to the ground, writhing around on the grass, trying not to cry out.

It stopped. I looked up. JH was simply raising a quizzical eyebrow and proffering the burger.

"No," I said.

"Anyone else want a go?" he sniggered, offering the remote around. Nobody did. He turned it up some more. Probably to maximum. This time I did yell.

It cut out. I managed to croak a "fuck you."

He went ballistic. "You pathetic bloody criminal! You come into my house like Lord God Almighty, sneering at the rest of us, thinking you're so damn superior. But who are you? What have you got? Nothing, you've got nothing. You are nothing. I'll fucking break you, you piece of shit..." With that, he switched on again, leaving me yelling like an elephant with toothache.

The pain went on for what seemed like hours, though it was only five seconds. When it stopped, a voice was saying, "cool it, Jeremy. He's had enough."

Forget it... “

“Fucking break him if it's the last thing I do,” said JH, as someone popped another bottle for him.

Next day, JH stuck his head through the garage door at sparrow-fart and said we were going to church. He gave me a suit, a shiny, bottle-green thing, then pushed me into the bathroom.

Again, I was being shown off. Having ascertained that I could drive he almost gave me the key until he thought better of entrusting his 4WD Lada Ostrovnik to me. Pity. I could have scared the bejeezus out of him by driving it recklessly; after all, he wouldn't dare use the remote to stop me.

Hinton Leaze, population circa 2,500, doesn't have a church. We went to some village nearby for a middlebrow evangelical service; the vicar, or pastor or whatever he was, delivered an uplifting chat about how the Bible is God's User's Manual for Life.

It being sunny, we all hung out in the churchyard afterwards to network. JH chatted with his social betters and Natasha exchanged banalities with her friends.

Regular churchgoing was going to be wonderful.

Iron John came up and clapped me on the back. I didn't recognize him for a minute as he, like me, had been washed and be-suited. He belonged to the Chief Exec himself and was living a tolerable existence in a room above Sir David's garage. Sir David had a huge paper and electronic library and allowed IJ the run of it when he wasn't tending two acres of garden.

Two of the others came over, also done up like rich men's dinners.

Then Mo appeared! She looked impossibly scrubbed and wholesome in a flowery print dress and straw boater.

We'd none of us recognized each other in the church and now frantically exchanged news. I told them how JH had tried to make me eat meat. Mo looked fit to murder him there and then.

“Has he a Suit?” asked IJ.

“Must have,” I said. “He won me in Suitplay.”

“Any idea what he uses to make it real?” asked IJ. I didn't follow.

“Illegals. Feelies. Drugs to heighten sensitivity,” said Mo, smiling at IJ.

I shrugged.

“Doesn't matter,” said IJ. “He's bound to use something. They all do. Try and make it to church next week. I'll have some black magic for you.”

Mo and I chatted. She, too, was living in Hinton Leaze, with the most junior owner of the lot. It turned out that Jeremy had actually won two of us, but his boss made him give the other one – Mo – to his assistant area sales manager, Wayne Roberts.

“He's an asshole,” she said, “but could be worse. He hasn't tried to rape me yet. I'm kept busy with...”

Three small girls and a boy, the eldest not above seven, rushed up to Mo and clustered around her legs, all chattering, all wanting to show her something or ask her questions.

“Meet the Roberts brood. I am their governess. My owners have too many kids and not enough money.

Has Jezzer got a dog?” she asked, as the youngest tried to climb up her leg.

A man beckoned her and the kids away. “We go to the park every morning between ten and eleven,” she said, waving.

JH graciously invited me to Sunday lunch, which I understand is an important ritual for people in regular well-paid work. Natasha slopped things from Marks & Sparks onto plates. They didn't bother trying to force meat on me. There was a bottle of Slovak plonk, too. JH was a member of the Skinful of the Month Club, or something; he reckoned it was good stuff. It tasted like vinegar to me.

Afterwards, JH loosened buttons, draped his arms over the back of the chair, and got expansive. He lectured us about the innate idleness of the unemployed, how he had pulled himself up by his bootstraps through a combination of hard work and back-to-basics morality. The jobless, the homeless, the hopeless were, you see, materially poor because they were morally poor.

“Don't you wish you had all this, Brian?” He said, waving his arm around, indicating the house, the car, the fridge, the wife... He didn't wait for a reply. “You can. If you've got the guts to work hard for it. In this life, you don't get anything for nothing. You're a bright bloke, there's still time, you should go for it.”

I could have said it was all white noise. I actually said nothing.

He shrugged. “I will win,” he said. “I'm a very bad loser. By the end of your time here, you will see everything my way.”

Iron John was right. After loading the plates into the dishwasher (his one domestic chore of the week), JH took a little onyx box from a cupboard over the sink, popped two pills and left the room.

He reappeared in a top-of-the-range Suit, a combination of string vest and black plastic sense-pads. He carried one of those wooden Japanese practice-swords.

In the garden, he stood in the middle of the lawn, clapped the visor down, and spent two hours doing battle with fresh air, looking like a very cross, oversized beetle.

The week passed quietly. Jezzer (as Mo had called him) did his nine-to-nines, Natasha watched television, went shopping and played bridge with her friends. Out of boredom I persuaded Jezzer to let me work on the garden. And each morning I took the wolf, whose name was King, for a walk.

In the park I'd meet Mo and the two of her charges who weren't at school. We talked and talked and talked. Usually about nothing in particular; neither of us wanted to focus too hard on our immediate situation. Naturally we had to be sort of discreet, so not so much as a handshake passed between us, but I really was falling in love. I liked to think she was, too.

On Sunday, we met IJ and some of the others at church again. He slipped me two small objects. “You'll know what to do with these,” he said. “Don't take out

the existing chip. Just plug this into the port next to it. I've called it Hieronymus."

I trousered his "black magic" and forgot about it until later in the day when Jezzzer went out to the lawn with his sword. IJ had given me a small plastic bottle of pills and a gizmo with about two dozen delicate little pins sticking out of it, some kind of 'ware.

It was too late to try anything that day. Besides, although Jezzzer deserved whatever nightmare that IJ had cooked up for him, it had been over a week since that incident, and I hadn't seen much of him since. I was in love, life was almost tolerable, I wasn't vengeful.

Another week passed and things still got better. I met Mo every weekday, and Natasha, who had the remote during office hours, but never once used it, took me shopping one afternoon. It was the first time we exchanged more than a few sentences, though I did most of the talking, prosing on about my favourite authors. I don't quite know what she made of all this; I think she saw a human being, rather than a criminal, for the first time. Maybe she felt my cultured and sensitive nature was valuable. Anyway, she gave me the run of a bookshop on one of her cards.

Then came Saturday night...

I didn't know when or if Natasha was likely to make free with the plastic again, so I'd got her money's worth, and at midnight I was tucked up in the garage with Newman's entire Dracula cycle, a big read that had taken the shop ages to print out and bind.

Jezzzer and Natasha were off at a dinner party and had left me with the immobilizer set at 20 yards, which meant that if the house caught fire, or got burgled there was cock-all I could do about it. Shame.

I heard them come in after midnight and was about to sleep when I heard him shouting inside the house.

Then the side door to the garage burst open. There was Jezzzer in his designer Y-Fronts with the remote in one hand. With the other, he pushed Natasha through in front of him. She was wearing a silk nightdress.

"Here he is, then," he snarled at her. "Go on then. Get into the sack with him, bitch!"

"Jeremy, no!" she said, in tears.

He pushed her so hard she fell on top of me. "Go on then, get on with it. Go on Brian, give her a good shafting. It's what you both want isn't it?!"

She scrambled to her feet as Jeremy fumbled with the box, then turned it to maximum.

"What the hell's going on?" I shouted through the pain.

"Don't play the innocent with me!" he said. "I know your fucking game. Trying to get into my wife's knickers so's you'll get an easier time of it here!"

"Rubbish!" was all I could manage. He turned the agony off. Natasha tried to leave, but he blocked her path.

"You think I'm completely stupid don't you? I call up a credit-card statement this afternoon and find she's spent 70 quid in a bookshop. This ignorant cow

hasn't read a single book in the last ten years. And now, like every other Saturday night, she lies there like I'm raping her, never showing any sign of enjoyment. But she's more than happy to spend my hard-earned money on some worthless bum because he talks to her about literature..."

"This is nonsense, JH," I said. "I don't fancy her. I'm sure she doesn't fancy a scruff like me. She was only being..."

Jezzzer wasn't listening. "What's your secret, then? Got a bigger cock than me, have you?"

I snorted.

"Come on, then!" he said, "let's both give her one! Maybe she'd like that, the frigid bitch!" He tore off her nightdress and once more pushed her onto me, pulling down his underpants as he did so.

"Come on then, Brian," he said, "let's see you in action."

"Go to hell!"

He switched on the pain. I told him to screw himself, which of course is precisely what he would have loved to do.

"You're one sick individual, you know that?" I said. "And even if I did want to get it up, it'd be difficult with your finger on the pain button."

Natasha climbed off me again. "I'm sorry," she said to me, "I'm sorry," through her sobbing, gathering up her nightdress. I told her it wasn't her fault. Jezzzer let her through the door this time, then spent the next five minutes tearing up the books she'd bought me.

What he did to Natasha was terrible, but basically none of my business; I didn't know what was going on between them. What really angered me was that final act of vandalism. He was destroying knowledge, wisdom and culture. He was a Nazi, a philistine. The fear that he and millions like him had of books was taking us all into a new age of barbarism.

Next morning, as we got ready for church, I popped IJ's pills into Jezzzer's onyx box, and slipped upstairs to plug Hieronymus into the port on the visor of his Suit.

As we were about to leave, Jezzzer got an urgent call from the office. He drove off looking grim and determined. Natasha went back to bed.

I helped myself to some breakfast and spent half the morning sticking books together again. Then I did some work in the garden. I borrowed the radio from the kitchen to listen while I worked. Right at the end of the lunchtime news I realized why Jeremy had left in a hurry. LBM, the huge electronics conglomerate, had mounted a bid for Southern Cable, promising new wire and all sorts of brilliant new services for domestic and commercial customers, not to mention bigger dividends.

We didn't see much of Jeremy for a while. He was busy going to meetings and helping with the hearts-and-minds campaign with shareholders. I didn't see much of Natasha either. Whenever I did, she looked sort of apologetic, as though the whole thing had been *her* fault.

In the park on Monday I told Mo everything that had happened. She listened in silence then looked me carefully in the eye, trying, I guess, to see if there really was anything between Natasha and me.

Finally, she said, "it's time to cast a spell. One that will change him for ever." She glanced around to see nobody was about, kissed me furtively, called the kids together and left.

Two days later she gave me a slip of paper with a London number on it and a woman's name. "Memorize the name and number," said Mo, "then lose the paper. Call it using one of Jezzzer's phones any time you know he's not at the office and ask for the woman. It doesn't matter if you don't get her. Keep the line open for a minute or more."

"What is this, Mo?"

"The less you know, the less it can harm you," she said. "It's the philosopher's stone. It'll turn an arrogant shit into a sorry shit."

"Is this going to hurt anyone?"

"Not physically."

I took the paper, memorized name and number, and walked the dog home again.

When I got back, Natasha was waiting in the kitchen. She had made me some lunch. Also on the table were new copies of all the books Jezzzer had destroyed. I thanked her lots, told her she didn't have to do this.

She shrugged. "It's his money."

"Aren't you frightened of him?"

"Not any more. I'm leaving. I'm going to stay with my parents and get a divorce."

She explained how his behaviour the other night was not exceptional. He beat her up every so often, had kinky sexual tastes, had been unfaithful. He kept pestering her to have sex with his friends while he watched. I didn't doubt a word of it.

She warned me unnecessarily that he'd be in a vile temper when he got home and found her note, and that it might be best to keep my head down and the books hidden.

"I would give you your remote control," she said, "so you can hide it or break it. But he's got it. He thinks I'd give it to you." She smiled weakly.

I carried her cases to the taxi for her.

JH got home at ten, found no supper and no wife waiting. He came into the garage, set the immobilizer and kicked me around a bit. He suspected I'd had a hand in Natasha's desertion. Perhaps I had.

He disappeared early next morning. The minute he did, I went into the house and punched up the number Mo had given me, making sure the system wasn't set to record.

A receptionist answered. I didn't get the company name, but it was a long one. I asked to speak to Theresa Colley.

I was put on hold; the screen filled with slo-mo pictures of waves and sea, but there was no company logo. This was obviously a line which prized discretion.

A young man came on. "I'm sorry," he said, "but Theresa is in a meeting. Can I take a message?"



"I don't think so," I said. "It's personal. Have you any idea what time she'll be free?"

"About an hour's time," he said. "Who shall I say called?"

"Henderson," I said, "Jeremy Henderson," and hung up, still no wiser as to what Mo's game was. I went off to the bathroom to clean up the blood and bruises Jezzzer had inflicted the night before.

Mid-morning next day I was getting King ready for walkies when Jezzzer arrived back home.

He was a zombie. I didn't ask what the problem was, especially as he went straight for the drinks cabinet. I said I was walking the dog. He ignored me.

In the park Mo and I sat at our favourite bench watching the kids chase each other around.

She nodded as I told her what had happened. "It worked then."

"The call I made?"

She nodded. "He's been fired."

"Whaat!?"

"Sacked, wasted, kicked out..."

"Mo, I'll say this in as many words, even though I'm sure I don't have to. I think I love you, and the only reason I can touch upon for why you're there in everything I think, dream and do is your mystique, all the fabulous things that go on in your head. I want to spent ten lifetimes with you because I know you'll never become ordinary or boring to me..."

She smiled. I loved her smile, the brightness of her eyes.

"...But just this once please stop being so enigmatic. Tell me what we've done to him."

"Let the dog off the lead," she said.

Despite my doubts about the wolf's suitability as a playmate, I did as ordered. King ran off with the kids.

"Jezzer has been sacked for disloyalty," she said. "Wayne told me Jezzer was a footsoldier on the anti-takeover committee. He knows the company's defence strategy. How would it be if he was caught making a call to the European Development Executive of LBM who's co-ordinating their takeover effort?"

"Would this senior executive of LBM be called Theresa Colley?"

Mo nodded slightly.

"And?"

"I got her name and number from FTNet. Wayne did the rest. At the tea-table the other night he was talking about the takeover. I mentioned how my Uncle Bernard was involved in something similar, but he'd been caught talking to the opposition when his firm looked at his itemized bill. I jokingly suggested he might score a few points with the boss by suggesting that they quietly monitor everyone's line-time. After all the firm pays their bills, so it's only fair."

Jeremy's bill had an LBM number on it, punched up from his home at a time he wasn't in the office. He had no recording to prove it wasn't him. He'd have had 10 minutes to clear his desk. Every recruitment dbase in the world would now have DISLOYAL stamped over his name in big red letters. Unless he

could find himself a topline zit to fry up a seamless new ident, and raise the money for new voice and handprints, he'd never have a management job again.

Three quarters of me was delighted the swine had got his due, the rest was apprehensive about what would happen to me.

"Do I become the property of Southern Cable?" I asked Mo.

"No," she said. "You're still Jezzzer's. The law assigns you into the custody of a named individual for the duration of sentence. You can't be sold, though he can hire you out and trouser your earnings."

I had this appalling vision of him undercutting the local paper-boy...

"You're in a much more powerful position," said Mo. "If he needs you, he's got to start being nice. And Wayne needs to carry on being nice to me if he wants his kids looked after properly while his wife works to supplement the family budget. So in view of your declaration of your feelings, I can no longer see any objection to our performing a full-on Frenchie snog right here in broad daylight, but for the sake of the children I'll have no groping..."

I accepted her invitation with more speed than grace. We canoodled like teenagers for a blissful eternity, only coming up when we heard the dog barking in front of us and a child's voice saying, "Eurrgh! What *are* they doing?"

Jezzer was talking to his solicitor when I got back. "...listen, even if I did want to talk to LBM – and I admit the thought had crossed my mind – I wouldn't dream of doing something as stupid and obvious as that..."

The man on the screen sighed, and went on about how Industrial Tribunals had been abolished. He'd have to go for a civil action, and that'd cost.

I retired to the garage and my books. When I looked in again mid-evening, Jezzer was in a heap in an armchair, cradling a near-empty bottle of panther sweat.

I went to the kitchen, perched myself at the breakfast bar and helped myself to bread and jam. It was hazardous, but I had to eat.

Jezzer stumbled in, red-eyed.

"It was Wayne, boring old useless old Wayne Roberts," he said to himself. "It must have been. He suggested Sir David look at everyone's bills. He fitted me up so's he'd get my job..."

He leaned heavily over the sink, turned on the cold tap and splashed water on his face. "What a state," he said. "What a bloody awful mess. Wife leaves me, kicked out of my job. Jeez, what a bloody mess..."

He turned to me. "I'm not as bad as you, though." He laughed a little. "No. I'm not a loser. Henderson is the best there is."

He opened the cupboard and took out his little onyx pillbox. Before I could decide whether or not to stop him, he had popped two of Iron John's pills.

"Still the fucking best," he said, and crashed out of the room and up the stairs.

I didn't know what the pills were, but I knew he

shouldn't be doing them in his loaded state.

I went to the bottom of the stairs. Before I could figure out how to stop him, he appeared on the landing, Suited up. In his hand he held the remote, and into a silk sash around his waist was tucked a real samurai sword.

Oh bother.

"Out of my way, loser," he said, waving the remote. "Any trouble out of you and I'll immobilize you and cut your fucking balls off."

Oh well, I thought, standing aside as he thumped down the stairs.

I watched from the kitchen window as he stood on the lawn, pulled down the visor, drew the sword and started swishing it around in the air, occasionally letting out some bloodthirsty yell as yet another phantom enemy fell to his cold steel.

Nothing weird happened through 20 minutes of this. I began hoping the pills were duds, and I'd plugged in Hieronymus the wrong way.

But no. Somewhere in Jezzzer's head, the samurai began to shapeshift.

(IJ explained some days later. The pills were ketamine; on arriving at Sir David's home, IJ immediately identified the man's son as a feckless slacker and had discovered and ransacked his stash in exactly 27 minutes. Hieronymus was IJ's own creation; he'd taken a couple of Bosch paintings and used one of Sir David's machines to assemble a plug which kicked into the Bushido game. At first, the images were subliminal, gradually accelerating into limited animation, until the point at which Jezzzer, tanked up on an hallucinogen which gives you nightmares if you're not feeling warm and fuzzy, found himself in Hell.)

Jezzzer was chasing next door's cat across the lawn with that sword, which no doubt had been lovingly sharpened.

I ran out, too late. The cat let out an astonished howl and cleared the fence in a single leap, leaving half its tail on the garden path.

"Stop, JH, stop!" I yelled. "Take the mask off!"

To my relief, he did, and looked around as if he'd just beamed down from another planet. He threw the mask to the ground in disgust.

Then he walked to his Lada. "It's Wayne, it's fucking Wayne Roberts who shafted me. They're all trying to destroy me. Wayne, Sir Frigging David, Natasha..." He looked at me. "And you!" He pointed the sword at me.

He opened the car door, threw the sword onto the passenger seat. "I'll sort you later," he said, starting the engine.

The 4WD lurched out onto the road and sped away.

I gave chase. He quickly lost me, but I knew where he was going with that sword. To where Wayne Roberts, his wife, four kids... and Mo... were.

The Roberts house was ten minutes' walk away. I got there in two. It fronted onto the village green, a patch of grass about the size of a football field with a few park benches and flowerbeds and a venerable old oak in the middle.

Jezzzer's Lada was smashed into the low brick wall at the front of Wayne's house.

In the car, Freddie Mercury was singing "We Are the Champions of the World" loud enough to drown an aero-engine, and Jezzzer stood on the front lawn waving his sword, demanding Wayne come out to fight him like a man, and not cower like the treacherous piece of shit he actually was.

All the lights in the house were on, but I couldn't see anyone at the windows. I prayed that Mo and the kids, at least, had slipped out of the back door, or had barricaded themselves in securely.

"Jezz... Jeremy... JH, stop, for God's sake stop," I yelled as I ran across the green towards him. He didn't even look at me, but in one smooth movement his left hand swept into the air and descended again to point at me.

I stumbled and fell. I couldn't get up again. He'd had the remote in his hand. I'd been immobilized.

I lay on the grass village green about 30 metres from Jezzzer, utterly helpless, but I could see everything.

It was like this:

Another 4WD pulls up close by and out climb both the shift rentacops. They look at one another as if to say "you tell me what to do so's you get the blame if we screw up."

These people protect the community from the barbarians outside; they don't have a freaking clue what to do with a resident who's gone harpic. They've not been trained in counselling skills. Well, actually, they haven't been trained in anything.

Jezzzer sees them and is still having flashbacks about demons; he turns, lets out a ghastly scream, lifts the sword high above his head with both hands and charges them.

For one of those frozen moments, the goons can only gape. Then, like something out of a cartoon, both turn and run. A moment longer and the nearest would have ended up with his head split neatly in two and with a sword lodged in his sternum.

Jezzzer pulls up, stretches his arms out and bows, as though being applauded by an imaginary audience, and sings along with the stereo.

"Weeeeeeeee are ther champions mah fre-hend...!"

As he turns, the tip of his sword touches the goons' 4WD. He stops, looks at me with a dastardly leer and says, "I wonder...?"

He pulls open the door on the passenger side and emerges with an assault rifle with a big tube running along the bottom of the barrel.

He laughs triumphantly, lays the gun on the bonnet of the car and oh-so-reverently sheathes his sword.

The gun has three magazines taped together. He pulls the first out and satisfies himself it's fully charged. He pushes it back in and cocks the gun. He reaches into the car again and brings out what looks like a weightlifter's belt with tin cans attached. He takes the first of the cans, pokes it into the rear end of the tube below the gun barrel and slings the belt over his shoulder.

I could have told you someone would get hurt when the government allowed rentacops to be armed. Business is business; you've got to control costs, so you hire people who'll bring their own tools – nauseating saddoes who'll work double-shifts at £2 per, on the promise that one day they just might get to lob rocket-propelled grenades (which they've paid for themselves) at a twoccer on a quiet motorway.

The main bedroom window in the Roberts house briefly glows orange, then the glass bursts out in millions of beautiful crystal fragments.

The curtains billow out after them. Only then is there any noise. It's quite loud.

"Put the gun down now!" shouts one of the goons from outside my field of view. Jezzzer turns and fires the rifle on automatic.

He empties the whole magazine. Bullets ricochet, crack and whine deafeningly from a stone wall close by.

He loads another grenade and fires it through a downstairs window of Wayne's house.

I have let Jesus into my heart; I am praying, really praying, for the first time since Mum told me that Jesus and Santa were not the same guy, praying that Mo, and the kids and their parents are out of the house.

And Freddie Mercury is preening himself on the car sound system, something about having just killed a man, Mama...

There's a lot of other noise. Jezzzer has alerted the whole village, and there's a deal of screaming and shouting all around.

He loads another grenade and fires it towards the far side of the green. I can't see where it goes, but the explosion is close.

There's this agonized creaking of wood and a sort of crump noise.

Jezzzer has wasted the olde oak tree, pride of Hinton Leaze.

Nothing happens for a while.

Now, we see that some resourceful member of the community has Done Something. From a side road emerges a drudge, a domestic robot with a happy smiling friendly helpful face decal at the top. And a shotgun held in the arms that normally take the feather duster and the bog-brush.

Its owner must have rigged some kind of radio control, but it's academic. A well-aimed RPG from Jezzzer turns Helpful Henry into a cloudburst of components.

Its happy face flops to the ground a few feet from mine.

What's that old movie where the two Americans end up surrounded by the whole Bolivian army? It's like that; there are suddenly dozens of people firing guns at Jezzzer from three sides of the green, with more joining in all the time.

Several men and quite a few women have mustered like the stout yeomanry of old to save the town. They've formed a posse with their shotguns and licensed pistols, their .22s and even air rifles, and crouch behind garden walls and other cover to blast away at Jezzzer.

As well as worrying about Mo and the Roberts

household, I am now concerned about me. The sky is crowding with projectiles and I can't even bat my eyelids for help, never mind crawl away. I suppose if anyone's noticed me lying here they think I'm dead.

Freddie Mercury assures us that he and his mates will rock us.

And they're all lousy shots. Most of the shotgun-owners only use them occasionally for clay pigeons, and the pistol-owners are firing from too far away.

So Jezzzer stands there in full view, and looses four more RPGs in various directions.

This only stings his tormentors to redouble their efforts.

The 12-bores are making a real mess of his Lada.

Only when Freddie finally falls silent does Jezzzer realize he's in a hostile environment. He steps back and disappears behind Wayne's garden wall.

A bullet furrows into the ground in front of me. Then another. And another, which I swear actually touches the tip of my nose.

I'm moving. Someone brave is dragging me towards the comparative shelter of a nearby garden.

"Are you all right?" says the voice I most love in all the world. Mo's face is right in front of mine.

I can't respond.

"Oh no!" she says to someone next to her. "He must be hurt. Where does it hurt? Have you been paralysed my love...? Oh. Paralysed. Oh. That's all right then. Jezzzer's immobilized him... Brian, darling, I'll have to leave you here for a moment. We have to get the children out. I'll come back to you in a minute..."

Someone shouts from the far side of the green, telling Jezzzer to surrender before anyone gets seriously hurt.

Jezzzer gets up and fires another grenade.

He doesn't dive back to cover immediately. He stands in full view and rests the butt of the gun on his hip and surveys the town contemptuously.

Although he's an easy target, everyone stops shooting. Maybe they're impressed, or want to savour this moment of the mad dog's last stand. I am certain that for most of the people here this is a game; there may be plenty of worried, terrified people elsewhere in the village, but the idea that guns and grenades maim and kill hasn't occurred to anyone who's come to play tonight. They've seen too many movies not to know that the good guy always lives in the end.

Suddenly, I am in pain.

I can move again.

I slowly, carefully, get to my knees.

Jezzzer is holding the remote up high. "Brian, where are you? You're not much of a hostage but you're all I got. Come here, come to Uncle Jeremy."

I'm willing. Maybe I can talk him out of this lunacy. I get up to a crouch and wave my arms around in the air to show everyone where I am.

Someone lets off a shot at Jezzzer from close by.

The remote held aloft in his hand disintegrates like a clay pigeon.

He looks at the hand where the zapper used to be, shaking his head in bemusement.

And that is all the chance I need. Like a jungle cat, I spring from my haunches over the wall and onto

Jezzzer before he can bring the gun to bear on me.

I get him on the ground. He is bigger than me, fitter than me and more bonkers than me. But I am mad as hell, and to his K-addled brain, I look like the Lord of Darkness himself. So within moments, he's wailing in existential despair because he thinks he's going to spend all eternity burning in hell, being kicked continually by the Devil in person.

They were all for hanging him from the remains of the olde oak tree, but it wasn't high enough, and then the police SWAT team helicoptered in to rescue him.

There were a few bruises and scratches, and lots of ringing ears, but no major injuries. Hinton Leaze feted me as the hero of the hour, though you could tell a lot of them were a bit disappointed that the drama had not achieved a fitting conclusion.

You'd think they'd be sufficiently grateful to petition for my early release, or at least a few months' parole. But oh no. Fair and grateful people don't get to live in places like Hinton Leaze.

The trial was straightforward enough. I'd got rid of the chip back on his Suit visor in the garden, and everyone thought he'd just scored a bad batch of pills. So he was sentenced to tagging for life, but the legal squabbles over Jezzzer and his property were another matter.

The judge made some very fine calculations according to all the people Jezzzer had harmed. A big piece of him went to Wayne Roberts, another slice to Hinton Leaze as a whole. Other individuals who had been injured or whose property had been damaged won minor portions.

Hundreds of others claimed his actions had stressed them so much they were on trunks or in counselling and entered claims for a morsel of Jezzzer or his property. Also, Natasha filed for divorce, demanding half his stuff.

While the lawyers argue, Jezzzer and I belong to Hinton Leaze, our labours administered by the Community Council. I don't know who the official remote-holder is, but I've not seen one since that night.

Jezzzer sleeps in the attic of the Parish Hall.

I'm sharing Wayne's family caravan with Mo.

Wayne wasn't keen on this arrangement, and still fears for the caravan's suspension. Mo quietly explained to him how complicated things might become if she were to tell the police about how she had been the one who got Jezzzer sacked. Wayne might lose his nice, new and better-paid job (the one that Jezzzer used to have), and it would mean that Jezzzer would have to have a re-trial and...

Wayne saw that she spoke with great wisdom and caved in gracefully. On what we think of as our "wedding night," he left a bottle of champagne by the bedside.

Wayne understands that you've got to meet people in the middle, even if they are taggies.

We've just been sweeping the streets. Jezzzer's changed a bit.

"I've done a Pareto analysis," he said. "I don't expect that'd mean much to you, but it's an extremely

powerful business tool that helps you direct resources more productively. Now look at this graph I've drawn. It shows how there are slightly more sweet wrappers in Elm Close, but a considerably larger concentration of cigarette ends – but, interestingly, almost no cigar butts – down in the park. The cigar butts are more randomly scattered, though they tend to be..."

"Jezzzer," I said (I'm on rather more familiar terms with him these days), "shut up."

"Anyway, I've designed these survey forms for us to record distribution of litter according to area, time of day and season. As you can see I've already coded them up, so's we can borrow a spreadsheet and database package with a view to optimizing our..."

I walked away. Mo was waiting for me on a garden wall.

Eugene Byrne last appeared here with the popular "Cyril the Cyberpig" (issue 66). He is best known for his series of alternative-world stories written in collaboration with Kim Newman: "In the Air" (#43), "Ten Days That Shook the World" (#48) and "Tom Joad" (#65). A long-delayed fourth in that series, about an alternative Russia, has been completed recently. Eugene lives near Bristol, and works for a local magazine.

JOHN KILIAN HOUSTON BRUNNER

24th September 1934-25th August 1995

John Brunner's sudden death at the age of 60, while attending the World SF Convention in Glasgow, was very saddening to all who knew him or who knew his work. At his peak in the 1960s and 70s, he was one of the major British science-fiction authors, noted for such novels as *Telepathist* (1964; also known as *The Whole Man*), *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), *The Sheep Look Up* (1972) and *The Shockwave Rider* (1975). He continued to publish new stories up until this year, though we greatly regret that we never found the right opportunity to publish him in *Interzone*. Obituaries have appeared in *The Guardian* (by John Clute), *The Independent* (by David Barratt) and *Ansible* (by Christopher Priest). Clute wrote: "Brunner's career had been in shambles for years... and he had become an invisible man as far as publishers were concerned. His bitterness at this invisibility was intense, devouring, and publicly expressed... Over and above his significant contributions to the CND movement, John Brunner was, in fact, one of the most acutely intelligent men ever to write science fiction, and the searing dystopias he created in his prime are among the most comprehensive analyses of the malaise of our century yet crafted."

PHILIP K. DICK

Brian Stableford

Since his death in 1982 Philip K. Dick has become established as a writer whose importance extends far beyond the boundaries of the science-fiction genre. He was one of the most prolific contributors to the sf magazines during the boom of the 1950s, and to the paperback sf line edited by Don Wollheim for Ace Books, where many of his early novels appeared as halves of Ace doubles. Until the last few years of his life such commercial and critical success as he gleaned was modest, but in recent years he has generated an enormous quantity of critical writing, becoming the most widely praised and frenetically analysed sf writer of his or any other generation.

Dick's life has been described in detail in more than one biography, the most comprehensive being Lawrence Sutin's *Divine Invasions* (1989). The story told therein is that of a man afflicted with various discomfiting stress-related symptoms who never could adapt to the demands of ordinary social life. Born in 1928, he was unhappy and resentful as a child; he thought his mother unloving, and was inclined to charge her with having caused the death of his twin sister by neglect. He was prescribed amphetamines for the relief of his asthma and remained addicted to them for much of his life. He dropped out of college after a year and then held a few odd jobs, but even work in a record store proved too much to bear. He was married five times, but only two of the marriages were relatively long-lasting; he seems to have pursued relationships with (mostly very young) women with the same prolific obsessiveness he brought to his writing, as if he were compulsively in search of a relationship which might somehow constitute essential proof of his entitlement to full membership of the human race. The brief taste of fame which he achieved before his death served to intensify the maudlin anguish he felt about the many difficulties which afflicted his life, and to deepen the shade of the black humour which he employed to alleviate the intensity of his self-pity.

It is, of course, by no means unusual for social misfits to turn to writing as a vocation. The linked worlds of the

Arts and Academia are the respectable refuges which modern society generously provides for those incapable of living a normal life, and literary work offers the most claustrophobic niche of all. Although modern critics are almost unanimous in claiming that Dick succeeded as a literary artist, turning his psychological difficulties to remarkable advantage as fuel for his vivid and marvellously off-beat imagination, it always seemed to him that his career was a catalogue of undeserved disappointments and the record of his published work a travesty of his true ambitions. He wanted to write "real" novels set in and passing judgment upon the real world – and he did, indeed, write a dozen of them – but the only things he could get into print were science fiction stories, about whose aesthetic merits he felt compelled to be defensive.

Only one of Dick's realistic novels saw print while he was alive, and that in a small-press edition 16 years after it was written. Most of the rest have since appeared, proving that even in his 20s he was a writer of ability, insight, originality and courage – and proving also that a writer with all those things in his favour can be ignored by every single publisher in America. It did not help matters that Don Wollheim – the paymaster who provided the bulk of Dick's income for the greater part of his career – was by no means reluctant to advise him that he should give up trying to write mainstream fiction because he was no good at it. (Don Wollheim thought that almost all mainstream fiction was no good, especially literary fiction of a jaundiced complexion, and he was so entranced by science fiction himself that he simply could not imagine why anyone should be interested in writing anything else).

The plot of one of the earliest as-yet-unpublished Dick novels, *Voices from the Street* (written 1952-3), is summarized by Sutin thus: "A young man, struggling with an unsatisfying job and a dreary marriage, falls into total despair when the supposed ideals of both politics and religion fail him." That might almost sum up Dick's entire canon of realistic fiction, except for the vital fact that his characters doggedly keep on struggling against

such fates in their own ineptly courageous fashion, winning a host of little battles without ever coming within sight of victory in the war.

As a writer of science-fiction novels, Dick was not allowed to reproduce that pattern in any straightforward fashion – not, at any rate, by Don Wollheim, who was a very firm believer in upbeat endings. (It was, of course, permissible to write short *contes cruels* with cleverly nasty-minded endings for the magazines, and Dick did so with relish.) Throughout his career Dick stirred restlessly and rebelliously beneath the yoke of these editorial expectations, compromising as best he could, but it was not until some years after *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) had won him a Hugo award, in spite of its gnomic ending, that he was able to work more brazenly towards resolutions which were essentially – if somewhat ironically – depressing. By this time he had become so adept at inflating the apparent value of little victories and looking aside from the loss of big wars that even his most horrific conclusions began to seem quite mild, if not strangely uplifting. It is a tribute to his remarkable gift for this paradoxical kind of prose that even the autobiographical essay which introduces his collection *The Golden Man* (1980) – which is surely the most grotesque hymn of whingeing self-pity ever penned – seems almost endearing.

Dick's first published work was "Beyond Lies the Wub," which appeared in *Planet Stories* in 1952. Humans exploring an alien world acquire a wub – a large piglike creature – with the intention of eating it, and will not be put off by its enthusiasm for discussing matters of metaphysics and moral philosophy; they find, however, that in spite of its meekness its outlook on life is uniquely adapted for survival. A later story, "Not by Its Cover" (1968) credits the fur of the wub with the same deceptive power; the texts of books bound in it are neatly edited to embody the defiantly anti-atheistic wub philosophy of life.

Once he had made his first breakthrough Dick became a prolific producer of science-fiction stories, which crept unostentatiously into the margins of the field. He could not sell to

John W. Campbell Jr's *Astounding* because the ideological gulf between the two men was impossibly deep, but he was a fairly regular contributor to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Galaxy* and there were plenty of other markets to try until the end of the '50s, when the magazines died in droves.

The most memorable of Dick's early stories focus on the difficulty of distinguishing real individuals from ersatz imitations, as in tales of mechanical androids like "Impostor" (1953) and "Second Variety" (1953) or surreal tales like "The Father-Thing" (1954). This theme was, however, quickly magnified to take in more complex sets of appearances, as in the political fantasy "The Mold of Yancy" (1955), "The Unreconstructed M" (1956) and "A Glass of Darkness" (written 1953, published 1956, revised for book publication as *The Cosmic Puppets* 1957); the last-named involves the deceptive transformation of a small town resulting from the active conflict between Good and Evil, here personified according to Zoroastrian mythology.

All these stories may be regarded as concretized extrapolations of paranoid suspicions, as may another set of stories in which seemingly innocent entities become dangerously hostile, including "Colony" (1953) and "Meddler" (1954). The mechanization of the environment and the computerization of political decision-making, which are luridly featured in the apocalyptic "Second Variety," also feature in a whole series of relatively long stories, which include "The Variable Man" (1953), "Autofac" (1955) and "Vulcan's Hammer" (1956; expanded for book publication 1960). Dick's attitude to highly-developed clever machinery is, however, far more complex than blanket suspicion or hostility. Intelligent machines sometimes feature in his early work in much more benign roles, as in "The Last of the Masters" (1954), which features an altruistic robot.

These various continuing themes, and the attitudes enshrined therein, were to become greatly elaborated and exaggerated as Dick's career progressed. His accounts of what it would feel like to live in a world whose appearances are deceptive and whose inanimate components are becoming more active and mindful, and what strategies people might follow in adapting themselves to life in such a world, became increasingly thoughtful and increasingly desperate in tone.

Dick wrote his first full-length science fiction novel, *Solar Lottery* (1955; also

known as *World of Chance*), in 1953-4, alongside the realistic novel *Mary and the Giant*. The latter was eventually published in 1987, in a version which Dick had revised – somewhat awkwardly, and, as it turned out, pointlessly – to editorial demand. In stark contrast to the calculatedly ground-breaking and controversial *Mary and the Giant*, *Solar Lottery* adopts the then-familiar framework of imagining a distorted future society corruptly dominated by some particular interest-group and ripe for overthrow. It features such typically Dickian devices as an android assassin and a religious cult whose hopes for redemption are focused on a possibly-mythical tenth planet, but it is essentially an exercise in pastiche.

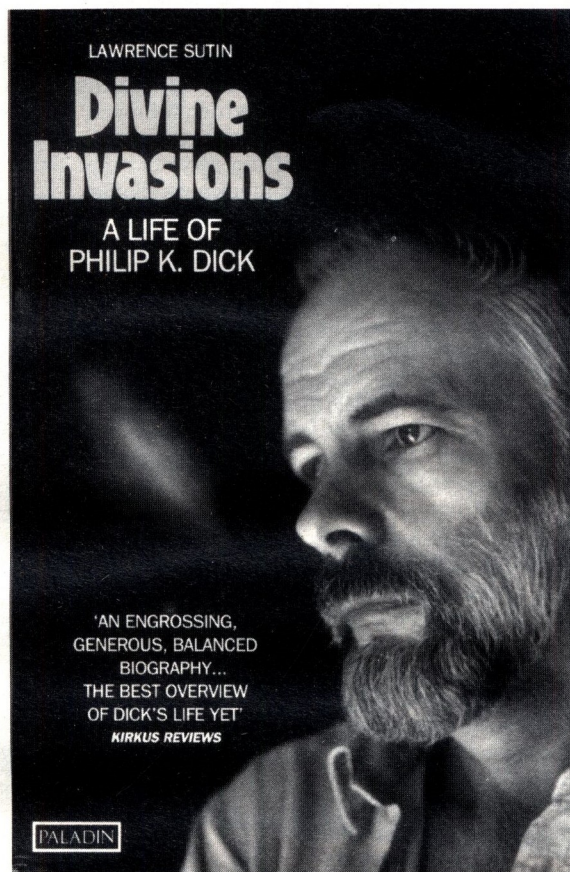
A similar attempt at conventional composition made at the same time

compromising revisions, Dick wrote several more sf novels before attempting another realistic one. *The World Jones Made* (1956) is more original and more impressive than its predecessor, following the career of a man with strictly limited precognition – who seems, to himself, to be living in a world which is lagging behind his own present by a year. His foreknowledge of a threatened "invasion" by enigmatic alien "drifters" allows him to whip up public anxiety and become a demagogue, but he remains impotent to change the world or his own fate. By concentrating on the endeavours of minor characters who are muddling through while this goes on Dick avoids the bleak pessimism which would have saturated the story had he concentrated on its central character; he was to use the same strategy

in many later novels written for Don Wollheim. *The Man Who Japed* (1956) follows the same formula as *Solar Lottery*, in a calculatedly irreverent fashion which is too slapdash to have much satirical bite. *Eye in the Sky* (1957), which was written earlier, is a much more significant novel which prefigures Dick's later work. A group of tourists caught in a freak accident are forced to live in a series of distorted worlds each based in the beliefs of one of their number; in order to get back to reality the sane members of the group – who see the world as it really is – must expose the contradictions and illusions innate in the webs of false belief constructed by their fellows.

The next four novels that Dick wrote in 1955-7 were all realistic, presumably representing a concerted attempt to make up for the disappointing near miss he had suffered with *Mary and the Giant*. Two of them have since been lost; the others were the rather bizarre *The Broken Bubble* (1988) and *Puttering About in*

a Small Land (1985). The last-named was certainly the best realistic novel which Dick had written to date, and is perhaps the best of the lot (although critical opinion is sharply divided on this point) but it failed to sell. Dick then attempted to blend the interests and techniques of his realistic fiction and science fiction together in *Nicholas and the Higs* and *Time out of Joint*. Although the first did not sell (and was subsequently lost) the second did, providing Dick with his first hardcover in 1959. It tells the story of Ragle Gumm, whose everyday life turns out to be a delusion occasioned by a psychotic withdrawal from real-



was "Time Pawn" (1954; revised for book publication as *Dr Futurity* 1960), but it seems that Dick got lost in the convolutions of the plot – which presumably he was making up as he went along – and could not sort out the tangled threads even at the second attempt. This was to happen with increasing frequency, until he apparently decided that this problem too could be turned to peculiar advantage, and began to take delight in writing stories whose whole point was that no resolution of their intensively recompliated plots was possible or conceivable.

Presumably because *Mary and the Giant* failed to sell, in spite of his

ity, which is carefully maintained by military strategists exploiting his strange talent for anticipating bombing raids. Like the characters in *Eye in the Sky* Gumm eventually recovers his true self and his grip on reality, but there are several awkward loose ends in the plot which cannot be accounted for within this schema.

While reworking a couple of magazine novellas into short novels for Ace, Dick returned to the writing of realistic novels in 1958-60, producing *In Milton Lumpy Territory* (1985), *Confessions of a Crap Artist* (1975), *The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike* (1984) and *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland* (1987). The last-named is a reworking of one of the lost novels of 1955-6 but the other three follow on from *Puttering About in A Small Land* in dealing with awkward

moral dilemmas arising out of intimate relationships which are severely stressed by economic difficulties. Dick appears to have made a sustained effort to contrive uplifting endings for what are fundamentally downbeat stories, more than once employing the device of having a character who has previously shown no sign of extraordinary altruism rise to a particular challenge with courage and conviction. It made no difference; none of the novels sold at the time.

Following these disappointments Dick again went back to writing a kind of sf that made use of the methods he had by now brought to full maturity in his realistic fiction. *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) was something of a breakthrough, winning the Hugo award as best novel of its year (the first time that had been achieved by a novel which had not been serialized in one of the magazines). This surreal novel, in which the USA has been partitioned by the Germans and the Japanese following the total collapse of Europe in World War II, was not the first fantasy of its kind to contemplate the metaphysical implications of the notion of alternative worlds, but it was the first associated with genre sf. Dick used the *I Ching* as an oracular aid in composing the plot as well as a key device within the story; it reveals to the main character, Mr Tagomi, that his world is not the "true" world, which is in fact contained within an alternative-history novel written by one of the other characters (which describes a world more like, but not identical to, our own).

The Man in the High Castle came

at the beginning of a decade that saw the rapid growth of a "counterculture" challenging all the established values of '50s America, and it caught the evolving mood very well. The rebellious and offbeat tendencies which had hitherto made Dick's work seem quirky and marginal now put him more in tune with the tide of fashion than any other sf writer. Recently embarked on his third marriage, with greater financial responsibilities than before, he set out purposefully to be a successful sf writer. The brilliant but relentlessly downbeat *We Can Build You* (1972), written in 1962, failed to find a publisher until it was serialized (as "A. Lincoln—Simulacrum" with a fake ending added by the magazine editor) in 1969, but the novels which followed contrived in various uplifting ways to ame-

liorate their own bleakness. Some of the more ambitious of them sold to better markets, while the remainder kept Don Wollheim's Ace line fully stocked. In 1962-5 Dick produced, in quick succession, *Martian Time-Slip* (1964), *Dr Bloodmoney* (1965), *The Game-Players of Titan* (1963), *The Simulacra* (1964), *Now Wait for Last Year* (1966), *Clans of the Alphane Moon* (1964), *The Crack in Space* (1966), *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), *The Zap Gun* (1967), *The Penultimate Truth* (1964), *The Unteleported Man* (1966 in abridged form; 1983), *Counter-Clock World* (1967) and *The Ganymede Takeover* (1967, in collaboration with Ray Nelson).

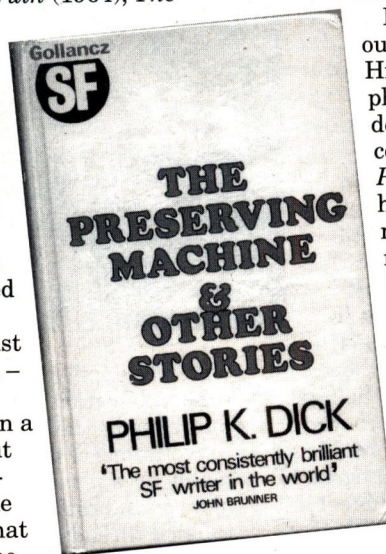
Several of these novels cannibalized earlier short stories, and some must have been written – with the aid of amphetamines – in a matter of days, but even the undistinguished ones make effective use of what had by now become Dick's typical methods and central preoccupations. All of them deal in one way or another with distortions of reality by drugs, psychosis, alien intervention or straightforward fraud. It is arguable that the best of the lot is *Martian Time-Slip*, written while he was still building up momentum, but the one which attracted most attention and praise

was *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, whose main characters – like the protagonist of *Now Wait for Last Year* – become hopelessly and irredeemably trapped in webs of delusion which cannot be unravelled. Many of the novels are blatantly, if rather confusedly, misogynistic, reflecting the rapidly escalating troubles into which Dick's current marriage had run.

At one point in 1963 Dick had his wife committed to a mental hospital for evaluation (although she had her own ideas about which of them was crazy), and subsequently persuaded her to take medication for supposed manic depression. Later that year Dick had a "vision" which became the seed of *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and led him to a brief flirtation with religious faith. Early in 1964 the marriage broke up; Dick never managed to set down roots again for more than a few months, and the confusion into which his life was cast was greatly enhanced by his association with the drug culture. It is astonishing that these upheavals did not immediately devastate his productivity, and doubly astonishing that he was able to mine his experiences to such effect that he was able to write two of his best books in 1966: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and *Ubik* (1969). These two books brought Dick's preoccupation with the relationship between real and ersatz entities and worlds to their highest level of complexity and intensity. In between the two he produced a juvenile sf novel which was eventually published as *Nick and the Glimmer* (1988).

Inevitably, though, Dick's output began to decelerate. His interest in the metaphysics of deception and delusion produced the neat comedy *Galactic Pot-Healer* (1969), which he later disparaged for making light of serious matters, although it is a better book than *A Maze of Death* (1970), which treats similar theological matters with unwarranted earnestness, or *Deus Irae* (1976), a planned collaboration that Roger Zelazny had to complete virtually unaided, which tries to do likewise but dissolves

into confusion. *Our Friends from Frolix 8* (1970) is a thoroughly competent potboiler, but Dick's productivity ground to a juddering halt as he tried to complete the novel which ultimately became *Flow my Tears, the Policeman Said* (1974), another novel of drug-distorted reality apparently inspired by a mesaline trip. Three years passed before he was able to



revise it. His fourth marriage broke up in 1970 and his already overstressed life fell apart thereafter.

In the interim between the penultimate and final drafts of *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* Dick opened his house to assorted drug abusers and juvenile delinquents, spent time in various mental hospitals, suffered a break-in concerning whose perpetrators he theorized wildly and endlessly, spent some time in Vancouver after being guest of honour at a convention there, and finally discovered another brief spell of stability with the teenage girl who became his fifth wife. When he had belatedly finished his novel-in-progress he followed it up with another, even more intense, novel about drug-distorted reality based on his experiences of the three last years, *A Scanner Darkly* (1977). He also wrote two of his most intense short stories, "A Little Something for us Tempnauts" (1973) and "The Pre-Persons" (1974), the latter a scathingly satirical anti-abortion story which drew wrathful responses from some of the field's newly-emergent feminists.

In stark contrast to Dick's early works, *A Scanner Darkly* took shape painfully slowly and was rewritten several times. Its progress was interrupted between the first and second drafts when he suffered (in February-March 1974) a new series of "visions," which were to obsess him for the remainder of his life and shape everything he wrote after *A Scanner Darkly* – which is justly regarded as a masterpiece by some critics, fusing as it does authentic experiences in highly dangerous territory with all the vigour and power of a brilliant and precisely focused imagination. Dick never became certain whether his 1974 visions were inspired revelations, communications from some godlike entity or delayed effects of the scrambling of his brain chemistry by amphetamines (which he had been forced to give up lest they kill him); it is perhaps inevitable that some of his admirers should prefer the former hypotheses, although the last is infinitely more likely.

It is not at all surprising that Dick should have used these visionary experiences in his fiction, nor is it altogether surprising that he should do so in a manner which suggested that he – like so many of his characters – had so comprehensively lost his grip on reality as never to be able to recover it. Even so, the novel whose

first draft (written in 1976) was eventually issued as *Radio Free Albemuth* (1985) and whose second version (written in 1978) was published as *VALIS* (1981) is as vivid and as readable as his earlier works. Its "sequel," *The Divine Invasion* (1981), is handicapped by a certain *recherché* quality (derived from the wide-ranging reading he did in attempting to comprehend and come to terms with his visionary experiences) and might not, in the final analysis, make any sense at all, but Dick had long since defused and disarmed

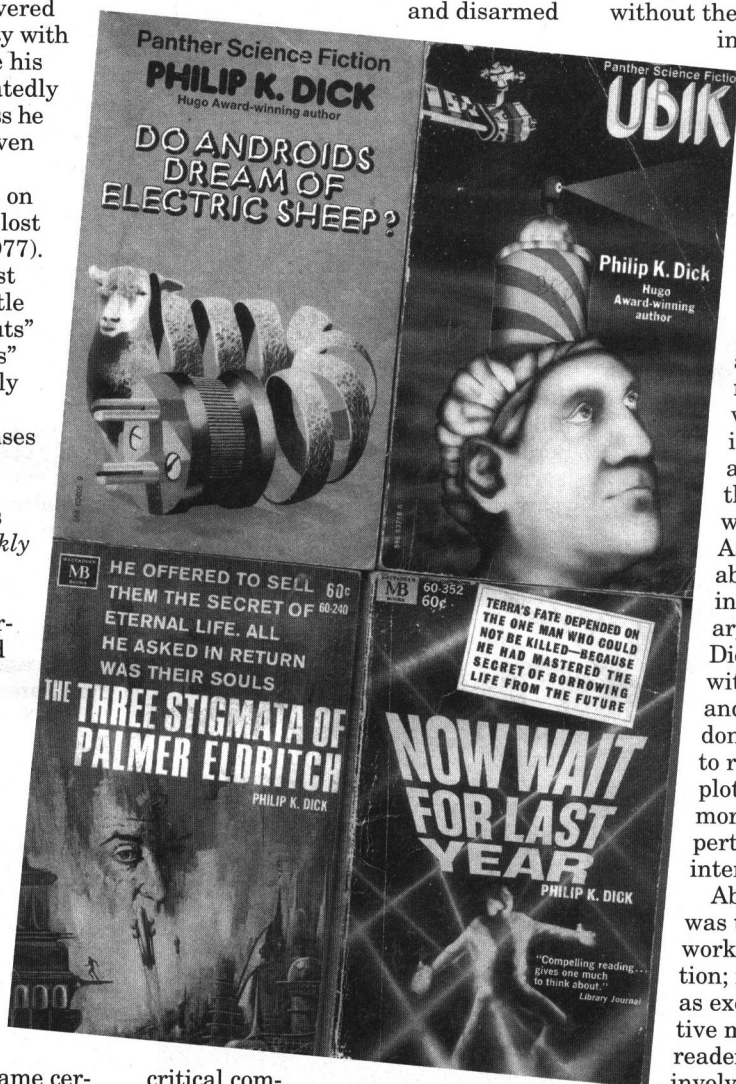
stances which provided their context.

Dick came to prominence in a period when science fiction expanded rapidly out of its magazine ghetto into the much wider world of popular culture. There, John W. Campbell Jr's insistence that real sf was based in the conscientious extrapolation of actual science not only cut no ice but came to seem like an eccentric handicapping system designed to detract from the comprehensibility and easy narrative flow of sf. Authors like Dick, who deployed imaginary technologies without the least regard for nitpicking matters of rational plausibility, suddenly found that they were no longer condemned to marginality, but could in fact bid to create a new core and centre for the field.

Dick had caught the leading wave of the '60s counterculture, and he was just as nicely placed in the '80s to catch the attention of new movements in literary criticism which became intently interested in the problematic relationships between the imaginary worlds within texts and "reality." As academic questions about the meanings and interrelationships of literary texts became murkier Dick's relentless fascination with deceptive appearances, and his unashamed abandonment of any commitment to restore coherency to his plots, came to seem even more daring and much more pertinent than he probably intended.

Above all else, though, it was the sheer fervour of Dick's work which commanded attention; no other writer got quite as excited about his imaginative materials, or compelled the reader to become intimately involved in the strange situations in which his characters find themselves. He was able to care deeply about dilemmas which no one had ever bothered to care about before, and he was able to make his readers care about them too. It goes without saying that no one who is capable of living a normal life is likely to be able to do this, but it is worth noting that most people who are incapable of living a normal life cannot do it either. Dick's success as a writer undoubtedly owed something to his failure to become a well-adjusted social being, but that makes it all the more remarkable that he was able to produce such amazingly rich and delicately-woven fabulations.

Brian Stableford



critical complaints of that nature. Ironically, *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (1981) – the only realistic novel Dick had ever been commissioned to write, turned out to be far from realistic. Dick remained, however, a writer capable of considerable elegance and more-than-considerable force. His short story "Frozen Journey" (1980; better known as "I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon") retains all the simplicity and clarity of his very best work in that medium.

It can now be understood that the awesome posthumous success which Dick has enjoyed arose from a fortuitous combination of his particular interests and abilities and the circum-



Last month I ran out of time and space and mortal vim, and what I'm saying here now has, therefore, waited weeks, ripening. But there is no underlying change to what I said in *Interzone* 100: that Christopher Priest's new novel, *The Prestige* (Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, £15.99), which may or may not be the best book he has ever written, must surely be the most conspicuously best-constructed work of fiction to have been published in 1995, in this house of genres. That it is the most through-composed, hypnotic, readable novel Priest has yet composed. That it is what we, as readers, are here for.

It is divided into five parts. Part One, which is set in the late 20th century, is narrated by Andrew Westley, a young man obsessed by the conviction that he has (or had) a twin brother, and who has learned that he was adopted. He is, it seems, a descendent of a stage magician named Alfred Borden, who flourished in the late 19th century. As the novel opens, he is on his way to northern England in order to find out more about Alfred Borden, whose book on magic has been posted to him by a woman named Kate Angier. She is the descendent of a second stage magician, whose name is Rupert Angier, and who had been involved in some kind of life-long feud with Alfred Borden. The young man arrives at Kate Angier's large isolated family home.

And we jump into Part Two, which consists of Alfred Borden's book, *Secret Methods of Magic*, a text far more intriguing than its cover hints, as it comprises a memoir of Borden; presents his side of the feud between him and Angier, who had initially offended him by performing tricks at seances; and gives the reader frequent hints that he is either unbalanced or has an "invisible" brother (shades of Priest's *The Glamour*), or both. Perhaps with the help of this double, Borden has created a magic trick which he calls the New Transported Man, and by which he seems to disappear in one place and reappear simultaneously elsewhere on stage; it is a trick none of his peers – certainly not Angier – can unravel. But then Angier himself begins to perform a somewhat similar trick, though clearly not one that uses a double. Borden becomes violently enraged at Angier's success, and sabotages a performance. Subsequently a spectre-like Angier assaults him.

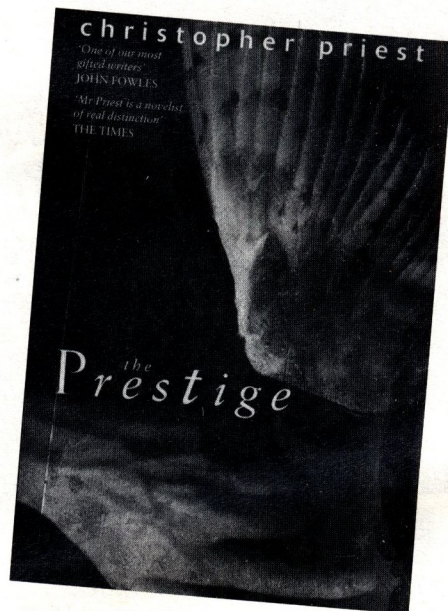
Part Three is narrated by Kate Angier. As a child, she witnesses a savage scene between a Borden and an Angier; in which Borden's young son is seemingly killed during a re-enactment of Angier's stage trick. But Kate is convinced – despite the evidence of her senses, for she has seen the child's dead body – that the young

A Double Crow

John Clute

Borden has survived, that he is adopted by another family, and that he is indeed Andrew Westley, whose presence in her home had been at her invitation.

Part Four presents the diary of Rupert Angier, from the age of nine in 1866, to 1904, some time after Alfred Borden's sabotaging of his show. We learn that Angier, after spending long years in fruitless attempts at solving the mystery of Borden's



trick, travels to Colorado, where he meets Nikola Tesla – a genuine historical figure, the inventor of a method of long-distance transmission of electricity, the Alternating Current system now universally in use. He was obsessively opposed in this development by his own overbearing real-life shadow, Thomas Alva Edison, who refused to admit that the Direct Current transmission system he had invented was hopelessly inferior, and who insisted that his own electricity generating companies continue with DC operations; as this reviewer can attest from

personal experience, as late as 1960 parts of New York City were still DC, and would blow any normal radio sky-high. It was like plugging into a Buck Rogers ray gun.

Tesla agrees to construct a matter transmitter for Angier, and eventually builds a machine which seems to do the trick (shades of *The Space Machine*). With this machine, Angier is of course able to trump Borden's own illusion. The only downside is that Tesla's machine is in fact a matter duplicator, and that every time it is used the performer dies in one place, and is reborn instantaneously elsewhere. The dead double is called the "effect, or the prestige." "If a rabbit is pulled from a hat," Borden explains in his book, "the rabbit, which apparently did not exist before the trick was performed, can be said to be the prestige of that trick."

Part Five will not be synopsisized. It is fairly short, it ends the book, it is quite superb.

Doubles are an inward device, of course, and *The Prestige* is a novel whose sections double one another; whose characters are twinned or prestiged and whose obsessions mirror the obsessions of the sharer in the glass; whose sf gaze turns backwards to an alternate past that reflects our recursive refusals – as a readership, as a race with its backs to the mirror at the end of the tunnel – to dance forwards, glances alight, into the killing malls. It could be said that *The Prestige* is a work whose pleasures are almost entirely interior; that it does not tell us much Worth Knowing. (There is, all the same, a structural irony – in the coign of which it is possible to reflect upon the fact that the two magicians have devoted their lives, and at least one miracle of science, to perfectly useless ends – but this irony tends to lose contour over against the Gaslight Romance convention that insights of any sort are in any case intimately tied to mania.) It could be said that *The Prestige* is, therefore, no more than an entertainment. It may be a fair call. I (one reviewer) couldn't really care less, in the end. A thing of beauty, after all, is a joy forever. *The Prestige* is a thing of beauty. As an exercise in narrative control, in pretending to propound illusionary matters while never actually, I think, telling an actual untruth, *The Prestige* is exemplary. It is a lesson to us in the joy of story.

Because it is an extremely important and teachable novel, Scott Bradfield's *Animal Planet* (Picador US, \$22) is going to appear on a lot of university courses, which may have a deleterious effect on students' willingness to understand that it not only represents a crucially sophisticated

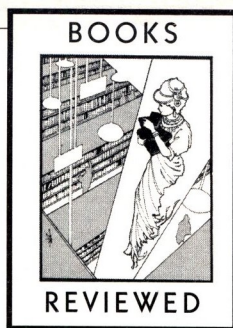
and timely rewriting of the nature of allegory, but that it is also astonishingly funny.

The basic premise is easy to extract from the title, and Bradfield's US publishers (though not his UK, Picador UK, who will release in 1996) have duly made sure to release the book in 1995, the 50th anniversary of the publication of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. We start in London Zoo, where Charlie the Crow is taking a breather. He tells the enclosed animals there that they are oppressed. Eventually a revolt occurs, which is put down. But animals across the planet begin to realize that they have had a bum deal from human beings. There is a stirring in the streets, but America is dominated by corporations bent on commodifying – i.e. ageing into recursion (or sharecrop) – any yet-raw thing which might be deemed translatable into that which is owned; and the revolt of the animals soon turns into a vast parody of the last half of Stephen Spielberg's *Sugarland Express* (1973). Charlie the Crow, and his sidekick Buster the Penguin, after time in penitentiary, are released and forgotten. Charlie takes Buster to a high hill, where he tries to fly again, after long years bound to the cement of the world:

And at that precise moment, Buster saw Charlie for who he really was, and for who he would always be. A foolish, partially deaf, prematurely aged creature who refused to be realistic about the world. Who was running down a green knobby hill flapping his foolish, baggy wings at the wind – imagining he could fly when he could hardly even run anymore.

But he flies. Happy ending.

More important than the spoof with tears of the happy ending, what this quotation demonstrates – as do phrases and sentences on almost every page – is the extraordinarily clever decorum of the text. We know that at one level of allegory, Charlie is a beast-fable crow who (in earlier texts) would represent with a strained fixity, from the beginning of the text to the last page, an unvarying angle of representation that governed the beast's relation to the human he is allegorizing. In *Animal Planet*, that angle of representation boxes clever. It is never still. At some points the animals are almost pure crow or penguin or ape. At other points they clearly stand in for those members of the human race who are oppressed by the Whites of the West. At still other points they are consumer victims. And sometimes they are rulers. Sometimes they are more than one thing simultaneously, and the sentences decorously yaw away from pin-down. And always they are raw beings.



It is a hugely accomplished text. It is going to be a famous book.

It is almost certainly the case that Brian Aldiss is not a "natural" poet, and it is almost certainly the case that this does not matter. The active, bristling poems assembled in *At the Caligula Hotel* (Sinclair-Stevenson, £6.99) almost invariably deport themselves with a genuine obliviousness to propriety. They trod on euphony, and through them Aldiss says exactly what he wants, in a voice we recognize instantly:

O Lord, I reach the gateway of old age.
Look upon me.
As I stand now at your draughty forecourt
Look upon me
In my bewilderment. Preserve in me
A late ambition to be wise...

It is the language of a man who uses language to be a man in. It is sometimes bruising for the language. Brian Aldiss's poetry should be read by anyone who reads the man.

James Blish, on the other hand, and it is something of a revelation to find this out, 20 years after his death, was probably, at his heart, an instinctive poet. The poems assembled in *With All of Love: Selected Poems* (Anamnesis Press, 1078 Howard Street, Suite 101, San Francisco, CA 94103; \$29.95) have the stressed, gnarly, ultimately obedient grace of a genuinely good and interesting minor poet of the Modernist Age. Ezra Pound lurks throughout, in poems like "The Coming Forth," but not the oneiric abandon of Pound's great moments, nor yet the Up Yours Bricolage of his bad days. Here is the second and final stanza of "Dies Irae," which is about cleansing the globe of the human race, about the survival of the rock which is in fact the globe:

The rock will carry, but it will not know
the scintillations of our
wisdom. Then, it will not.
It will boil with joy
when we quit it; but our
joy, not
any joy of the rock,
thought, wound, paprika wine, vermin
or bird.

The editor, and publisher, is Keith Allen Daniels. He has done a wise thing.

John Clute

Fantasy Against Fundamentalism

Chris Gilmore

"Sincerity in art," according to Wilde, "is largely a matter of talent." Guy Gavriel Kay's *The Lions of Al-Rassan* (HarperCollins, £15.99) illustrates the epigram extremely well. Kay is one of those writers who obviously have to believe in the worlds they create, and he has the talent to make them worth believing in.

The setting is a distorted vision of the Heroic Age of Spain, with the adherents of Ashar the Stars (=Arabs) dominating the south, Jad the Sun (=Christians) in the north and Kindath the Moons (=Jews) living as best they can between the many rocks and hard places of the Peninsula. The major viewpoint is Jehane bet Ishak, a female Kindath physician practising in Fezana (?= Toledo), a formerly free city now dominated by the current principal warlord, the Asharite Almalik of Cartada. This could be very standard stuff, but Kay has taken the trouble to learn enough about medicine in medieval Iberia to make his background convincing and then use it to illuminate the character of his heroine.

That being so, I wondered briefly why he had chosen to set his tale in a parallel world rather than a romanticized vision of the Age of El Cid. The answer came soon enough – Kay is no friend of revealed religion, and leavens his tale with many grim jokes at the expense of Christianity and Islam alike. His theme is that the Alhambra and Chartres may be beautiful, and the achievements of the Christian imagination and Islamic scholarship impressive, but both are impurities, the fruit of revisionism, hateful to the fundamentalists, for whose piety the only appropriate symbols are the Crusade and the Jihad – all else is damnable frivolity. For Kay only the fundamentalists have internal consistency, and in as much as they are hateful, the only good service is lip service. Hence his need to present the authentic evil and spurious goodness of both religions in a purified form.

He has also a strong feeling for the nexus between language and psychology which produces at its most formal the code of chivalry that dominates his principal male characters, Rodrigo Belmonte of Valledo, an irregular soldier of great distinction in service with one of the petty Jad-dite kings, and Ammar ibn Kairan, poet, diplomat and hatchet-man currently in service with Almalik. Both men are into early middle age as the



book opens, and too steeped in their respective codes to turn back; early in the book both encounter Jehane, who is indisputably beautiful but nearer 30 than 20 and no less dominated by the oath of her profession. To a greater or lesser extent all three stand for humane values, but in all three the demands of a Code are paramount; one knows instinctively that if push comes to shove they will unflinchingly sacrifice themselves or those they love to it – and because Kay has drawn them so well, one hopes they will be spared the necessity.

The potential conflicts of principle, loyalty and desire are plain from the outset, and constitute the stuff of high tragedy; Kay develops them at a leisurely pace, while the interactions between the three major and several lesser characters and the backgrounds which dominate them quicken the book. The effect is of long preparation in the certainty of a major catastrophe, so that the many violent and colourful incidents along the way provide ornamentation rather than progression.

The same is less fortunately true of the dialogue; given that all the characters are intelligent, serious-minded, handsome and more closely acquainted with death and suffering than is healthy or wise, their conversation sometimes comes a little close to Georgette Heyer. Likewise, in the less focused linking passages Kay's irony can be ponderous – but these are minor details; in every aspect that matters this tale of high heroism and romance can and deserves to be taken dead straight. It is not a short book, but comes in the very select category that this reviewer would rather have had longer; there are some finely sketched minor characters who are never fully developed, and really need to dominate books of their own – which I don't expect to happen, as Kay is not a sequel-merchant. And in a world where Christian and Islamic fundamentalism are both on the increase (not to mention the march), this one deserves to be pondered for its subtext as well.

The idea of a man who has to live his life in Sundered segments is far from new – it lies behind Fredric Brown's "Letter to a Phoenix" and (combined with a serially reincarnated sidekick) a *Children's Hour* radio serial from the 1950s; nor is the idea of a man who constantly loses his memory and has to remake his life daily from what he finds around him – *vide* Gene Wolfe's *Soldier of the Mist* and its sequel. John Barnes has combined them in *Kaleidoscope Century* (Millennium, £15.99) by means of a fairly crude McGuffin: Joshua Ali Quare has a recurrent dis-

ease which every 15 years or so lays him low with a high fever. The crisis subsides, leaving him largely bereft of memory but only five years older than last time; he must therefore recreate himself from what little remains, from his ill-organized computer disks, home videos etc., from his physical habits, but most of all, from what he feels instinctively is or is not himself.

For none of the material available is free from corruption. He may (or may not) have undergone a major personality change during his fever; his earlier selves may have excised some aspects and heightened others; worst of all, his memories tend to appear as relived episodes including recollections of recollections from earlier eras, of which all are subject to similar caveats and none have enough context to guarantee authenticity. As remembered dreams and reconstructions *à l'esprit d'escalier* are no less real than anything else, Josh's situation is that of a man arraigned for participation in his own most unedifying masturbatory fantasies with no idea how to plead.

As Josh is by now over 140 years old (and looks past 60) this mechanism allows Barnes to run a character study of a singularly repellent man against a history of the next century – no bad combination, except that for reasons that only appear in the last chapter he makes it a parallel-world story as well. This time round, when Yeltsin climbs on the tank to quell the Old Guard coup someone blows him away with a handgun, and things are different thereafter, though as the major griefs of the 21st century involve wars between competing AI networks (memes) and hyper-virulent venereal plagues, not especially different. It's a lazy way of disarming criticism of his authenticity (his American Communist Party is permanently and improbably flush with KGB gold, for instance), and lends the book the air of louche insouciance more suited to Mike Moorcock's *The Adventures of Una Persson and Catherine Cornelius in the Twentieth Century*, deflecting attention from the futurology and the central character alike.

Josh combines considerable intelligence with innumerable vices but no virtues whatever – human or animal.

Following his career, you could be forgiven for assuming that his principal pleasures were (in approximate order): rape, torture and murder (preferably as a package); the accumulation and contemplation of wealth; the discovery and deployment of rationales for despising everyone except himself; conspicuous consumption/display/waste (especially against a background of human deprivation); the degradation of other people's morals by bribery or terror; and virtuous self-congratulation for his kindness in curtailment the rape and mutilation when there isn't time for a really thorough job. You'd be wrong, though: what he likes best of all is to get sentimentally drunk with Sadi, the companion of his most unsavoury exploits, and remind each other what really fine fellows they are.

Such an anti-hero makes for a grim tale, to which Barnes brings ingenuity and an unseemly zest which sustains interest until one comes to note a lack of balance. Josh is simply squalid: without tragic pathos, because he shows no potential to have been anything better, nor tragic grandeur, because he has no conception of what he has become. His mother is a hard-nosed communist of the sort who thoroughly approved the Berlin Wall, while his father is a drunken rapist; Barnes himself takes no explicit position in the nature/nurture debate, nor does the book offer any philosophical context for such a monster – he is a mere phenomenon, as monolithic as a figure from medieval demonology. I presume that is Barnes's intention; why else should he use phrases from Yeats's "The Second Coming" for his chapter headings? – but Josh is ultimately pointless. As Yeats says elsewhere, "there's no human life at the full of the dark."

Somewhat over halfway through the book Barnes tries to correct by having Josh adopt a teenage waif and bring her up more-or-less as a daughter, but by that time the character is established; instead of adding a dimension she only raises the question of her own ontology – is she another of Josh's self-righteous fantasies, or has Barnes slipped up? In fact, he's slipped up; as a Gretchen figure she'd have a place in the life of Faust, but can offer nothing whatever to Mephistopheles. Barnes drops her in an arbitrary fashion, to be transformed into a sentimental icon.

Against these shortcomings, it has to be admitted that many of the ideas are ingenious and there are some nice touches, as when in the course of a desultory game of one-upmanship among three murderers it transpires that each has killed at least one Nobel prizewinner. Against that, there are some weak and vulgar touches, like Barnes's racist and over-

used coinage to serb (= commit variously aggravated rape). Remember the verb to kipple (derog., backform from Kipling)? But these are incidentals; it's as a study in evil that this book must stand or fall, and as such it falls victim to its own single-minded superficiality.

And for a complete change, how about a near-future tale involving AIs, much mayhem and materialism (both impinging heavily on sexual relations) and an ultra hard-boiled viewpoint who cynically exploits his insider's privileges? Simon Ings's *Hotwire* (HarperCollins, £4.99) takes its title and its central metaphor from the illegal, dangerous but universal practice in Latin American shanty towns of hooking your domestic appliances directly to the grid – done less to save paying for the juice than because if you live in such an area you can't afford the cost of running a legitimate supply. You therefore take your chance when the voltage spikes.

Ajay, the principal male viewpoint, is as much a chancer as John Barnes's Josh, but unlike Josh he has a serious motive: his sister has been seriously mutilated, and his long-term goal is earn enough to repair her body and mind – of necessity, piecemeal. Early on he captures and (to further a machiavellian publicity stunt) unnecessarily injures a pre-pubescent girl mugger. Looking down on her, he reflects that she had probably turned to crime because she lacked the hybrid allure of the typical Carioca girl. Not being pretty enough for prostitution, her only credible source of income is robbery with violence. Such human considerations lend depth to what begins as a common enough cyberpunk romp, though decorated in more than usually grotesque style.

The other major viewpoint is Rosa, clone-daughter of Lucy Snow who bears the guilt for having loosed the current murderous generation of AIs on the world. Lucy's ideas of child-rearing are original but unattractive. Rosa has spent her entire life in a purpose-built hell (social interaction by Sartre, furnishings by Bosch) where her only companions are Elle, a more favoured clone, and Pig, also a clone variant but of minimal intelligence, from which both she and Elle suckle their nourishment.

Rosa and Ajay are thrown together when Ajay attempts an overly ambitious sortie against Dayus Ram, Snow's principal AI avatar, and winds up in Rosa's hell. Rosa rapidly makes him her own (on her own terms) through a rather preposterous physical communion, and the lovers set about their escape! OK, *Perils of Pauline*. But despite the crudity, this is a book about the assertion of

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human values against those of the power-broker and the machine – not to mention the grisly caprice of Snow's "scientific" experiments in the dismantlement and recombination of human flesh. As such it can lay claim to the credentials of a romance, and one played out against a more than usually bleak and hostile background, while Ajay's original purpose languishes on the back-burner. Ings lays it on the line clearly enough:

Her mind made up, her future chosen, she gazed at him, her angel and reluctant saviour. She wondered if he understood the murky workings of her heart. 'Just be there when they splay me out.'

Who could resist such an offer?

Well, Ajay, as a matter of fact. But Rosa keeps on upping the ante until Ajay has to call; such is the romance of lovers unequally allied, and (as usual) the woman is more at risk. Ajay has also to cope with her social deficiencies. Hellish as her existence has been, it has certainly been sheltered, and she is ill prepared for a high-speed escape over unmade roads in a 4wd:

'I feel sick,' she said.

He sighed.

'Real sick.'

'Open the door. Throw up on the road if you have to. We don't have time to stop.'

She studied the door. 'How do I open it?'

'This is going to be a long fucking journey,' Ajay muttered.

So this curious maimed love story develops. Each party depends on the other, and it's in Ajay's nature that he responds to Rosa's need. It's also in Rosa's nature that she should value the source of her first ever (and well overdue) sexual experience. Yet they cannot become lovers through anything resembling a conventional process of courtship and mutual discovery – he has too much experience, and she too little. The sense of a bitter catastrophe approaching all too fast lends tension to the central section.

The climax, predictably enough, involves the intrusion of Ajay's original mission into his idyll, accompa-

nied by much physiologically unconvincing mayhem and realistically unimaginative cursing. It's also accompanied by some mega-dreary sex-writing. Are there really still people to whom the words "cock" and "cum" signify anything except childish embarrassment? I suppose there must be, but I hope for his own sake Ings isn't one of them. It's not the first time I've commented that a writer of some potential seems determined to mar his own work by tacky tackings-on, and as often before, I wonder what can be the point. A marketing ploy, perhaps? Buy a deluxe latex doll and get *Hotwire* free? I hope not, but if that's not the point, what is?

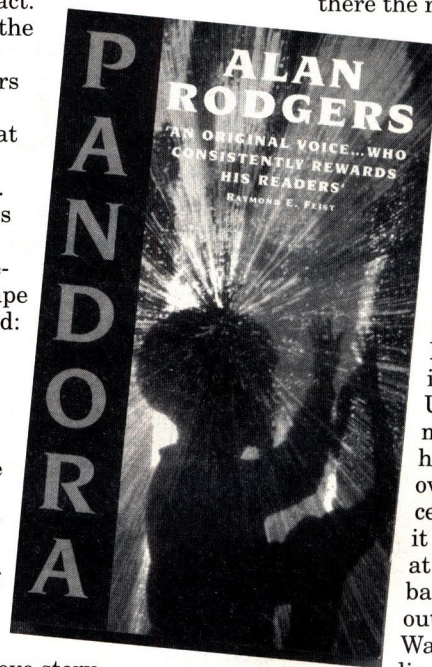
These considerations aside, the ending disappoints, with a fey final scene but no attempt to resolve the sexual relationship or to indicate what the future may hold for either party. I suspect the book suddenly died on the author, but he had to finish it somehow and took the easy road. A pity, after a strong start and an interesting middle, but sometimes life does that.

Pandora by Alan Rodgers (Millennium, £4.99) also features a *faux naïf* heroine of doubtful humanity, but there the resemblance

ends, for it's based on a rather neat conceit. "Just suppose one of those urban myths about a flying saucer crashing in New Mexico is true. The US Government really has taken it over, and successfully kept it under wraps at a secret base throughout the Cold War. There is a live survivor

(Pandora), who looks much as Whitney Streiber says she should. What would life be like there now?"

Rodgers's vision presumes that the secrecy is so all-pervasive, it has encysted itself. No one is ever allowed out of the base for any reason – it's like Bletchley Park during World War II – and over 17 years a lot of senior people have died. Now not even the president knows, not through any conspiracy, but because he doesn't need to know and it's no one's job to tell him; in any case, there's not much to tell; the alien craft disintegrated shortly after impact, and Pandora,





who was born to a dying occupant by self-administered Caesarean, is an unfruitful field of study to the scientists imprisoned on the base. General Hightower, the commandant, is a shithead who was lucky to get a major's commission in wartime but has since been automatically promoted but never granted a day's leave, and the general feeling of living in a time-warp is enhanced by Pandora's ability to warp time in sundry ways, so that a man may wake up in middle age, pass the afternoon in his late teens and go to bed on his last legs.

The atmosphere is perforce domestic – the place is home now, so people make it homey – but inherently unstable. The whole thing rapidly unravels when Airman Ken Estes is transferred there as an act of spite for getting a general's daughter pregnant. Hightower takes against Ken, Pandora takes to him, and the tensions released in the resulting schemozzle frighten her so much she goes on the lam, out into the world – sort of. For it isn't our world at all, it's

(appropriately enough) the world as perceived by readers of *The National Inquirer*.

Altogether, an ingenious idea, but the execution doesn't quite live up. Pandora's thoughts are given in a breathy, verbose style intended to express girlish innocence, but too cutesy-pie by half; she comes across as simultaneously moronic and manipulative, while the author's own style recalls the *Mad Magazine* spoof about the gardening columnist paid by the word: "First you dig a big, big, big hole." Moreover, her time-warping comes into play only when it suits the

plot. Ken's character is paper-thin but just as inconsistent; that he should be not very bright and in permanent terror of his superiors is fair enough, but the plot also requires that he occasionally make intuitive leaps beyond the scope of simpler minds. Such, I suppose, is the world of the super-market tabloid, but it's a world better suited to satire than high adventure, and Rodgers should have decided from the outset which he wanted. The result is an amusing experiment with some good running gags, but never quite succeeds as either.

Worst of all, such a style vitiates the book's moral purpose, though it's obvious enough. Rodgers set out to write a deadly serious parable about ends and means, and never lost sight of it. Nor did I, once I'd spotted it under the layers of kitsch, but it's not strong enough to excuse them – nothing could be. The result is yet another almost good book sacrificed to a pose, and I'm tempted to fling up my arms and shout "Why, O why?" But Heaven, as usual, vouchsafest not.

Chris Gilmore

It's not too often that anthologies of horror stories can be said to be important in a sense that would – or should – earn them the attention and, indeed, the respect of readers outside the prescriptive and constraining parameters of that genre. In fact, Graham Masterton's 1989 collection *Scare Care*, a benefit anthology conceived to support the Scare Care Trust's efforts to raise money for children's charities, is really the only one that springs to mind ... at least until recently. Because now there's Richard T. Chizmar's *The Earth Strikes Back* (Zeising, \$18.95).

We've all read the newspaper reports, seen the horrific footage of oil slicks and chemical spillage from behind Russia's and former East Germany's rusting curtains, and we've cringed at the latest tales of new cancers springing up in connection with industries previously thought to be safe. Occasionally we've even marvelled at the books and films that take a fictional slant on one particular aspect singled out in the guise of entertainment. But, let's face it ... it's all pretty much silage off a dead duck's back. Chizmar has recognized this: he's taken a few mordant and bold imaginations to extrapolate the news and play with the myriad *What if's* to the Nth degree... and hit the message home.

The Earth Strikes Back is a fine book, worthwhile, relevant and entertaining all at the same time. Of the 20 contributions, most deliver the goods in full with only a couple failing to ignite at all. Poppy Z. Brite's "Toxic Wastrels," for example, with its over-

Let's be Careful Out There

Peter Crowther

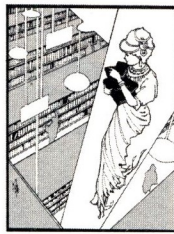
the-top depiction of a couple of nihilistic dope-heads hell-bent on torture and mutilation, seems more intent on grossing out the reader than in cluing him in. Sort of a literary "moony," a pus- and excreta-stained backside pressed up against the page and daring us to keep on looking at it for about 15 minutes. Thanks, but no thanks. Less gratuitous but equally unsatisfying is Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's "Do Not Pass Go Do Not Collect \$200" which, like the board-game from which it borrows its title, seems to go nowhere and takes a long time to get there.

But the other 18 offerings are something else again. James Kisner's "Ground Water" and Nancy Collins's "Cancer Alley," two classical revenge stories of society's underdogs taking on the authorities they consider responsible for their family's deaths, and Richard Laymon's tense tale of a couple of animal-rights activists pur-

suing a woman in a fur coat ("The Fur Coat") are equally angry and no less hard-hitting in their finale than Ms Brite's but they employ a more studied approach which takes the reader all the way and, just as it should be, wins him over.

The all-out classics are undoubtedly these: Dan Simmons's eloquent and quietly fervent "My Copsa Micas," actually more an essay – and, at 24 pages, a long one – which, cleverly placed in the lead position, sets the ground-rules upon which all else in the book is constructed; Charles de Lint's "The Forest Is Crying," a typically gentle de Lint tale of ghosts, angels and time-travel; Thomas Tessier's P. K. Dick-like "I Remember Me" (my personal favourite) with its world-wide plague of memory-loss and people who tattoo their partners' names – as well as their own – and their addresses on their skin ... but pretty soon they start to forget much *much* more; Ed Gorman's thoroughly nasty "Cages," in which a young boy in a possible future sells his deformed sister in order to get money to give to his mother to buy food; Mark Rainey's brief-but-powerful "Torrent," in which it rains constantly ... but these are showers that nobody wants to get caught in; Rick Hautala on exceptional form with "Toxic Shock," which does a new take on the right-to-life controversy; Tom Monteleone's "Please Stand By" which, in its cynical last line, perhaps sums up the single greatest problem facing ecological improvement; Barry Hoffman's hallucinogenic "Double-Edged Sword," a fable about a bunch of mercenaries

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who bring back a little extra something from their latest mission; and Hugh B. Cave's perfectly-placed closer "Genesis II," which suggests optimistically that all may not be lost ... yet.

An excellent anthology and highly recommended – now let's watch out where we throw that litter!

As Chizmar's book demonstrates admirably, short-story writing is an entirely different discipline to novel writing... and it can pack a more powerful punch. That's primarily because it manages to deliver its message – and, if it's good enough, cause the reader's hoots of delight – in a far shorter space and time. But there's a knack to doing it *well* and, not surprisingly, there are fewer "great" short-story writers than there are "great" novelists, though many writers work (albeit on and off) in both formats.

In our own field, and of those craftsmen and craftswomen who are still plying their trade *and* turning out their tales pretty prolifically, there are really only a handful: Harlan Ellison, Ray Bradbury, Ramsey Campbell and Clive Barker must surely head the list, though their short fiction output has slowed compared with what they used to produce; then you come down to ("down" in terms of volume rather than in terms of effectiveness) Howard Waldrop, Charles de Lint, Garry Kilworth, Lisa Goldstein ... and maybe another 20 more whose short fiction regularly hits the top notch.

But there's one more who, for my money, deserves to be up there at the high table when the short-story kudos are handed out: and that's Ed Gorman. Like Ellison and Twain, Hemingway and Caldwell, Bradbury and Vance, and all the hardworking joes who pounded out streams of tales for the late lamented pulp magazines, Gorman has a nose for a story, an eye for a potential situation or confrontation and an ever-ready ear for sharp and realistic dialogue.

But it's the range of his settings and genres that probably sets Gorman apart from even the loftiest of all the other successful short-story writers. Because the truth of it is that Gorman is just as much at home in the untamed West as he is in the shady alleyways of the big city; just as comfortable with a conversation between a serial killer and a victim as he is with an argument between an adolescent girl and her mother; and apparently just as familiar with the cut-and-thrust world of corporate big business as he is with the demands of running a farm in the mid-western United States.

Gorman's talent has long been available for the picking in scores of

magazines and anthologies in every genre and field imaginable. And it's been showcased already in two great collections (to my knowledge: there may be more), *Prisoners* and *The Best Western Stories of Ed Gorman*. Now there's one more.

Cages (Deadline Press, \$35) features 21 stories (comprising more than 150,000 words) which, in addition to the title story (also featured in Richard Chizmar's *The Earth Strikes Back* anthology and mentioned above), run the gamut from 1958 small-town Iowa, where a couple of 15-year-olds get caught between an injured hoodlum and a corrupt cop ("Moonchasers," currently being prepared for the big screen by the producer of *The Shawshank Redemption*), to a 2009 in which a "bounty hunter" of sorts makes a living by rounding up empathic children and selling them to a down-at-heel medical profession so that, simply by tethering the unfortunate children to the patient, the doctors may perform intricate surgery without anaesthetic ("Survival").

On the way, there's a tale in which a small-time journalist realizes a lifelong ambition by interviewing an old western story writer ... only to discover that his hero is very human indeed ("Pards"); another in which a creature travels to earth from the depths of space and holes up in an old well, there to exert its will over any who happen by ("The Brasher Girl"); one more in which a 19th-century executioner revisits a town to do a job ... and to experience once more an all-too-brief slice of salvation in the arms of a favourite whore ("Deathman"); and one in which a Confederate doctor discovers, in the closing stages of the Civil War, an expression on a wounded man's face that calls into question everything they're fighting for ("The Face").

In a review of one of Gorman's books, one US magazine said: "If H. P. Lovecraft, Jack London, Dashiell Hammett and Ernest Haycox were all alive today and having a chat about the state of the popular American short story, they'd all be talking about Ed Gorman." I couldn't phrase it better, so I won't try. But I will say this: Virtual Reality is not the big new thing it's cracked up to be. Ed Gorman has been providing the means to

enjoy it for years. All you need is an easy chair and the tiniest bit of imagination ... and he'll do the rest.

I recently came across a postal auctions catalogue for books and magazines stretching back many years and featuring many sizes of price-tag. Amidst all the usual suspects – first issues of this and that, first appearances of new costume and so on – was one very interesting item ... very interesting not least because I had just picked up a facsimile reprint of the book for a fraction of its £130 reserve price. The book is *The Adventures of Superman* by George Lowther and, with the exception of an unauthorized softcover reissue in 1979, it had (prior to its new incarnation under the Applewood imprint, \$17.95) been out of print for more than 50 years.

Originally published in 1942, Lowther's book makes no pretence at being art. It's fun, frenetic and dated: the story has gone through seemingly hundreds of polishing-up exercises... though all too many of them have instead tarnished the Man-of-Steel's once great image. *The Adventures of Superman* tells it just the way it was, way back in those World War years when simplicity was the name of the game and a few scientific implausibilities were not allowed to get in the way of a good yarn.

And, of course, the story of baby Kael's hair-raising rocket trip to Earth from the doomed world of Krypton and his subsequent discovery of awesome powers is one hell of a tale... the impact of which we should not allow repeated retellings (or, indeed, endless reworkings!) to diminish.

Here, the prose is lean and simple, aimed at a more juvenile and less demanding audience than that which frequents the comic-book stores of the 1990s; and while the handsome colour plates and full-page b&w illustrations (beautifully rendered by Supe's co-creator Joe Shuster) are a far cry from the painstakingly realistic (and consequently sterile) work of today's comic field they also serve (somewhat paradoxically) to emphasize that the intervening five decades since its original publication have lost us more than we've gained.

But that was then and this is now. The sad truth of the matter is that it is extremely unlikely that the world will ever be as uncomplicated or as naive as the one which first received this book. Nevertheless, like Enid Blyton's Famous Five tales and the William stories... and like Patrick Moore's Mars books, E. C. Elliot's Kemlo sagas or Angus MacVicar's Lost Planet yarns, *The Adventures of Superman* is, to the discerning reader, a glorious artefact of a bygone time.

Pete Crowther

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period 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.

Anthony, Piers. **Geis of the Gargoyle.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-62296-2, 390pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1994; 18th in the "Xanth" series.) 21st September 1995.

Bakker, Robert T. **Raptor Red.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03919-X, 241pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Youll, £12.99. (Prehistoric sf novel by a noted paleontologist; first published in the USA, 1995; set 120 million years ago, it's about the life of a dinosaur.) 7th September 1995.

Ballard, J. G. **Rushing to Paradise.** Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-654814-8, 239pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Quasi-sf novel, first published in 1994; reviewed by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 90; among the interesting review quotes which cram the covers and flyleaf is one by Labour MP Gerald Kaufman, who says: "A delight to read, a combination of scary humour and grim obsession — one of the top novels of the year"; other reviewers describe the book as "Wellsian" or compare it to *Robinson Crusoe* and *Lord of the Flies*.) 11th September 1995.

Ballard, J. G. **A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-25555-5, 280pp, hardcover (?), no price shown. (Essay collection by a major sf writer, first edition; unbound proof copy received; Ballard's first-ever non-fiction book gathers pieces, mainly short, written for magazines and newspapers between 1962 and 1994; it is divided into eight sections, headed: "Film," "Lives," "The Visual World," "Writers," "Science," "Autobiography," "Science Fiction" and "In General.") January 1996.

Benford, Gregory, ed. **Far Futures.** "Five new novellas of hard science fiction." Tor, ISBN 0-312-85639-3, 348pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; dedicated to Arthur C. Clarke, it contains an introduction by Benford, mainly about the fate of the universe billions of years hence, and long stories on the

distant-future theme by Poul Anderson, Greg Bear, Joe Haldeman, Donald Kingsbury and Charles Sheffield; it looks to be a very interesting book.) December 1995.

Besher, Alexander. **Rim: A Novel of Virtual Reality.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-332-8, x+357pp, B-format (approx.) paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; a debut novel by an American writer, it was shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick Award.) 7th September 1995.

Bradbury, Ray. **The Martian Chronicles.** "Modern Classic." Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-647923-5, 235pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf fix-up novel, first published in the USA, 1950, and in the UK as *The Silver Locusts*, 1951; this first-ever British B-format edition appears to be reproduced from the first Granada/Panther A-format edition of 1977 [which was reprinted eight times]; before that, it was for many years a Corgi paperback, and must rank as one of modern sf's all-time bestsellers, both in the USA and the UK; other books of sf/fantasy interest that HarperCollins/Flamingo have included in their "Modern Classics" series over the past year or so, none of which was sent to us for review, include *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, *The Naked Lunch* by William Burroughs and *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury.) 11th September 1995.

Brewer, Gene. **K-Pax.** Bloomsbury, ISBN 0-7475-2203-0, 231pp, C-format paperback, £7.99. (Sf [?] novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995; it's either sf or "delusional sf" — about a psychiatric patient who claims to be from another planet; we're told nothing about the author, but he seems to be American.) 14th September 1995.

Brite, Poppy Z., ed. **Love in Vein: Twenty Original Tales of Vampire Erotica.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648209-0, x+433pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror anthology, first published in the USA, 1994; according to the copyright statement, this is co-edited by the ubiquitous Martin H. Greenberg; it contains all-new stories by Douglas Clegg, Charles de Lint, Elizabeth Engstrom, Nancy Holder, Kathe Koja and Barry Malzberg, Thomas F. Monteleone, Gene Wolfe and others.) 11th September 1995.

Bujold, Lois McMaster. **Mirror**

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Dance: A Vorkosigan Adventure. "Triple Hugo and double Nebula award winning author." Pan, ISBN 0-330-33422-0, 614pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; Bujold has the potential to be

popular in the UK: if she has won three Hugos and two Nebulas, and sells like hotcakes in the States, why has it taken Pan well over a year to publish this book?) 8th September 1995.

Bujold, Lois McMaster, and Roland Green, eds. **Women at War.** "The first-ever original anthology of military SF about women!" Tor, ISBN 0-312-85792-6, 384pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; it contains all-new stories by Margaret Ball, Juanita Coulson, P. M. Griffin, Holly Lisle, R. M. Meluch, Elizabeth Moon, Elizabeth Ann Scarborough, Judith Tarr, Jane Yolen and others; good old Martin H. Greenberg seems to be the invisible third editor, though he's not specifically mentioned in the copyright statement.) December 1995.

Cherryh, C. J. **Rider at the Gate.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-63827-3, 370pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; Cherryh seems as bewilderingly prolific as Britain's Tanith Lee: this is her third new novel to be published in the UK this year [following *Tripoint*, from Hodder, and *Invader*, from Legend] — and yet another [a fantasy] is promised from HarperCollins imminently.) 7th September 1995.

Di Filippo, Paul. **The Steampunk Trilogy: Victoria, Hottentots, Walt and Emily.** Four Walls Eight Windows [distributed in the UK by Turnaround, 27 Horsell Rd., London N5 1XL], ISBN 1-56858-028-2, 352pp, hardcover, cover by Christine Francis, £13.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1995; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 100; this is the American first edition of about six months ago, with a British price.) 28th September 1995.

Douglas, John. **Cursed.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-63536-3, 296pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; this is the second novel by a new British writer.) 7th September 1995.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **The Year's Best Science Fiction:**

Twelfth Annual Collection. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-13221-2, xivi+590pp, C-format paperback, \$16.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [listed here earlier, from an incomplete proof copy]; it contains 20-odd stories by Stephen Baxter, Michael Bishop, Terry Bisson, Pat Cadigan, Greg Egan, Lisa Goldstein, Joe Haldeman, Nancy Kress, Ursula Le Guin, Maureen F. McHugh, Geoff Ryman, Brian Stableford, George Turner, Howard Waldrop and others; reviewed by Neil Jones and Neil McIntosh in *Interzone* 100.) Late entry: 24th July publication, received in August 1995.

Etchison, Dennis. **California Gothic.** Dell/Abyss, ISBN 0-440-21726-1, 324pp, A-format paperback, \$4.99. (Horror novel, first edition; this American paperback has been sent to us by Robinson Publishing/Raven, who are planning a UK edition for release on 26th September at £4.99.) Late entry: June publication, received in August 1995.

Gell-Mann, Murray. **The Quark and the Jaguar: Adventures in the Simple and the Complex.** Abacus, ISBN 0-349-10649-5, xviii+392pp, B-format paperback, £8.99. (Popular science text by a Nobel Prize-winning physicist; first published in the USA, 1994.) 7th September 1995.

Gingrich, Newt, and William R. Forstchen. **1945.** Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-87676-7, 382pp, hardcover, cover by Gary Ruddell, £14.99. (Alternative-world sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American, Baen Books, first printing with a UK price sticker; since Mr Gingrich leads a pretty busy life as Speaker of the House of Representatives, presumably this book has been written mainly by Forstchen [who has produced many military-adventure sf novels in the past decade]; so when will some enterprising British publisher commission Labour MP and sf enthusiast Ken Livingstone to co-author a science-fiction novel?; it would have a rather different political slant...) 14th August 1995.

Godwin, Parke. **The Tower of Beowulf.** Morrow, ISBN 0-688-12738-X, vi+246pp, hardcover, cover by Don Clavette, \$23. (Fantasy novel, first edition; American author Godwin has been chewing his way steadily through British legendry for the past two decades: following an Arthurian trilogy and a couple of Robin Hood novels, he now tackles Beowulf; although it remains little known in the UK,

some critics rate his work very highly.) *August 1995.*

Goodkind, Terry. **Stone of Tears.** "Book Two of *The Sword of Truth*." Tor, ISBN 0-312-85706-3, 703pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a whopper: it's 700 pages of small print.) *October 1995.*

Gorman, Ed. **Hawk Moon.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1587-1, 245pp, hardcover, cover by Lee Gibbons, £16.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995.) *14th September 1995.*

Grundy, Stephan. **Rhinegold.** Penguin, ISBN 0-14-023723-2, 870pp, B-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone 85*.) *3rd August 1995.*

Hambly, Barbara. **Travelling with the Dead.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648029-2, 377pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995; this, along with Baxter's *The Time Ships*, Brite's *Love in Vein* and Williams's *Metropolitan* [see above and below], is one of the first titles in a new HarperCollins sf/fantasy imprint known as Voyager; actually, Voyager may be seen as the latest incarnation of the old Panther Books — see comments under John Russell Fearn's *Emperor of Mars*, last issue; from Fearn to Hambly, 45 years of fine paperback publishing, the best sf/fantasy list in Britain, which perhaps deserves an article to celebrate it [see a future *Interzone*]; it's a pity, though, about the countless name changes over the years: if "Penguin" continues to be good enough for Penguin, and "Pan" is good enough for Pan, why did HarperCollins drop Panther?) *11th September 1995.*

Heinrich, Clark. **Strange Fruit: Alchemy, Religion and Magical Foods, a Speculative History.** Bloomsbury, ISBN 0-7475-1548-4, xi+212pp, hardcover, £20. (Illustrated history of arcane/mystical drug-lore, with particular emphasis on mushrooms; first published in the USA, 1994; we're not quite sure why we've been sent this, but...) *14th September 1995.*

Holt, Tom. **Djinn Rummy.** "A work of comic genies." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-329-8, 277pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Lee, £15.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition.) *10th August 1995.*

Johns, Eric. **Capture by Aliens!** Illustrated by John Watson. Walker Books [87 Vauxhall

Walk, London SE11 5HJ], ISBN 0-7445-4116-6, 95pp, hardcover, £6.99. (Juvenile sf novel, first edition.) *4th September 1995.*

Jones, Stephen, and David Sutton, eds. **Dark Terrors: The Gollancz Book of Horror.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06136-7, 379pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, £15.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; proof copy received; a continuation from a new publisher of the old *Dark Voices: The Pan Book of Horror*, it contains all-new stories by Christopher Fowler, Graham Masterton, Richard Christian Matheson, Mark Morris, Kim Newman, Nicholas Royle, Michael Marshall Smith, Karl Edward Wagner, etc, plus reprints by Ramsey Campbell, Brian Lumley and Peter Straub.) *26th October 1995.*

Jordan, Robert. **Lord of Chaos: Book Six of The Wheel of Time.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-300-X, 1035pp, A-format paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994; "Robert Jordan" is a pseudonym of James O. Rigney, Jr.) *10th August 1995.*

Kessler, Carol Farley. **Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress Toward Utopia with Selected Writings.** "Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies." Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-499-X, x+316pp, trade paperback, £15. (Critical study-cum-anthology of a leading American feminist utopianist, author of *Herland* [1915]; first published in the USA, 1995; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) *States "July" on the review slip, but received in August 1995.*

Larson, Randall D. **Films Into Books: An Analytical Bibliography of Film Novelizations, Movie, and TV Tie-Ins.** Scarecrow Press, ISBN 0-8108-2928-2, xii+608pp, hardcover, \$69.50. (Bibliography, arranged both by title and by author, of film novelizations and film-and-TV spinoff novels [the use of the term "tie-ins" in the subtitle is unfortunately vague]; first edition; it also contains dozens of short interviews with writers, the majority of them sf and fantasy people, including Piers Anthony, the late Isaac Asimov, David Bischoff, the late Robert Bloch, Ken Bulmer, Ramsey Campbell, Arthur C. Clarke, J. M. Dillard, Alan Dean Foster, Robert Holdstock, John Jakes, James Kahn, Vonda N.

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McIntyre, the late Mike McQuay, Ed Naha, Robert Thurston, Guy N. Smith, Joan D. Vinge, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, etc; a longer version of the Foster interview first appeared in *Interzone 80*; this book is not totally comprehensive or error-free [how could it be?]

but it's a very useful first stab at mapping a little-known literary territory.) *Late entry: April publication, received in August 1995.*

Lewitt, Shariann. **Memento Mori.** "A searing portrait of a world in flames, from an impressive new sf talent." Tor, ISBN 0-312-85625-3, 286pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) *December 1995.*

McAuley, Paul J. **Pasquale's Angel.** Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05917-6, 384pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £5.99. (Alternative-world sf novel, first published in 1994; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone 85*.) *31st August 1995.*

McDonald, Ian. **Evolution's Shore.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-37435-4, 355pp, trade paperback, cover by John Jude Palencar, \$12.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK as *Chaga*, 1995; proof copy received; why do McDonald's novels always carry different titles in the UK and the USA? for this to occur once or twice might be editorial happenstance, but when it occurs every time it begins to look like deliberate policy; having said that, *Evolution's Shore* does seem the better of the two titles.) *6th November 1995.*

Mirbeau, Octave. **Torture Garden.** Translated by Michael Richardson. Introduction by Brian Stableford. Dedalus [Langford Lodge, St Judith's Lane, Sawtry, Cambs. PE17 5XE], ISBN 1-873982-51-8, 206pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Horror novel, first published in France as *Le jardin des supplices*, 1899; a philosophical tale of terror, and a classic of the perverse, it was published previously in English by Dedalus in a different translation, 1990 [from which year Stableford's introduction dates]; this new translation drops the definite article from the novel's title; we are not told why a fresh translation was felt to be necessary.) *24th August 1995.*

Moorcock, Michael. **Fabulous Harbours: A Sequel to Blood.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-408-0, 192pp, hardcover, cover by Gustave Moreau, £15.99. (Sf/fantasy collection,

first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; despite the misleading words "a sequel" in the subtitle, it's very much a collection, consisting of sundry linked "multiverse" stories first published in 1993-95 — although one, "The Girl Who Killed Sylvia Blade," dates from 1966.) *21st August 1995.*

Murphy, David. **Broken Heroes.** Illustrated by Paul Sheridan. Introduction by Morgan Llywelyn. Albedo One Publications [8 Commons Rd., Loughlinstown, Co. Dublin, Ireland], no ISBN shown, 76pp, small-press paperback, £2.95. (Sf collection, first edition; it contains eight stories, several of them reprinted from small-press magazines.) *No date shown: received in August 1995.*

Nagata, Linda. **Tech-Heaven.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-56926-0, 357pp, A-format paperback, \$4.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a second novel by a new American writer, resident in Hawaii.) *6th November 1995.*

Newman, Kim. **The Bloody Red Baron.** Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-0252-4, 358pp, hardcover, \$21. (Horror/sf novel, first edition; sequel to *Anna Dracula*, set 30 years later during an alternative First World War; proof copy received; this looks as though it will be the world first, since the British edition, due from Simon & Schuster, has been delayed until 1996.) *November 1995.*

Noon, Jeff. **PolLEN.** Ringpull [Albion Wharf, Albion Street, Manchester M1 5LN], ISBN 1-85702-398-6, 327pp, B-format paperback, cover by Joe Magee, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1995; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone 100*.) *6th November 1995.*

Price, Susan. **Elfgift.** Point Fantasy, ISBN 0-590-13157-5, 256pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Scutt, £3.99. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first edition.) *18th August 1995.*

Qingyun Wu. **Female Rule in Chinese and English Literary Utopias.** "Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies." Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-580-5, ix+225pp, trade paperback, £15. (Critical study of utopian sf and fantasy; first published in the USA, 1995; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; the author is evidently Chinese but resides in America; the works she studies range from Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* to Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, but the main interest of her book lies in its treatment, from a feminist perspective, of Chinese utopian

fictions little known in the west.) *States 28th July on the review slip, but received in August 1995.*

Rankin, Robert. **The Garden of Unearthly Delights.** Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-40515-4, 253pp, hardcover, cover by Ian Murray, £14.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition.) 3rd October 1995.

Rankin, Robert. **The Most Amazing Man Who Ever Lived.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14211-5, 318pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ian Murray, £4.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1995; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 98.) 5th October 1995.

Rice, Anne. **Taltos: Lives of the Mayfair Witches.** Arrow, ISBN 0-09-943681-7, 520pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994; third in the series that began with *The Witching Hour* and *Lasher*.) 7th September 1995.

Rusch, Kristine Kathryn. **The Fey: Sacrifice.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-270-3, 550pp, hardcover, cover by David O'Connor, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; Ms Rusch is getting to be almost like C. J. Cherryh or Tanith Lee in her prolificacy; how does she do it, and still find time to edit *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*?; with its small print, this is a big book; another mystery: why do her novels come out all-in-a-rush in the UK, when the last several have still to be published in her home country, the USA?) 21st August 1995.

Shaw, Barclay. **Electric Dreams: The Art of Barclay**

Shaw. Introduction by Harlan Ellison. *Dragon's World/Paper Tiger*, ISBN 1-85028-364-8, 128pp, very large-format paperback, £12.95. (Sf/fantasy art collection, first edition; it contains over 100 colour reproductions.) 14th September 1995.

Smith, L. J. **The Forbidden Game 2: The Chase.** Point Horror, ISBN 0-590-13156-7, 226pp, A-format paperback, £3.50. (Young-adult horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994; the author's full name is Lisa Jane Smith, and she is American.) September 1995.

Tilley, Patrick. **Star Wartz: Tales of Adventure from the Rimworld.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-319-0, 409pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Warner, £15.99. (Humorous sf novel, first edition.) 10th August 1995.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **The Hobbit, or There and Back Again.** Illustrated by the author. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10328-8, 272pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1937; a "Note on the Text," signed by one Douglas A. Anderson and dated December 1994, tells us that this new edition "contains a number of further corrections of misprints and errors"; apart from a couple of picture books, this is the first Tolkien title we have received for review from HarperCollins since 1991; alas, they did not send us such recent new titles in the "History of Middle-earth" series as *Sauron Defeated*, *Morgoth's Ring* and *The War of the Jewels*; probably that

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oversight was due to the fact that they had set up a special Tolkien division in 1991 [a sure way to keep your books secret from the world] — but said division is likely to have been scrapped in HarperCollins's recent staff purge and reorganization; so, welcome back to the fantasy field, Professor Tolkien!) 4th September 1995.

Verne, Jules. **From the Earth to the Moon.** "The book that inspired Space Mountain, Disneyland, Paris." Introduction by Felicity Goodall. Alan Sutton, ISBN 0-7509-1092-5, 128pp, large-format paperback, cover by David A. Hardy, £7.99. (Sf novel, first published in France, 1865; we're not told whose English translation this is, but it's evidently abridged and here repackaged, with astronomical colour plates and Disney promotional illustrations, as a tie-in to the "Space Mountain" funfair ride.) 31st August 1995.

Weis, Margaret, and Don Perrin. **The Knights of the Black Earth.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06060-3, 383pp, hardcover, cover by Les Edwards, £15.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; the first in a new sequence, it appears to be a work of sub-Star Wars space-operatics set in the universe of Weis's earlier "Star of the Guardians" series.) 31st August 1995.

Wells, H. G. **The Science Fiction, Volume 1: The Time Machine, The Island of Doctor Moreau, The War of the Worlds, The First Men**

in the Moon. Dent, ISBN 0-460-87732-1, 474pp, hardcover, cover by Cyril Power, £15.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; the four novels were first published separately in 1895, 1896, 1898 and 1901.) 18th September 1995.

Williams, Sean, and Shane Dix. **The Unknown Soldier: Book One of the Cogal.** Aphelion [PO Box 619, North Adelaide, S.A. 5006, Australia], ISBN 1-875346-11-2, 361pp, B-format paperback, cover by Tim Ide, A\$14.95 [\$10 USA; £5 UK]. (Sf novel, first edition; Sean Williams [born 1967] and Shane Dix [born 1960] are new Australian writers.) No date shown: received in August 1995.

Williams, Walter Jon. **Metropolitan.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648023-3, 376pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 11th September 1995.

Wingrove, David. **Days of Bitter Strength: Chung Kuo, Book Seven.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-450-56417-7, xxi+457pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Harrison, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; this is the second-to-last novel in the series: the final volume, announced as *The Marriage of the Living Dark*, is scheduled for 1996.) 21st September 1995.

Wingrove, David. **White Moon, Red Dragon: Chung Kuo, Book Six.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-63971-7, xxv+629pp, A-format paperback, cover by Tim White, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1994; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 93.) 21st September 1995.

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and share-crops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.

Baxter, Stephen. **The Time Ships.** Illustrated by Les Edwards. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648012-8, 629pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, sequel by another hand to H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*; first published in 1995; the title is given as *Time Ships* on the title page, but that's wrong — there should be a definite article; Arthur C. Clarke has described this as "the most outstanding work of imaginative fiction since Stapledon's *Last and First Men*,"

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which must be the most astonishing praise ever heaped on any younger British sf writer's head; certainly, the book is fine sf, and perhaps the best "sequel by another hand" anyone has ever written; reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 95.) 11th September 1995.

Bischoff, David. **The Deity-Father.** "Gerry Anderson's *Space Precinct*." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648216-3, 289pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 11th September 1995.

DeWeese, Gene. **Into the Nebula.** "Star Trek: The Next Generation, #36." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-89453-6, 274pp, A-format paperback, £4.50 (?). (Sf TV-

series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American first edition of July 1995 which presumably will appear with a British price sticker [the copy we've been sent doesn't have one].) No date shown: received in August 1995.

Haldeman, Joe. **World Without End.** "Star Trek Adventures, 12." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-538-5, 150pp, A-format paperback, cover by Alistair Pearson, £4.50. (Sf television-and-film-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1979.) Late entry: 20th July publication, received in August 1995.

Holdstock, Robert. **The Emerald Forest.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-648014-4, 253pp, A-format

paperback, £4.99. (Near-fantasy film novelization, first published in 1985; it's described as "developed from the script by Rospo Pallenberg" for the film directed by John Boorman; this is one of the rare examples of a movie novelization which has been accepted into its author's canon.) 21st August 1995.

Rigelsford, Adrian. **Terry Nation's Blake's 7.** "A complete guide to the adventures of the crew of the *Liberator*, and the making of a TV science fiction classic." Introduction by Terry Nation. Bantam, ISBN 0-7522-0891-8, 95pp, very large-format paperback, £9.99. (Copiously illustrated guide to the sf television series, first edition; according to the cover and spine, the title is *The Making of Terry Nation's Blake's 7*, but it doesn't say that on the title page.) 17th August 1995.

X-FILES FANZINE. £1.50 plus 2nd-class stamp, from D. Powis, 38 Camrose Walk, Cwmbran, Gwent NP44 4NN.

BASICALLY INSANE? Then why not read our collection of SF/fantasy/horror stories? It will only cost you £1.50. Please send cheques (payable to B.I.W.G.) to: 48 St David's Crescent, Newport, Gwent NP9 3AW.

"QUITE BEAUTIFULLY PRODUCED AND ILLUSTRATED ... the production values are stunningly good ... puts many professionally produced magazines to shame." So says *Matrix* of Paul Beardsley's *Substance* magazine. Issue 3 now available, featuring Stephen Baxter, Molly Brown, David Pringle, Peter Garratt. £2.50 for a single copy, £9 for a four-issue subscription, payable to Neville Barnes at 65 Conbar Avenue, Rustington, West Sussex BN16 3LZ.

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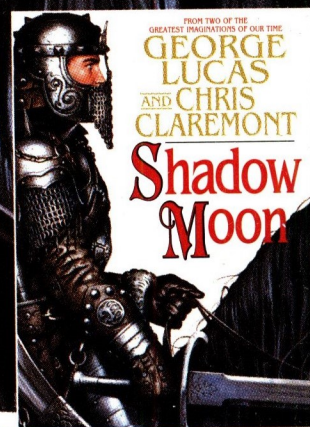
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