

JANUARY 1996



inter**Z**one

£2.75

103

New stories by

Barrington J. Bayley

Ian Watson

John Brunner

Darrell Schweitzer

Cherry Wilder

Paul Di Filippo

Reviews by

Thomas M. Disch

Gwyneth Jones

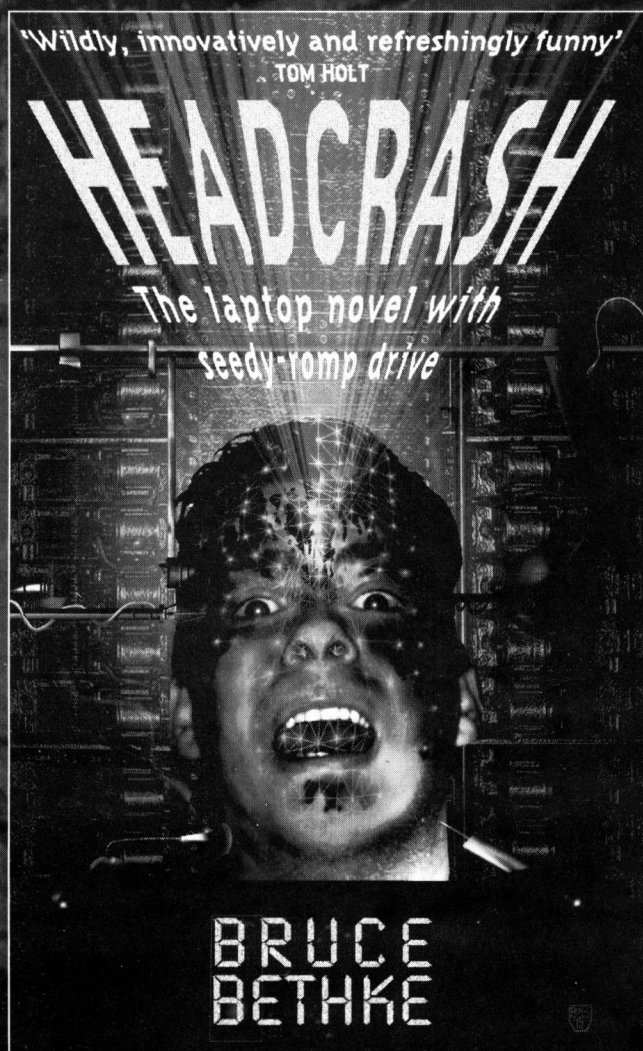
and others

**HUGO AWARD
WINNER**



* BRAINDUMP * BRAINDUMP * BRAINDUMP * BRAINDUMP *

'Watch out Bruce Sterling, William Gibson and John Shirley.
Here comes Bruce Bethke. And he's got a chainsaw'
Joel Rosenberg



HEADCRAASH is approaching ...

Don't get caught with your systems down

C:\BETHKE> RUN DOS, RUN! [ENTER]

Bad command or file name

C:\BETHKE> Jack Burroughs is a man more accustomed to saving documents than saving his skin. The Information Superhighway may be a busy place, but, as any Junior Assistant Software Engineer for Monolithic Diversified Enterprises (Building 305) will tell you, it's not easy getting out of the bicycle lane. For Jack Burroughs, however, things are about to change. [ENTER]

Bad command or file name

C:\BETHKE> Before you can say 'relational database', Jack finds himself caught in a tangled cyberweb of corporate double-dealing and virtual espionage. And when he's forced to put his life on-line, it soon becomes apparent that his grip on (virtual) reality is by no means secure. [ENTER]



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 size. Persons overseas please send a
 disposable manuscript (marked as
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interZone

January 1996

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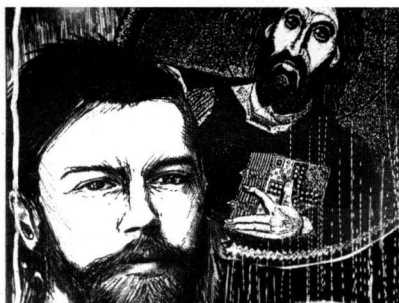
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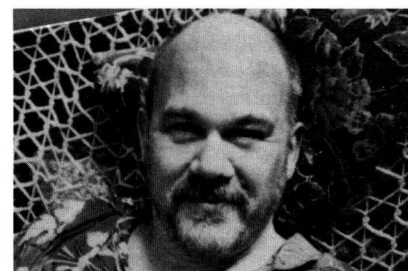
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Interface

This issue we bring you, at short notice, a story by the late **John Brunner**, "The Drummer and the Skins." Our normal interview feature has been held over in order to accommodate this fantasy tale which, with its idealism, its political anger and its enthusiasm for jazz music, we thought would make a fitting tribute to John – an author whom, alas, we were unable to publish in his lifetime. In addition, we hope to bring you an essay on his work at some future date.

We're also pleased to welcome back **Tom Disch** and **Gwyneth Jones** as occasional non-fiction contributors. In fact, Tom made his return in the last issue, number 102, but because his piece there was a last-minute rush

addition, buried in the book-review section, we omitted to add his distinguished name to the contents page or to the cover. Apologies for that, and we hope we've made up for it this time.

Interzone 1995 Popularity Poll

This is the January 1996 issue, mailed in December 1995. As before, we'd be grateful if readers could bend their minds, over the coming weeks, to rating the past year's stories, articles and illustrations. Let us know your thoughts on the contents of issues 91 to 102 inclusive (no need to wait until you've read the present issue, as it will count towards *next* year's poll).

We'd appreciate it if readers (especially those who are renewing their subscriptions) could send us answers to the following questions. Just write or type your replies on any piece of paper and send them to us before the deadline of **1st March 1996**. We'll report the results later in the spring. Any further comments about the mag-

azine, suggestions for further improvements, etc., would also be most welcome.

- 1) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 91-102 inclusive (i.e. those with a 1995 cover date) did you particularly like?
- 2) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 91-102 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?
- 3) Which artists' illustrations (including covers) in *Interzone* issues 91-102 inclusive did you particularly like?
- 4) Which artists' illustrations (including covers) in *Interzone* issues 91-102 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?
- 5) Which non-fiction items in *Interzone* issues 91-102 inclusive did you particularly like?
- 6) Which non-fiction items in *Interzone* issues 91-102 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?

Dear Editors:

I'd like to comment, very belatedly, on the John Brunner interview in issue 97. By an ironic coincidence I received in the same day's mail a review copy of a *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* novel by Robert Sheckley. I am sure Sheckley needed the money, but it saddens a lot of us to see him reduced to such straits. I wonder how many of the readers of that book know that this is a genuinely important writer, whose distinguished career stretches back to well before most of them were born. Are any of Sheckley's other books in print?

With this kind of publishing climate, no wonder Brunner sounds depressed. I'm sure he too could write *Star Trek* novels. He'd probably rather sell apples on the street-corner first, though of course I can't speak for him. I am happy to see that he is at least producing a lot of fine short fiction. There remains far more freedom in the short-story market than in the book market. I think what we're already seeing is a renaissance of the sf short story, brought about by some of the most experienced and talented figures in our field, former mid-list to upper-midlist writers, who now fall into the category of (it is necessary to coin a new term here) ex-novelist. They're just as good as ever. They have written classics. They can no longer sell their work at book length.

The reason is simply that the accountants aren't interested in novels, they're interested in the upward trajectory of the writer's career. A new writer has an advantage over an established one, in that there is no line on a graph showing how his books sell. The publisher hopes that the second book will sell better than



Interaction

the first, the third better than the second, etc. In other words, they're investing in the upward sales curve. A writer about 60, who has been publishing for 35 or so years, may not have an upward curve, but instead a flat (or even descending) line. The accountants don't want that. The careers of such writers are very hard to restart, particularly if they've been stalled for a while.

Another humiliating recourse would be for the senior writer to use a pseudonym, start over, and lie about his age. Since many of the editors are quite young and inexperienced, it should be possible to find one who can't tell what he or she is getting. But the dignified (and more hopeful) approach is probably just to write as much short fiction as one can. So we the readers depend on magazines like *Interzone* to keep our favourite writers going, when the book publishers have failed.

Darrell Schweitzer
Strafford, Pennsylvania

Editor: The above comments of Darrell Schweitzer's were written just prior to John Brunner's sad death. There are other writers out there, however, for whom Darrell's remarks may be equally pertinent (at least one of them has a story in this very issue of Interzone – as, indeed, does Darrell himself).

Dear Editors:

Congratulations on *IZ* 100! It had the look of a professional, mature, and well-balanced magazine. You have now got most of the elements right – the fiction is readable and interesting, if not always as challenging as it might be (but then I can only cope with so much challenge each issue); the non-fiction is varied and the book reviews comprehensive.

I was grateful for Brian Stableford's piece on Philip K. Dick in *IZ* 101, because I think you do too little on individual authors. And I would like to see some reflective views on past "classics." Did anyone see Michael White's "On the Shelf" article about John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* in the *Sunday Times* (3rd September 1995)?

IZ 100's coverage of British sf magazines since 1970 was an interesting bibliographic service, but I wish for once you had used the space instead to boast about the highlights of *Interzone's* first 100 issues. You really have underplayed your achievement in reaching that number. It is a superb achievement and you really *must* commission an article placing *IZ* in its proper role in the story of British sf. [We had such a piece, by Mike Ashley, in issue 57, marking our first ten years – Ed.]

Returning to the *Sunday Times*, another issue (10th September 1995) contained a fascinating essay by Douglas Kennedy called "Crime Now Pays." Kennedy's thesis is that mainstream writing has become so rarified that "the thriller has become the true contemporary literature." Kennedy quotes novelist James Ellroy as saying: "let's face it, the best crime fiction is indistinguishable from

the best mainstream fiction – and any time I read that one of my books has somehow managed to ‘transcend the genre,’ I want to punch a wall. As far as I’m concerned, people would much rather read about crime as an ongoing social force than about some depressive woman staring at the cockroaches in her London flat.” A familiar story? Authors like Dickens and Hardy, now considered the classic novelists of the 19th century, told stories that had “narrative force.” Figurative painters did the same for art. Now we have novels no one wants to read and paintings no one wants to look at. When and why did it go wrong?

Douglas Kennedy’s article demonstrates that we still need “narrative force.” It is unfortunate that he did not extend his thesis to cover science fiction. I read and enjoy thrillers, but they are thin fare with limited flavours. Sf’s wider palette better satisfies the palate.

David Pringle was quite right to be upbeat in the editorial of *IZ* 100. There are plenty of good “sf” books around. *Interzone* must continue to find them and bring them to us, whether they emanate from within the genre or not, irrespective of how close they are to what has historically been called “sf.” Anything that is outside the “mundane” will be of interest to *IZ* readers. And, at the risk of being controversial, I suggest *IZ* ceases to try to be comprehensive, and simply ignores genre dross of the “spin-offery” type and formulaic fantasies.

I hope *Interzone* 200, which will only be eight years away, will have succeeded in redefining sf by destroying its genre boundaries – better still, by destroying the genre itself. And that people will as soon read and respect Greg Egan as Elmore Leonard. Good luck for the next 100! I was an *IZ* founder subscriber in 1982 and I hope to make it to 200.

Brian J. Cox
Chichester, W. Sussex

Dear Editors:
Congratulations on your well-deserved Hugo Award. I was most interested in the interview with SMS (*IZ* 100) and rather pleased to see that he does in fact make use of the very sources that I had long suspected. I have always considered *The Strand Magazine* to be a real milestone in page-design terms (as also was *The Windsor Magazine* of the same era). It was nice to see a whole issue of *IZ* given over to one artist. Are you thinking of doing the same thing with any other of your regular art contributors? I thought that the small Moebius-like vignettes on pages 4, 6, 22, 34, 56, 63 and 66 were particularly effective. I know that *IZ* is primarily a magazine for

the written word, but it is gratifying to see an illustrator being treated with the same respect as that given to an author for once.

It seems to me that sf illustration suffers from problems within the sf world similar to the problems sf as a whole suffers in the world at large: it is compartmentalized and categorized (by those who know little or should know better) as being something it can be, but doesn’t have to be.

In writing this can be represented as a type of space western (or the 20th-century version of the prophet Isaiah or simply escapism); in illustration, somehow only the chrome-plated look is considered acceptable. While all of these stereotypes have their place, there is so much more than that to both areas; what could be the cutting edge of both writing and illustration will be blunted if it is allowed to be dominated by these clichés.

However, to some extent, sf illustration is not judged as rigorously as writing. There is a lot of bad art about in the sf field. This is largely because Art Colleges are particularly elitist about taking on students who want to work in fantasy or sf genres; hence many sf artists are self-taught and, as a consequence, technically weak, especially in anatomy and perspective, whatever raw talent they may possess.

Possibly just as responsible are those editors who disregard errors and poor-quality illustration when they would never overlook a plot loophole or scientific impossibility in a written story; maybe deep down they consider visual representation intrinsically inferior to the written word and, therefore, not worth worrying about. This relatively uncritical approach gives little incentive for illustrators to improve or diversify and in today’s fast-moving world of communication represents a distinctly ostrich-like attitude.

Treating artwork seriously also, of course, implies not chopping it around or playing with it without the artist’s permission any more than one would interfere with the content of a story after it had been accepted for publication. A picture is, after all, worth a thousand words. But then maybe I’m a bit biased.

Deirdre Counihan
Brighton

Dear Editors:
Nick Lowe should be ashamed (“Mutant Popcorn,” *IZ* 102). How can the idea behind *Species* be even “modestly original” when Fred Hoyle used it more than 30 years ago in the TV serial and novel *A for Andromeda*?

John Gribbin
Piddinghoe, E. Sussex

Editor’s Note: The following Small Ad appeared in *Interzone* 100.

“WANTED: a time machine, by last week. Contact: SMS, Das Werkhaus, 69 Tremona Rd., Shirley, Southampton SO1 6HS.” Here are two responses received by SMS:

Dear SMS: 14th September 2105
We were there. Where were you?

Miles Metcalfe
Department of Chronic Engineering
Bromley, Kent

Dear Sir: 13th September 1895
My client is currently located in time and space such that she is unable to contact you directly. Consequently she will be engaging my services in the near future in order that I may expedite her requirements in my usual manner, which I believe I may say without undue exaggeration is both punctual and exact.

Therefore, without further preamble (time as it were being of the essence), will you please place the following advertisement in the periodical *Interzone*. Any edition prior to, but excluding, the November 1995 edition will be most satisfactory.

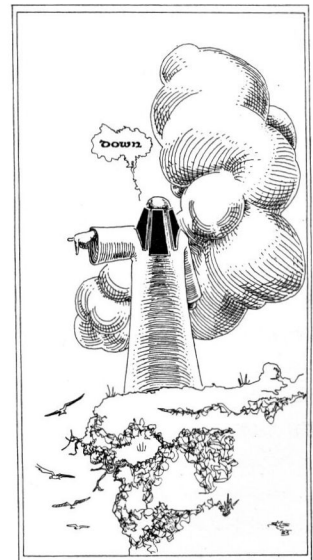
“WANTED: a time machine, by last week.”

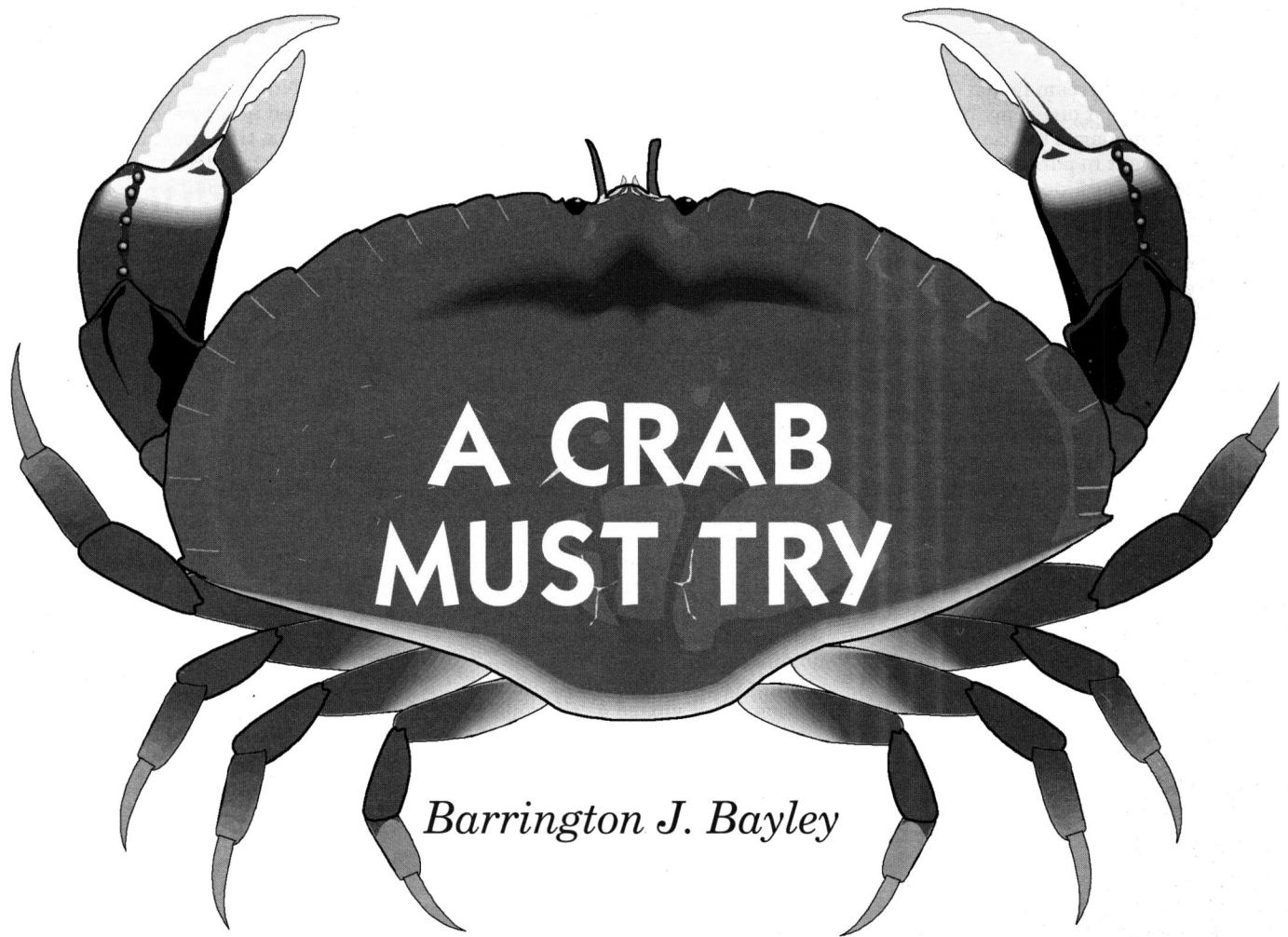
As my client is currently of no fixed abode she will also request that your own business address be used for the furtherance of any correspondence that the advertisement has already generated.

No doubt this letter is already rendered unnecessary by circumstance and everything has come to a conclusion satisfactory to all parties. I do, however, believe that the usual social conventions and formalities should be followed. Where would we be without them? Where indeed...

I am, and will remain, your obedient servant.

Colin Strangely-Brown
Twickenham, Middx.





A CRAB MUST TRY

Barrington J. Bayley

Oh what fun we had that summer! Carousing along the shoreline, munching alkymash from parlour to parlour, splashing in the rockpools. Scrambling underwater. Brawling with other crab gangs.

Chasing femcrabs!

What fun we had, me, Red Shell – our big mate, brave Red Shell! – Soft Nut, Quick Claw, Gimpy with the deformed legs which made him walk oddly, almost facing to the front, and Tiny, even smaller than Gimpy. Tiny would make up for his lack of size by being cocky and jumping about a lot. Red Shell tolerated Tiny, just as he did Gimpy, so the rest of us did too, even though we all knew they could never make it.

Oho! We all knew Red Shell would be the one to make it with a femcrab!

There's so much to remember about that summer. I like to think of the time we took the clifftrain to Highrock, the next town along the coast. The parlours there were all new to us; even the alkymash tasted different. And got you sloshed quicker, too!

We piled out of one of the parlours to find ourselves confronted by a gang of locals. We stopped, staggering and bumping into one another, as they stood high on straightened legs. Typical yobbo threat-poise.

So what, we didn't like the look of them, either. The very smell of them told us they'd been raised in a different nursery from ours. What was really bothering them, of course, was the coquettish way the local femcrabs were skittering by and pausing to prink and Jink. New crabs were in town!

One of them was a big fellow, twice the size of Tiny. He strode forward, grabbed our little friend by one

leg, and lifted him bodily into the air.

"Not much to this one, is there?" he jeered, waving his eyestalks. "Let's pull his legs off."

Another claw came out to seize another of Tiny's legs. It wouldn't have surprised me if he could have torn Tiny apart. Then – CLACK! Red Shell's massive builder's claw came banging down on the big fellow's mandibles, sending him rocking back, dropping Tiny on the flagstones.

That was when we all piled in. Shells banging, claws clacking and pinching. Tiny was jumping up and down, yelling insults – but staying well away from those strong pincers, naturally. One of the local townies was soon on his back, claws waving as he tried to right himself.

It ended as the watch appeared at the end of the promenade, standing like sentinels, swinging their cudgels. The locals must have had a taste of those cudgels before, because they soon scooted, hooting derision.

Which left us standing there surrounded by the femcrabs who had stopped to witness the sport. Oh-oh-oh! We all started to engage in claw-signalling – all that is, except Gimpy and Tiny, who knew it wouldn't be any use and never tried.

Instinctively the femcrabs responded with their barrier signalling. We paired off and the claw movements got briefly complicated. I was aroused! But sloshed, too, and my coordination went. My femcrab ceased signalling suddenly and scuttled off.

So did all the others apart from Red Shell's. He kept going. He always kept going longer than the rest

of us! Her rear claw trembled as though she was about to bring it out. Red Shell was nearly into the second stage of signalling! But he was sloshed, too, and couldn't coordinate his limbs to that degree of complication. He turned to us as she slid away, one claw raised in the "good going" gesture.

The watchcrabs ambled up. "Don't make any more trouble, lads," one warned gruffly.

Who wants to make trouble? Back into the alkymash parlour! By the time we came tumbling out we'd forgotten all about the last clifftrain home. We went sliding and slipping down the rocky slope to the beach and larked about as the sun went down. Then we set off. It took us all night to walk back, clambering over rocks, splashing through tidal pools, and, as the tide came in, striding along the bottom of the sea like zombies. Yes, that was a great day.

When you come up out of the winter caves it's still cold and there's work to be done. Mostly we were allotted to the construction teams, moving along the coastline repairing seafront buildings, replacing the soft porous sea stone where it had crumbled during the freeze. Not Gimpy, of course: he couldn't do that kind of work. He'd spend the spring growing seaweed in the shoals. Keep it up, Gimpy, that's where our booze comes from!

At summer's height the main economic tasks are done and it's holiday time. That's when the alkymash parlours are open day and night and there's no worry about tomorrow. That's when a young crab can enjoy himself going around with his mates supping mash and signalling passing femcrabs.

Though to tell the truth we spent more time in the parlours, where the femcrabs didn't go.

And what would we talk about?

As to that, the subject was obsessional. *What did they look like?* A femcrab's egg-laying tube and – even more forbidden! – her mating vent. None of us had ever seen them, of course, but we gloated endlessly over descriptions claimed to have come from crabs who had.

The other topic of conversation was to boast how far we had got. All of us (except Gimpy and Tiny) claimed to have got to the third stage of signalling, but I don't think any of us had apart from Red Shell. What sustained us was the hope. The dream that some day our signalling would become proficient enough to equal the femcrab's barrier-signalling and proceed to intercourse. It was one of those cruel tricks of nature that femcrab claw-signalling was instinctively elaborate, but a male crab's had to be learned. As soon as you'd attained one level of speed and coordination, the femcrab would smoothly raise her signalling to another.

Out of a thousand male crabs, maybe three or four would succeed in coupling during the course of their lifetimes.

But a crab must try.

One day, as we were lolloping along the promenade, bellies full of alkymash, on our way to an eatery to crunch huge piles of fried whelkshrimps, we saw Droopstalk.

Droopstalk was our old schoolmate, who we hadn't seen since we graduated, very short of qualifications, and went straight into the labour draft. He was scuttling along with eyestalks down as usual, as if unaware of anything around him.

"Droopstalk!"

"Why, er, hello Brown Mantle," he said as he saw me, then gave vague greetings to the others. He was a little embarrassed. They'd always made fun of him at school. He was all right in his way, except he didn't seem interested in real life. Always had his eyestalks stuck into books.

"Thought you'd emigrated! What do you do with yourself these days?"

For answer Droopstalk turned his eyes above. There, on the headland above the town, was the astronomical observatory. It was dome-shaped, and had always looked to me like the carapace of some eminently brainy savant.

"I work up there."

"Oh! You're a scientist."

"Yes, I'm a scientist," Droopstalk said, with his funny mixture of shyness and pride. "It's fascinating work. We investigate the stars and planets."

Tiny started jumping up and down. "Stars and planets! Oho! Me and my pals would rather investigate under a femcrab's shell!"

Quick Claw and Soft Nut crowed their agreement. Poor Droopstalk was never one to enjoy crudity. He waved his claws in real embarrassment, and scuttled away.

Bit of a coincidence, Tiny saying what he said. We went on to the eatery, and stuffed ourselves full of whelkshrimps. Then we went and lounged on the beach for the rest of the afternoon, until deciding it was time to complete our tour of the alkymash parlours in the main street.

We climbed the steps to the promenade. Halfway along I noticed that Tiny wasn't with us. Looking back, I saw him crouched down on a step below the promenade. His eyestalks were peeping over the edge of the flagstone, peering upward.

A femcrab was scuttling slowly past. Tiny was trying to look under her carapace.

It was me who gave him away. Noticing the direction of my gaze, her eyestalks whipped down and spotted him. Uttering a hoot of outrage, she turned and scuttled quickly in the other direction.

Tiny levered himself on to the promenade, the very picture of furtive triumph. He was in a state of excitement as he joined us, spittle forming at his mandibles.

"I glimpsed it, lads! I saw her egg-laying tube! Honest I did! Another moment and I'd have seen her mating vent, I reckon!"

We all began to foam with excitement as we heard this. All, that is, except Red Shell. He stood aloof, holding his four claws in a gesture of dignified disdain.

"You really are a grubby lot," he said deliberately. Suddenly he relaxed, and laughed. "Good for you anyway, Tiny."

Back in the nearest mash-den, we couldn't hold out

for long. We cornered Tiny at the end of the bar.

"What's it look like? Her egg-tube?"

"It's smooth, really smooth, and dark red," Tiny gloated. He gave a conspiratorial little flick of his upper left claw. "It comes straight down from her body, but not very far. And it sort of turns forward at the end."

That was that it was supposed to look like. Tiny could just have been repeating the stories.

The question tormented me. Had he really seen it?

Had he really seen it?

Something else we used to like doing was letting ourselves be overwhelmed by the tidal wave.

It comes once a day, but never at the same time. Droopstalk had once explained that our moon is small, for a moon, and very close. It takes just under a day to make its orbit and comes hurtling across the sky, raising a ripple in the oceans as it passes. Despite the tidebreaks, the tidal wave surges up the beach and crashes against the seawall, then recedes with a big sucking sound, dragging everything with it.

Down on the beach, we would brace ourselves as the wave came in, legs dug into the sand. Then we would let the backsurge carry us on to the sea bed and bump and blunder about there.

After a while your mind alters. In some ways it's like getting drunk on alkymash, in some ways different. The change comes from breathing sea water: it has less oxygen in it than air, so you go into a trance and lurch about laughing, unable to think clearly.

Femcrabs never go into the water. The lower oxygen level renders them incapable of performing the mating deterrence signals properly. A male crab wouldn't be instinctively restrained and could couple with her.

There was a hacking that summer. The condemned crab had lured a female into the water and raped her in the absence of signalling. So there he was on the scaffold, being hacked to pieces. Unfortunately for the femcrab she had to be hacked too. She was now carrying fertilized eggs, and non-consensual procreation is against the law.

The double hacking excited Tiny tremendously. He was very dirty-minded. "It'd be worth it," he muttered that night. "It'd be worth it. She wanted it too, y'know. She was just as guilty."

It's standard male lore, of course, that femcrabs are just as sex-crazed as males and only their instinctive barrier signalling prevents both sexes from getting down to the main business without delay.

Could the femcrab really have gone into the water in cooperation with her rapist? Tiny loved to talk about the reputedly perverted inhabitants of the Sumole Archipelago, half the world away, whose females consent to being half-suffocated so as to inhibit their signalling and make them amenable to mounting. It's said the guilty couple then hide away until the eggs are laid, smashing them as they drop.

"See, they all want to do it, just like we do," Tiny would whisper intensely. "How about it, lads? Let's ask a femcrab..."

"Yeah, ask her, Tiny," Soft Nut urged. "Hoo hoo! Go

on, ask her! Ask that one over there."

We were on our way from one alky den to another. A femcrab with a striped carapace was proceeding along the other side of the street.

"Hello, darlin'!" Soft Nut yelled. "Tiny's got somethin' to ask yer!"

Tiny hid his eyestalks while the stripe-shelled female quickened her pace and made off.

From then on Tiny was mocked unmercifully by all of us.

"There's one over there, Tiny! Go and ask her."

"Ask her to take a dip with you, Tiny!"

"Ask her if you can tape her nostrils over!"

Until, one day, he did.

We were lounging on the beach. The day's tidal wave had come and gone, so it was safe for females to come down from the promenade. Tiny was restless, and was irked by the hammering he'd been given over the past few days. He was skittering about on the edge of the water, trailing his claws in the spume.

She wasn't the prettiest thing you could have seen. Tiny wouldn't have chosen a pretty one. Her claws were a little too large, and her shell pattern was a bit jagged. That's probably why Tiny's maddened brain thought she might be worth trying.

As she scuttled sedately along the wet sand Tiny fell in step with her. Then they both stopped. Tiny made no attempt at signalling. We could only see him talking.

Suddenly she staggered back, claws stretched out in alarm. She gave a hoot that was a loud shriek, then came scabbling wildly up the beach, eyestalks waving and wobbling in all directions. She was obviously in panic, as she ran up the steps and disappeared along the promenade.

Tiny stood still as a statue on the sand. It seemed a long time before he stirred himself and rejoined us.

"What did you say to her?" Quick Claw asked in puzzlement.

"I asked her, that's all," Tiny said in a surly voice. "*I asked her.*"

"Asked her what?"

"I asked her to go into the water with me."

We stared at him in shock.

"Hey, Tiny," I said, "you've gone and done it this time."

Tiny himself seemed shocked by what he had done, or rather, perhaps by the femcrab's reaction. But what else could he expect? He's let his perfervid daydreams carry him too far for once.

As the summer wore on we began to get more frantic in our signalling efforts. That's the usual pattern every summer, but this was a special summer: we were having more of a good time than ever before.

It must have been a bit dull and depressing for Tiny and Gimpy as we rushed up to every femcrab we encountered, claws racing. In earlier years Tiny would have a go at signalling, but he soon gave up. Occasionally a femcrab would respond just a little, but only for a few seconds before turning away. And Gimpy had learned early in life that it was no use trying at all. So they would both stand around while

we went at it, wishing we could all dive into the alkymash parlours like we used to.

While a femcrab is engaged in signalling with you she's showing interest. It's when she drops her claws and turns away you know you've shit it. When you first signal her she responds in defence, countering your signals with more complicated ones of her own. In turn you then have to counter those, getting through her barrier, so to speak, and she moves up to the next level of complication and so on. While it continues it becomes more and more exciting, claws weaving and darting in an intricate dance. In that special summer we were all – except Tiny and Gimpy – improving our skills. Red Shell particularly. He began spending less time with the gang and seemed less interested in cruising the parlours all day long.

He wanted a femcrab!

Gimpy started to sidle up to Quick Claw a lot. One day he said, "Hey, Quick Claw, wouldn't it be a laugh, you know, if you were signalling a bint, and then you slid out of the way and let me slide in. She might not notice straight away. That'd be a laugh, wouldn't it?" he finished eagerly.

"Yeah, that'd be a laugh, all right," Quick Claw answered casually. "She wouldn't be young enough for you, though, would she, Gimpy?"

It was a cutting remark. Gimpy had been known to hang around school gates at leaving time, hoping to entice some immature femcrab whose barrier signalling hadn't been established yet – another hacking offence, but I suppose he just couldn't help himself. A crab must try, and for Gimpy there was no other recourse left.

He and Quick Claw didn't speak for some time after that.

We all admired Red Shell for the speed and precision his signalling was acquiring. He had started stalking one particular femcrab, a vision of beauty whose carapace patterns were just like flowers growing on the clifftop, and whose claws were so clever and deft they made you shiver. He knew when she would be coming along the main street and he would lurk in some doorway to leap out and renew signalling. He got further and further every time, he reckoned.

The magic moment came unexpectedly. It was an hour or two after the tidal wave. We had gone down on to the beach at the far end of the promenade where the rocks were all tumbled over the tide-breaks, and were still wet. We jinked about for a bit, and suddenly there she was, standing tall on the sand and looking out to sea, legs extended delicately. Red Shell lost no time. His claws were already twitching as he advanced towards her. She turned and saw him, and the signalling began.

We watched entranced. Red Shell's signalling was really good by now. He was putting everything he'd got into it. In no time at all he was past the preliminary first stage and her rear claws came out. Then second stage and third stage... how many stages were there? None of us knew, really. It was something we feared to talk about, afraid to reveal our ignorance. We wouldn't have been able to tell, anyway. Both her and Red Shell's claws became a blur as they per-

formed an ever more frantic dance, for what must have been nearly ten minutes.

And then, before our stunned eyestalks, it was over. She thrust her claws forward and held them there in the delirious signal of surrender, and Red Shell stood trembling.

We all knew what happens next. The male turns the femcrab round and she automatically tilts her carapace so he can get his prod into her mating vent. Had it been me, or Quick Claw, or Soft Nut, we would have done it in full view of our pals, hooting with triumph. But not Red Shell. He nudged his newly won mate and steered her out of sight among the rocks.

Eyes agleam, Tiny set off in pursuit until held back by Quick Claw, who seized one of Tiny's legs in his powerful builder's pincer.

"Leave them alone, or Red Shell will tear you to pieces."

So we stood in silence and imagined what was going on a few yards away. Finally we clambered on to the cement promenade and sauntered towards the main street.

Suddenly we were leaping about and yelling to all and sundry.

"Our mate's done it!"

"Red Shell's got a femcrab! He's doing it now!"

"He's our mate, he is!"

In the main street we dived into the nearest alkymash and slurped with abandon. Red Shell came swaggering in an hour later. Looming over us with his legs straightened out and rigid, he stuffed alkymash into his mandibles.

We looked up at him in awe. "What's it like, Red Shell?" Tiny whispered hoarsely.

To that he made no answer, and for a while behaved as though nothing had happened, apart from a new haughtiness in his manner. He offered the usual friendly taunts to Tiny and Gimpy, and gave forth his rough labourer's advice as to how a crab should live.

Early in the evening he gave me and Quick Claw a comradely clack on the carapace.

"Keep it up, lads. I'm off now to do some more fucking."

We saw little of Red Shell after that, and shortly he disappeared altogether, quitting our little gang. A change comes over a crab once he mates. He has no time for his old life. His responsibilities press on him too heavily.

As the sun's zenith crept lower with each passing day our signalling efforts grew ever more manic. No femcrab on the street escaped our predatory claw-jiggling. Sometimes police crabs would stand nearby, cautioning us by their presence not to take things too far.

It wasn't that any of us seriously expected to repeat Red Shell's feat, but the hunt itself was compulsive and exciting. One day I was in delirium, dashing hopelessly from one femcrab to another, when from the near distance there came a huge crashing sound. It was the daily tidal wave dashing itself against the sea wall. In the sky above, the small moon sped beyond the horizon.

At that moment there was a commotion at the end

of the main street. All the crabs of the town seemed to be turning out to see a spectacle that was rolling along the thoroughfare. It was the traditional mating celebration.

And it was Red Shell's! Riding in triumph, high up on the lead float, came Red Shell himself. Behind him, on a slightly lower platform bedecked with coloured seaweeds, lay his delightful mate with her ravishing carapace.

The rest of the procession consisted of seven drays displaying their offspring. Thousands of jiggling little infant crabs.

Good old Red Shell. He and his mate were one of about half a dozen couples who would produce the next generation on this part of the coast. An awesome thought, but that's nature for you. Only a handful of crabs are good enough to reproduce.

"That's our pal Red Shell!" we started telling everybody. "Red Shell's our mate, he is!" We hooted out to our gang leader as the procession came by. "*Red Shell! Red Shell!*"

Red Shell gave us the claws-up sign as he passed.

Thoughtfully we watched him disappear into the crowd.

That was two summers ago, and now this one in its turn is coming to an end. Big slabs of ice are drifting in through the archipelago, sometimes lodging themselves on the shore. The sun is low in the sky. I spend much of my time on the beach now, legs dug into the sand. Last year, even though we didn't have Red Shell with us, we still had fun and chased femcrabs, but not as much so as before. And this year we no longer seem to have the urge.

It's funny how we hardly used to notice the older crabs, sitting on the beach or squatting quietly by themselves at the back of alky parlours. "Poor old bloke-crab," we'd say sometimes, with slight contempt. It hardly occurred to us that before too long that would be us. Poor old bloke-crab.

Sometimes I look at the observatory outlined against the sky above the town. Droopstalk will still be there, his eyestalks stuck to a telescope. Bet he never tried to claw-signal a femcrab in his life. Probably hardly even thought of it, too busy buried in his books. I remember the things that had excited him when we learned them at school, about how ours is one of 19 planets and is fourth from the sun. It's small as planets go. The scientists say its atmosphere is leaking away for lack of gravity. In a hundred million years it will be too thin to maintain the climate and the world will be lifeless.

Unless something can be done about it, of course. Some future race of crabs will have to deal with that. What will it be like, that future race? Not much like me and my pals, I reckon. They'll all be like Droopstalk, heads full of numbers, trying to save the world.

How will they mate, in that case? Droopstalk could no more signal a femcrab to the point of intercourse than could poor Gimpy. You need lusty crabs like Red Shell for that. I start to reminisce, dwelling on my finest moment. I hadn't even been with my pals. For once I'd gone roving on my own, exploring the rocks south of the town. I had splashed out of a salty pool,

climbed up a crevice – and there at the top I saw her, shell dappled blue and green, claws as dainty as could be. She seemed as surprised to see me as I was to see her, and without thinking about it I started to signal. It wasn't like it usually was; my claws seemed to know what to do, inducing her to go into more complicated barrier signalling. I was all atremble, summoning up all my concentration. I'd never got this far before! I kept it up for what must have been at least two minutes before she broke off and scuttled away.

Two minutes! Another six or so and we'd have been coupling, I reckon! To think of it!

The excitement!

The frustration.

I settle myself deeper into the sand with a sigh. Not far away is Quick Claw, also looking out to sea, and beyond him Tiny and Gimpy. I wonder what they are thinking about. It must have been galling for Tiny and Gimpy, I suppose, to spend their time with pals who had *some* chance, however small, of making it one day. That sets me thinking again. Of her. Dappled blue and green, claws weaving an enchanting dance. I think of my prod going into her vent, her claws thrust forward. Prod going into her vent! Prod going into her vent, her claws thrust forward!

Stop thinking about it! It's too much.

It was too much. It's only a kind of itch now. It's funny how it doesn't seem to matter now.

We won't be going into the hibernation caverns this time. We will have expired before the freeze comes, and the sand crawlers will have picked our shells and claws clean. Our exoskeletons will be placed carefully on the cemetery pile inland. Me, Quick Claw, Soft Nut, Tiny and Gimpy, and all the others, male and female. Not Red Shell, of course. There's a special cemetery for parents, called the Reliquary of the Ancestors. Soon the town will be partly populated by Red Shell's children.

The sun's zenith was quite low today. I watch it to sinking to the horizon, painting the sea red. I could make it into the town, sit by myself in an alcove in a parlour and sup a plate of alkymash. But it seems a lot of trouble. I think I'll just lie here, watch the sun go down, and wait to see if it rises again.

Barrington J. Bayley still lives in near Telford, Shropshire, where he continues to turn out his quirky short stories regularly. The above is his 14th for *Interzone*, and one of our favourites to date.



Such Dedication

Ian Watson

It's hard having a famous brother. It's even harder when your brother is the Son of God. You see, on that Christmas day in Bethlehem long ago Mary gave birth to twins – of whom I am the other. This is one of the great hushed-up secrets of history. I myself didn't know until after word of the Crucifixion reached my foster Magus in Persia.

On that original Christmas day I was surplus to requirement, an almighty surprise and embarrassment. Which of the visitors would whisk me away? The well-heeled ones, or the humble ones? Magi, or shepherds?

If the answer was shepherds, how inappropriate it would have been to expose me on a cold hillside. The infanticide solution would have been out of keeping with the joyous occasion. Besides, just imagine my hungry cries attracting... a wolf. Imagine the wolf not eating me but dragging me off to her den to foster. With the Romans occupying Judaea, the legend of Romulus and Remus wasn't exactly unknown.

Or imagine the Wild Boy of Bethlehem, a feral wolf-child, eventually encountering Jesus in the wilderness – and being raised from all fours and endowed with speech... and revealed as His *brother*.

What if the shepherds had passed the baby on to the care of some community of zealots or Essenes? What if one of the simple shepherds had been indiscreet? There were so many would-be Messiahs, most of whom history has conveniently forgotten. Whenever I



Illustrations by Tony Luke

hear about my brother being “tested in the wilderness,” nowadays I imagine that I’m a subscriber to *Which Messiah?* magazine – along the lines of *Which Car?* or *Which Handgun?* There were so many aspiring Saviours. I would have seemed to be a fully authentic claimant in fulfilment of the prophecies.

You may wonder how the magi and the shepherds and my parents could tell which twin was the chosen one. And which should collect the short straw.

My brother preceded me by a couple of minutes (as my foster Magus eventually explained) but there was also a nimbus round His head. Later religious paintings are right in that regard, though they exaggerate considerably. The halo was a birth-caul – the membrane which sometimes covers the head of a newborn child. Evidently the caul was luminous.

The magi thought it wise to feed that membrane to a goat. They didn’t want any future comments along the lines of: son of God, nimbus; superfluous brother, no nimbus. It must have been those shepherds who gossiped about the faint light around my brother’s head, corresponding to the comet which shone in the sky at the time.

Anyway, my brother was to die wretchedly. His followers evangelized, but for several decades it seemed that they might only amount to a minor sect. For me, the salient fact was that physically I grew no older than that day when my foster Magus (elderly, by then) finally told me of my true origin. Could it be that I was the miracle? That this was why I’d been smuggled away to safety in Persia?

Not so, said my foster mage. After years of meditation he had decided that my birth wasn’t exactly an error – but that I was what in modern terms you might call the *control* in the divine experiment. I was the duplicate who didn’t receive the drug of divinity.

Despite the fact that I didn’t age beyond 34, the other magi disagreed that I had any part to play in a divine plan – except to stay *well apart* from it, and to hide my lack of light and my longevity under a bushel. Apparently the role of “control” had already been taken. By Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew. This Jew scorned my brother on His way to Calvary. In angry exasperation my brother told Ahasuerus that he would stay alive as a witness until my brother returned in glory at the end of the world. In those days the end of the world didn’t seem so remote. Indeed, in later centuries I was sometimes to pass myself off as the Wandering Jew if people became suspicious about me. On several occasions this saved me from a worse fate than a beating. No pious Christian would dare try to *kill* Ahasuerus. I never met the actual Wandering Jew.

I tried to adopt a low profile, in keeping with the advice of the Magi. Meanwhile, my brother’s religion triumphed – and became an empire with its own emperors, the popes.

I could recover from beatings quickly. Likewise, from any serious injury. When I once lost a hand to a bandit’s sword, the hand regenerated within three months. Regeneration, and immortality! Some of my brother had obviously rubbed off on me – by accident.

Regeneration may come in useful when I do arrive on the alien world, if some mishap occurs. Obviously I could never have included this feature in my bio as an inducement to chose me as the volunteer for the first star-flight. Sanity is a prime requirement in undertaking this mission which is insane by any ordinary reckoning. To claim immortality for myself would have weeded me out at once.

An *insane* mission? To travel solo to an alien star system with no means of returning home to Earth must seem a bit unhinged. Or else... *utterly heroic*.

Some early navigators set sail with no certainty that there was even a destination to arrive at. I at least can be reasonably sure of arriving at Tau Ceti III! However, the quasi-space field can only translocate a restricted volume of material. This ship, the *Sapiens*, only has room for one person – along with enough rations and water for the twelve and a quarter years of the journey, and exercise equipment, and the generator for translating the *Sapiens* into photons and back again at journey’s end, and liquid air, and enough fuel to land upon the promising third planet, and a small transmitter satellite to release into orbit before I land. There’s only enough available space for one person to travel one way – and a living *person* must indeed travel. The quasi-space effect requires the presence of consciousness within the craft.

Several thousand people applied to become humanity’s hero on this first interstellar voyage – including quite a number of dwarfs. Some of these argued *two for the price of one*. To confine two persons eyeball to eyeball in this ship would have been the height of folly. *Homicidal* folly.

How about the risk of suicide? Hundreds of Japanese applied. No doubt they regarded this one-way journey as a kind of kamikaze mission. Strict psychological profiling screened out anyone with pathological tendencies.

The chosen hero will *not* inevitably die at journey’s end. By very long baseline interferometry, space telescopes have revealed the Earthlike profile of the third world of Tau Ceti. It’s almost the same size as Earth. It orbits mid-way in the habitable zone. In its spectrum there’s oxygen and nitrogen and liquid water, the whole cocktail of a biosphere. There’s a high chance of finding alien vegetation and even creatures, however humble. Just so long as DNA is indeed the optimum code of life and providing that proteins are compatible (rather than wrong-handed) I ought to be able to feed myself adequately. For years after landing I ought to be compiling reports to transmit to the little satellite, to be squirted across the light years.

If favourable, my reports should lead to the sending of several more quasi-space ships, each with a young volunteer host-mother aboard, and a stock of frozen embryos to start up a viable human population. None of these mothers-to-be could possibly join me until almost 30 years after I left Earth. Maybe longer, if Mission Control waited to assess the long term effect on me of any alien micro-organisms (as opposed to my succumbing swiftly!). I pin no hopes on a breakthrough in the physics of the quasi-space effect, permitting bigger ships or faster and cheaper voyages.

The *Sapiens*, and successor ships, is the best chance we'll have of spreading human life to another planetary system so that all our eggs aren't in one basket.

After two millennia (and a bit more) I have acquired a destiny comparable to my brother's! There's a distinct correspondence – even to the matter of the halo. The *Sapiens* and myself are being translated into photons. We seem to be of the same substance as previously, yet actually we are woven of light which encodes us in a holographic fashion.

Why should I worry about alien bugs at journey's end, or about injuries twelve light years away from the nearest medical assistance? Or about raging toothache, four parsecs away from a dental surgery? I'm virtually invulnerable. Not that I intend to act rashly, such as dancing a jig when I land and breaking a leg. Survival through two millennia has taught me discretion.

The main problem for the chosen hero would be the sense of utter isolation.

Why should I worry about solitude? I, who have been the most alone of people! What price a few paltry decades compared with the whole of my brother's era? Time is of a little account to me, who never ages.

As for ordinary human relationships, I forget how many wives I have wedded, how many mistresses I have taken, how many children I have begotten. Some of their distant descendants may in turn have become subsequent mistresses or wives! I'm so accustomed to the rupture of relationships by natural death.

Exactly how many bygone wives? Vagueness inevitably creeps in. Even so, I have 21 centuries of memories to mull over during my mere twelve years of travel – along with a library of data in computer memory. How truly representative of the human race I am, more so than anyone else could possibly be.

Coincidentally, I once spent twelve and a quarter years in a small dungeon in solitary confinement. Unseen hands would slide a tray of food and water through a slot each day. The food was nourishing, though as the years went by the water became increasingly insipid. No voice ever spoke to me. My memories occupied me well enough, back then. I was optimistic that times must change. Faith (of a sort) saw me through. Not faith such as my brother's must have been, but at least an equivalent to faith.

Active faith in my brother, such as millions of people enjoy, could hardly be for me when I must distance myself from his followers for the very sake of their faith, in case discovery of my existence caused confusion.

I could hardly list my really impeccable qualifications in my application. Yet I'd already positioned myself to best advantage. Project *Sapiens* was a decade and a half in the development. Ten years previously, the basic physics was already understood. Such a project was foreseen. During the 21st century I'd gained genuine qualifications in physics and piloting and planetology and such. During the 20th century I'd accumulated money. Plausible false documentation of parentage, schooling, and so on, was merely costly to buy. I went to work for the project in its seventh year – not too early, or I might have seemed long

in the tooth as a possible future candidate.

I suppose my credentials were triple-checked, but my Palestinian background was a definite plus. The nuclear incident of the mid-60s obliterated the chance of checking on me totally. That crime served as a spur to the project too. Nuclear war was still a possibility. The project, mainly funded by Arab and Euro money, was one of faith, you might say. Didn't I hail from a region of three major faiths? Didn't I speak Arabic and Hebrew, as well as fluent English and French?

The psychologist who interviewed shortlisted applicants was a dumpy bespectacled middle-aged Swiss woman by the name of Hildegard Borer. She could both lull a candidate and pierce with her questions.

"Actually," I confided to her, "I'd quite like to be as far away from this world as possible for a while." Oh, the accumulation of events and folk did weigh on me. I must avoid seeming anti-social, yet I mustn't seem at all dependent on other people. I grinned at her. "Rather like a hermit monk, meditating in silence to fulfil a vow."

"Will God alone be with you in the interstellar deeps?" she probed.

"Maybe," I replied, "I shall be extending the range of God. In a minor way," I added lightly. Nothing messianic. Nothing extremist. "Mostly," I murmured, "I'll be extending the range of Humanity. Of consciousness. Once consciousness forges a physical link between our world and Tau Ceti maybe there'll be some unforeseen consequence. I wouldn't put any money on this, though!" Ever the realist.

At the mention of money Frau Borer immediately asked, "What will you do about your unspent salary, accumulating at compound interest?"

Since she was Swiss, I risked a joke. "After I land, maybe I'll set up a bank. You can squirt the money to me."

She eyed me. "You lack any family of your own to assign your assets to."

I shrugged. "The nuclear incident –"
"As I'm well aware. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It frees me from ties. My family," I stated, "is Humanity. I shall set up a trust fund to endow an orphanage in Central Africa. I haven't decided exactly where. It'll be somewhere I've never been – because I'm going where no one has ever been."

This reasoning satisfied her. It was imaginative but it wasn't excessively visionary.

Translated into light am I. Yet consciousness involves duration, the perception of elapsing seconds, minutes, hours, days, years – twelve-and-a-quarter years in all. I'm eight years into the journey. Four more years remain. I have gone far beyond my brother. I have escaped from His orbit.

I inspire myself by calling up on screen (yet again) a sonnet written by the Italian Giordano Bruno. Bruno was burned at the stake for heresy in the year 1600 by my brother's followers. I seem to have forgotten most of the Italian I must once have known, but with the aid of an English gloss in prose at the bottom of the screen I freely translate (ah, as I am translated, into light!):

*And who will give me wings,
And who will warm my heart?
Who'll free me from the fear
Of accident and death?
Who'll snap my chains and burst the gates
Through which few people freely pass?*

*Aeons and years, days and hours,
The daughters and weapons of time –
Those saved me from time's fury.*

*That crystal sphere of the sky
Can't halt my widespread wings.
Through space I hunt infinity,
And other worlds. Once far away,
Soon those are left behind.*

How true, how true. What a remarkable vision of the future which is now the present. Inquisitors tortured and burned Bruno. I can hardly blame my brother, who Himself was tortured to death. Was His passion as prolonged as mine?

Tau Ceti! A sun very like Earth's own sun illuminates a world of blue and white and brown, of sea and cloud and land. Automated guidance and my own adjustments have brought me into orbit. After years of emptiness decorated with tiny motionless starlamps now half of my universe is space and half is world.

One land-mass is shaped like a sperm whale, another like a horse. How Godlike my view is, though I'm not His beloved son.

Might I be so, after all? Upon this new Earth a divine programme may activate within me. My brother was time-bound to first century Palestine by the very nature of his mission. The deity who begot him wasn't bound by time. God might well have perceived a future of interstellar travel (to one neighbouring star at least). God was economical. Two interventions for the price of one! May it be that I am not redundant, but am also God's chosen son? Was I merely held in abeyance all this time?

If so, will alien intelligences necessarily await me down upon the surface of the Whale or the Horse? Ach, I know that I'm not messiah material.

The radio crackles with static, and nothing else. No civilization is broadcasting. (Yet this would also have been true of Earth till a couple of hundred years ago.)

Faced by the challenge of a whole new planet, I feel older as if gravity already tugs at me. Surely I exercised enough en route. Has my inner clock, which paused in Persia long ago, resumed its ticking?

Inspection of my face in one of the few shiny surfaces yields few clues. I see an oval with blurred features. Before departure my whole body was treated with radical depilatory creams, permanently to remove all body hair. I could do without twelve years' growth of hair or the chores of hairdressing, which might have left me looking like a ragged lunatic. Consequently I resemble some imaginary android. A hand, I may once have regrown. But my hair now, never.

Radar scanners and cameras are at work. Images

are being digitized. After a few hundred orbits I will release the satellite. Data will be squirted, along with a preliminary memo about my personal impressions from orbit. Over a decade from now there'll be such rejoicing on Earth – and avid anticipation of my upcoming memos from the surface.

I wasn't asked to report on my state of mind. To do so might open treacherous trapdoors of vertigo at my sheer distance from all other human beings. To announce that I'm actually *His* brother might cast the accuracy of my own reports in doubt, though not of the radar maps nor the photographs.

Six weeks' terrestrial food and water remain. On the planet beneath me surely I shall find manna.

The landing module has come to rest upon a rolling plain fleecy with cotton-like herbage. The nose points downhill into a dip choked by grey fuzz spotted with what might be yellow blossoms or some sort of spore-pod. I think there's swampy water or saturated mud under the fuzz. The module tilts forward and to the right side. The rumpling of the land denies me any distant views.

In the vicinity grow several examples of local trees. Already I think of these as biforks and triforks. Two or three adjacent "trunks" rise from the ground, then fuse into a single column crowned with a canopy of feathery foliage.

Oh the joy of finding life!

After a while I spy pale browsing beasts the size of goats, though with tusks and tufted tails. My landing would have scared them away, but now they have returned and ignore the intrusion. Their hind legs are longer than their front legs so that their bodies slope forward and downward. Snouts to the soil, bums and tails in the air. They root with their tusks and lick with long tongues. Now and then the beasts rear upright, startled, for reasons unknown to me. They bound away on those powerful hind legs, in a toppling-forward motion. But they return again. I surmise that the tufts on the tails, held erect while grazing, are some kind of detector of vibrations which guards them while their heads are down.

Big insects with diaphanous wings glide about, sometimes snatched by swift bat-like creatures, spookily white.

To the rear of the module the crumpled parachutes lie coiled by breezes like great pink afterbirths or discarded linings of the womb from which the module has been born into this new world. I shall remain a while in the womb, although I'm breathing external air – so pure and sweet and heady after twelve years. The percentage of oxygen is higher than on Earth. Do fires periodically sweep across these plains? Do those biforks and triforks stand stiltedly so as to keep their main part out of the flash-flames?

I have a rifle with 500 rounds, with which to hunt those browsing beasts for their meat, if I can digest it.

I compose a memo about my restricted – yet revelatory – view of this planet. Up to the satellite; onward to Earth for vast orbital radio telescopes to detect, eventually.

I haven't stepped outside. But outside comes to me.

Cresting the rise: a dozen dappled quadrupeds. They're considerably larger and fiercer-looking than the browsers. By contrast with browsers these beasts' haunches are low-slung and their front legs rise high. One animal rears and slashes at the air with long claws. The base of the skull and the upper necks of these four-peds are... how can I put it? They are swollen by leathery grey sacks of various sizes. Sacks – or *saddles*, attached by rope? Why should a *neck* be saddled? No fairy-like creature perches upon those saddles. Nor do the ropes reach all the way round in a cinch. They sprawl, as though attached by stickiness or suction.

The four-peds descend with evident purpose. They paw at the parachutes. They gape at the module. They put fierce heads together. Ropes come loose and touch – and I realize that those sacks, those saddles are themselves the riders of the beasts.

Those riders are like octopuses. Some are as big as my chest. Some are no larger than a modest knapsack. They cling to their mounts with short arms which surely invade the nervous systems and brains of the beasts. Through binoculars I'm glimpsing thin tubes which sprout from the parasites' arms into the skulls and necks of their hosts.

The sacks seem to lack eyes – unless the eyes are hooded and closed tight, the better to concentrate upon what the *mounts* are observing with keener eyesight. Does a mouth beneath each parasite draw nourishment from its host's bloodstream?

The parasites confer by touch. Messages must flow from arm to arm – chemical or tactile signals.

There's intention and intelligence in the manoeuvring of the mounts, in the examination of the pink shrouds and the module. A beast steps close to scrutinize this very porthole out of which I peer. Predatory animal eyes examine me, eyes through which a rider must certainly be spying.

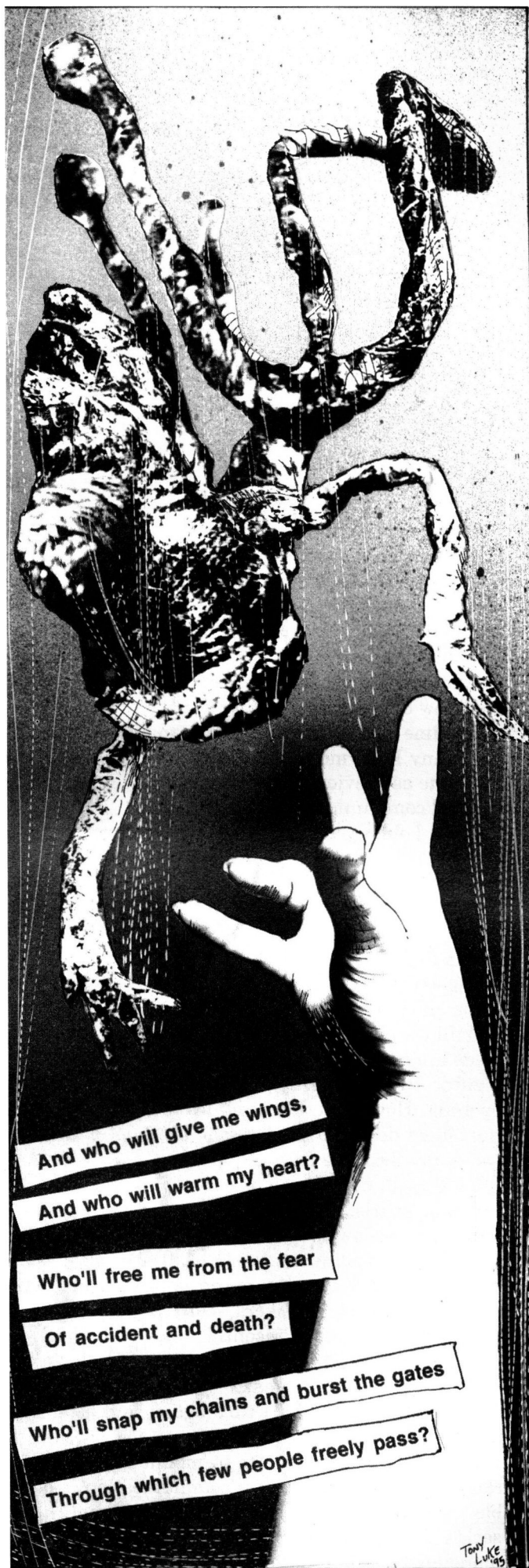
A beast rakes tentatively at the hatch with its claws. It has identified the weak spot in this metal womb of mine. It desists. Mere claws cannot open the hatch.

Other creatures with riders have arrived – huge versions of the browsers. A rider shifts from one to another by slithering across on to a neighbouring back. Almost immediately a predator-animal slaughters the abandoned food-beast by biting through its throat. Three at a time, with no crowding nor snarling, the predators feast.

A herd of food-on-the-hoof is here to supply the fang-armed, claw-armed company of investigators who must have seen my pink parachutes descend from afar and who mounted (literally!) an expedition. These visitors seem prepared for a long stay.

Large relatives of the bat-birds arrive, ridden by little knapsacks. After conferring, they flap away.

There must several species (or castes?) of the parasites, which cooperate mutually. Maybe there are also rival tribes, or minor nations. Predators may serve as warriors to cope with rivalries.



Technology seems absent, perhaps undreamed of. The parasites use the resources of other creatures of land and sky, yet I doubt there can be any equivalent of an ape on this planet. I think there are only animals with paws and hooves and claws.

Some predators scan the sky by night. Three minor moons orbit this world. Can the riders conceive what my module is? Of what it might be made? How it may have descended on silken wings from one of those moons, with a strange sort of parasite inside it, namely myself? Now and then, they reach out their fingerless arms to stroke the module's sides.

A month has passed, and they're still all around me. Soon I must step outside or starve. I mustn't use my rifle even by way of demonstration. I would seem like a monster. I would merely be guaranteeing my death, quite soon. Yet if I'm to be enslaved, I shall be enslaved forever.

I must greet my destiny, as my brother greeted His. Might I seem like a God to the Riders?

Only, perhaps, if they have any concept of Gods.

Maybe a Rider will extract from me the concept of a God, for the first time on this world. If so, I may indeed merely have been in abeyance for the past two thousand years. Now at last I shall come into my own, in a far more bizarre way than my more famous brother could ever have dreamed possible – not that He knew of my existence!

It's time to send a last message to Earth. If there's to be any later message, it may not come from the same *me* as previously. It might be the first extraterrestrial communication.

Shall I finally reveal to Mission Control my true identity, which has sustained me for so long? I think not. Earth can probably only bear one miracle, my discovery of intelligent alien life.

I strip to the waist, as if in readiness for a scourging. The gesture I shall need to make requires a naked spine and bare neck.

(Will the Riders understand that my trousers and boots are artificial additions, akin to my module?)

After twelve and a quarter years, the hatch is opening. How smoothly it glides. Just as smoothly, the ladder descends. The air's mild. Rays of Tau Ceti warm my flesh which is as white as alabaster. As I show myself, none of the host-beasts flinch away. No predator snarls. All is suddenly very still. I scarcely move. I'm a slow motion mime artist. Perhaps this creates a misleading impression – of semi-paralysis! I exhibit myself in this manner for a full minute to the attentive animal onlookers – to those who watch through their eyes. Presently I turn my back on them, and descend the ladder.

My knees feel quite weak.

Down on the ground, I turn again, and bow three times to the spectators.

Yes, I'm inviting a Rider to mount me. How else can communication occur, if communication is possible? Riders confer, arm to arm. Soon a small knapsack, riding pillion on a food-beast, transfers itself to a predator. That predator paces towards me.

The flesh of my neck and the back of my shoulders are numb. My body jigs, out of my control. My legs kick. My arms wave. My hands flex. My head swings from side to side. My Rider is trying out my unfamiliar paces.

Soon I stagger, as my brother staggered under the weight of the cross He must drag.

I sink to my knees. I'm not so supple or strong, after all, despite twelve years of exercise. My muscles have wasted a bit. As a runner I'd be a failure. My limbs remained more supple in that dungeon long ago in the absence of any exercise equipment. Yet my hands, my dextrous hands, my nimble fingers, ah! Those are another matter.

Beasts gaze up at the sky, although no ghosts of moons are visible, only high wispy cirrus clouds streaking the blue. A sign of approaching rain? The land could use it.

Do those gazers speculate that millions more like me may live up in the sky? Have they ever theorized about the possibility of more skilful hosts (though obliged to make do with predators and grazers and bat-birds)?

My brother came to Earth to serve Humanity. Apparently I've come to Tau Ceti III to serve the Riders – as they have never been served before. Unlike my brother, I'll be utterly precious, pampered, guarded by elite predators, reserved for the most special of tasks. For precise manipulation.

I pick up a pebble. I hold it up to my eye. I rotate the stone in my fingers. I pick up a second pebble and tap the two together. Up in the air I toss one pebble up and catch it. I toss the other and catch. Elementary juggling, still on my knees.

This manipulation is a mapping of pathways. Control is ascending up through my mind. Phantom smells assault me. Adrenalin surges, so that my heart races. But now calm engulfs me. Dreamlike imagery intrudes. Memories trigger visions – of the interior of *Sapiens*. I seem to be back inside the vessel in the interstellar gulf. It's as though my arrival at Tau Ceti and my landing here were only a delirium, a hallucination brought about by isolation and deprivation.

I see Planet Earth shrink behind me.

I see thronged human cities – all the artifice of civilization.

I look at Hildegard Borer again. A halo surrounds her face. She's the sole object of my attention. She dominates my field of vision to the exclusion of all else. My surroundings are extinguished. The circumstances are erased. To watch her suspends my awareness. She effaces me. She obliterates all memory of...

... the early life of Nagib Jouanne...

...born in the Lebanon in 2051...

My adopted identity – the latest alias. *What of it?*

How can I be remembering anything of a childhood in the Lebanon in the 2050s and 60s? I never was a child since the time of Emperor Augustus and King Herod!

Yet I'm on a beach playing ball with my little brother. He drowned in the sea. So did my father who tried to rescue him. My mother poisoned herself,

leaving me alone. She loved my father too much.

I play ball with my brother. I toss a pebble up and down. As a little boy, how I yearned to be an astronaut aboard one of the little cities in the sky.

My present name is Nagib, *but I cannot be Nagib.*

Yet I am. My family were Lebanese Christians. We spoke Arabic, Hebrew, French, and English.

How my Rider wriggles within my mind.

Rival Rider already present within my mind, but no match for the parasite. Rival Rider being Hildegarde Borer – pouring into me the big lie to sustain me through twelve years of travel to loneliness.

Immortal. Destined. Unique (except for my more unique brother). Able to survive for centuries. To tolerate the disappearance of everyone I ever knew. Able to endure a dozen years in a dungeon. For my time of freedom will come, my release upon an alien world.

My Rider is calming me, gentling me. Trying to fathom me by being in me, like some puzzling God within. My Rider evolved over millions of years to mount and comprehend other creatures. There's so much more in me to probe and employ.

Will Earth take fright at my preliminary reports of intelligent parasites controlling the other animals on this world? Or will the news about a habitable biosphere be so wonderful as to eclipse all else?

Will I make more reports presently, full of seductive lies about partnership of species? This may not

be such a lie at all... How long will it take my Rider to appreciate concepts such as tool-making and space-travel?

In another decade and a half, the young mothers will depart from Earthspace, sustained by lies. Will their special lie be that most life on the Earth is due to perish when a comet plunges into the Pacific? That these young mothers-to-be carry the sole embryos of survival away to another habitable world?

They'll need to be kids when they set out. Twelve years old... Eleven. Old enough to understand and to be desperately dedicated, and able to study implantation and obstetrics and such – young enough to begin bearing numerous offspring at journey's end whilst still in their 20s, not in their 30s.

When they arrive, will an ageing man greet them, with a knapsack on his back?

Up until that moment, the girls will have been magnificently dedicated.

Soon after that, they'll be motivated anew by the Riders who wait for them. They'll be devoted to breeding as many human babies as they can.

Ian Watson last appeared here with "Ahead!" (issue 95). Author of many books since his famous debut novel, *The Embedding* (1973), he lives with his wife Judy in Northamptonshire.



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The Drummer *and the Skins*

John Brunner

Maybe it was a silly sentimental sort of idea. But when it dawned on me that Tommy Caxton's Solid Six would shortly have been playing together on and off for 30 years I did feel we ought to mark the event in some way.

So I canvassed opinion at our next gig – we still play a dozen dates a year, half of them annual fixtures since way back when, though this was strictly a one-off, or at any rate we hoped so: the wedding of Louie and Cindy Ditton's daughter Kath – and the verdict was in favour. The next question was where. Most of the venues we'd worked at in the early days had undergone a change of use and not a few, including Nick's Cellar at Marble Arch, had been lost to redevelopment. Not that we really wanted to play in a former crypt again...

Fats Hamilton, our drummer, was out of the room when we started on the subject, making room for his next glass of champagne. When he limped back to rejoin us – he has these terrible varicose veins in his right leg, which have more or less made him quit using his hi-hat, though he can still keep the beat moving fine on the bass drum pedal, and the real mouldyfigs would say it's no loss, but I've never been that puristical... Where was I? Oh yes. He was the one who said, "What about the old Watergate, then?"

Bill Sandler, the pianoman, said doubtfully, "I thought that had gone, too."

"Nope!" Fats relit his cigar. He's been under doctor's orders to quit for years but he compromises. He smokes only five a day instead of ten. Unfortunately they're twice the size. "Still there, still a pub."

"How do you know?" chimed in Ed, the bassist.

"You forgotten that's where I met my Cora, rest her soul? Her folks still live in the area. I go back now and then, see my nephews and nieces. Had to take a diversion one time – there was a bomb scare – and all of a sudden I found myself in Watergate Street. And there the pub was right in front of me, only the name had been changed. When I got to my brother-in-law's place I asked why, and they told me it was because of

what happened with President Nixon. The landlord got sick of people making stupid jokes."

"So what's it called now?" demanded Alf Reardon, opening the dribble key of his trombone and blowing through because we were due to play another set. By the look of things we might have to do so without a clarinetist, for Louie was nowhere in sight. But what the hell? It isn't every day you marry off your only daughter.

"Would you believe the Riverside?"

And he gave one of his slow-burning waiting-for-the-doubletake grins.

I'd better explain. The Watergate-as-was had been the home of a jazz club in the early days of the trad revival. We'd guested there occasionally. When the original resident band split up they invited us to take over. Since at that time a club residency was as close as you could get to a secure job, we jumped at it. We changed the name to the Riverside Club and for our signature tune, of course, we used *Down by the Riverside*. It wasn't where we started out, but it was the place we'd played most regularly for the longest time. We clung on until the landlord drank himself into early retirement, by which stage everyone was listening to rock and roll.

Still, we hadn't quit entirely, even though we never had a permanent base again. In fact we'd been bloody lucky compared to some. After three decades we were still able to get together occasionally with our oldest friends, make the kind of music we loved, and on top of that, get paid.

Sometimes, anyway.

So we decided to go ahead. That very evening I phoned up and spoke to the landlord, whose name proved to be Herbie Smithers. He sounded cautiously in favour. He said the old "ballroom" we used to play in was still there, though they hadn't featured music much lately, more strippers and stand-up comics. Those, he said glumly, weren't pulling the punters like they'd used to, so he'd been considering a change and wouldn't mind giving us a slot. When it turned

out he had a vacancy in two months' time on the actual 30th anniversary of our first gig, everyone gave boozy nods and told me to go ahead. Bill said he would design some fliers on his kids' computer, Ed agreed to book ad space in *New Musical Express* and *Time Out* and the local rags, Alf took on the job of contacting survivors who had guested at the Riverside when it was our baby, see if they were free that evening and willing to sit in...

And Fats promised to talk his in-laws into decorating the hall and maybe bringing along some West Indian goodies provided the pub didn't sell its own food in the evening. Everything suddenly seemed like it was really going to happen – especially since, when the following week Bill and I paid a visit to check out the premises, confirm the boss had applied for a late drinks licence, sign the contract and make sure there was a tunable piano, we found the place was better than the old days, not only because it had recently been repainted but also in the sense that there was now a bar in the ballroom itself. When we worked there you had to squeeze along the passage past the toilets to tank up; if you waited for the interval you had to queue for ages, if you didn't you missed some of the music, and either way you probably spilled half your glassful on the way back through bumping into people coming out of the loo. Also the car-park had been enlarged. Now it extended all the way to the actual watergate after which the pub had first been named, a wicket leading to a flight of steps where ferymen used to board and land passengers before London's modern bridges were built. And with the clearance of the docks there was plenty of room to park in nearby streets as well. Mark you, in the old days that wasn't much of a problem. We owned a van. I mean one between us. We'd bought it on £50 shares and did the maintenance ourselves.

Things had changed, and not all of them for the worse. We found ourselves really looking forward to the big event.

Kath's wedding had been in late August, on a fine sunny day conducive to optimism. When the weather turned wintry in October we still felt tolerably cheerful. The word was getting around, and all sorts of people who had gone on to wealth and glory kept phoning or telling their agents to write and say they hoped to drop in. Rock Redstone reminded us his first professional booking had been at the Riverside with the skiffle group the Brotherpluckers, before he went on to two gold discs and eventually platinum. Champ Wellington said it was thanks to visiting the Riverside that he had gone back to the piano after a five-year break and would call by and play boogie-woogie in the interval. Victoria Timms who had given up her brass bass in favour of record production, and indeed supervised our first commercial release, sent apologies – she would be abroad – but she had just found a forgotten boxful of that very 45 in mint condition that we could maybe raffle or auction and where would we like them sent?

Our course, in short, was set fair until the very morning of the anniversary. Then, while I was prac-

tising some tricky home-made riffs I didn't want to leave out of *Snag It*, I had a phone-call from Fats's elder half-brother Errol's widow Leonie. That was something of a surprise. She was a devout Pentecostalist and her husband had been an equally strict Baptist, so they maintained polite but distant relations with Fats – Tom, as they always called him, he sharing by chance both a name and a nickname with the late great Mr Waller – who had taken up a profession that often required him to play past Saturday midnight and thus profane the Lord's Day. Cora, his wife, on the other hand, had been one of the jolliest and least inhibited people I ever met. No wonder that, even though most of his tangled web of relatives and connections lived virtually within walking distance of one another and the Watergate – I mean the Riverside – it had been his in-laws Fats had appealed to.

Sensing something amiss even before I'd heard more than the name of my caller, I waited.

"You been down Watergate Street lately?" Leonie demanded.

"Well – uh – not since checking out the arrangements for our concert."

"Then I strongly recommend you do that small thing." She spoke a weird blend of Island-talk, formal English and American, having studied briefly at a black college in the States.

And before I could extract further details she rang off.

I tried to reach Fats. He wasn't home. I tried Louie. Nor was he. In the end, because there had been a worrying shadow of malice in Leonie's voice, I caught a tube to the station nearest Watergate Street. It was the sort of area where businesses don't shut at noon on Saturday or even on Sunday and there were street-markets, so it would have been hard to find a parking-place despite redevelopment.

And the moment I emerged from underground, I realized what Leonie meant. The National Patriotic League had been by – or, to describe them more accurately, a gang of racist thugs who disgrace the name of Britain by their very existence. On every blank wall, their hateful pseudo-Nazi monogram. On half the doors, presumably those of houses occupied by people with the wrong colour skin, threats against "wogs" and "coons" and "yids." On the roadway at the corner, shattered glass from a newsagents' shop run by a family called Nandy (the name was still on the signboard over the door that also advertised cigarettes) who were miserably nailing boards across what had been their windows.

Across the road half a dozen louts in imitation combat gear and steel-capped boots slouched against a wall: so-called skins, short for skinhead, because they think it smart to imitate – not that they know it – the cropped hair inflicted on prisoners and army recruits to clean louse-eggs from their scalps. Literal nitwits, in other words. Two of them had swastikas clipped into what stubble remained. Two more had the motto from an SS dagger tattooed on their forearms: BLOOD AND HONOUR. They were grinning.

I wasn't old enough to serve in World War II, but I did have to endure two years' National Service in the army, and I swear I didn't go through it to make the

future safe for walking arseholes like that lot, the kind who don't even think with their balls because they haven't got any. For a moment I felt like telling them so. Loudly.

Yet...

In Mezz Mezzrow's autobiography *Really the Blues* he describes how he felt, the morning after he premiered an interracial swing band in New York, when he returned to the theatre to find swastikas scrawled all over the lobby. I had never felt like that until now. But thanks to Mezz, the only white man I ever heard of who applied to have his race officially changed to "coloured", I knew how I ought to react.

I was boiling, blazing, smashing furious. Yet I must not descend to their level.

I mustn't give in.

From behind me, wheezily: "Was it Leonie that told you?"

Even without mention of the name I'd have known who the speaker was before I turned round. His cigars have taken their toll of Fats Hamilton's throat and lungs the way obesity has of his legs. (We didn't wish his nickname on him; he was already answering to it when he signed with the band, and hinted that he had acquired it at school.)

Not waiting for a reply, he went on, "She's gone kind of crazy since Errol died. Calls London 'Babylon' like the Rastas do. I could believe she tipped off the fascists to spoil our date, help save my soul before it's too late.... So what do we do?"

"We go back," I said, "to the Watergate – I mean the Riverside – and we have a heart-to-heart with Mr Herbie Smithers."

Who was most reluctant to discuss the matter. It was only when he realized his wife – we'd been introduced to her as Norah, a little redheaded spitfire of an Irishwoman – was on our side that he consented to talk to us.

Or more exactly, mutter.

It turned out that over the past few weeks the fascists had been targeting by turns each of the pubs in this area that served blacks and Asians. Their HQ was a so-called bookshop a mile away, its windows sheathed with iron and surveillance cameras below the eaves. Talk was that they wanted next to drive the Nandy family out of the shop we had just seen in order to take it over as another "forward base."

Because they had just forced yet another publican to refuse black and brown customers despite the Race Relations Act and they were feeling their oats.

"If you hadn't come here," Smithers said bitterly, "we might have –"

It took me that long to draw the deep breath I needed to react. He didn't mean me, or the band, when he said "If you hadn't come here."

He meant Fats.

"You might have acquired an all-white clientele?" I barked.

"I didn't mean –"

"You did so bloody mean! A pub full of racist traitors? You're welcome to the stinking thugs! But meantime my band has a contract to perform here tonight" – I was warming to my theme – "and among

the guests we're hoping to welcome are Rock Redstone who is proud of singing blacker than most blacks, and Junius 'Champ' Wellington that nobody could mistake for white at a hundred yards on a foggy night, and..."

It wasn't working. Shutters had slammed down inside the guy's head. Steel shutters. Still, with Norah's support I managed to make him acknowledge our promise that we would turn up, on time, and go ahead even if the other half of his fucking pub – this bar that we were standing in – were playing host to a Nuremberg Rally complete with stormtroopers! Moreover he would pay every penny of the sum we had agreed, otherwise he would hear from my lawyers plus those of the Musicians' Union. The union doesn't much care for people like me because we used to back visiting American jazzers in the days when there was still a ban on them appearing in Britain, but I didn't have to tell Smithers about that.

When we marched out Fats's face was practically grey. But he grinned as he clapped me on the shoulder and said he was spending the day with his sister-in-law but would be back this evening. One of his nephews would deliver and set up his drum-kit.

As I watched him hobble away I felt... no, I won't say a premonition. A conviction. My old oppo might well be due to play his last engagement with the Solid Six.

Messages on the answerphone when I reached home made me even more discouraged. The fascists had outdone themselves. They'd exploited their sympathizers on the right-wing trash-sheets to circulate threats about trouble in the area this weekend. Champ's agent apologized that he wouldn't be able to come after all, pleading the need to rehearse for a television show. Rock Redstone's agent Gerry Spinks (who had for a short while represented us too) reported he had an incipient throat infection. And so on.

Picturing Watergate Street the way I remembered it from years ago as the first mists of a winter evening floated up from the Thames and re-created the London of Sherlock Holmes and Fu Manchu, I found Rock's excuse at least difficult to dispute.

But I felt I ought to warn the rest of the band. I managed to reach Alf and Bill, and they insisted we must go ahead. Moreover they turned out to have hit on an idea I'd overlooked. Alf had located a Chinese restaurant we used to patronize in the old days, more often after the session than before. Then it had been the Red Dragon; now it was the Golden Bowl, but it occupied the same premises, and they had booked a table for an early dinner. They had contacted Fats at his sister-in-law's and he had said he'd do his utmost to show. I felt obliged to do the same, despite the shadow that had been cast over the anniversary celebration I had dreamed of. Instead of driving direct to the restaurant, however, I parked at the pub and went obsessively to check the stage: had the piano really been tuned as promised, had the drum-kit been properly set up, were the mikes connected right?

Which was how come I was the only member of the Solid Six actually at the Riverside when...

You know this gag about how when policemen start looking young you must be growing old? Well, I've been used to that for a long while, and the same with doctors and indeed just about everybody. I'm resigned.

But when Norah called me to meet this particular busy it wasn't the youthfulness of the face under his black-and-white cap-band that affected me. It wasn't his light tenor voice. It wasn't the lack of lines around his mouth or on his forehead. No, what made me feel outright prehistoric was his attitude. You see, I'm old enough to remember when it was an accepted principle that British police protected everybody equally. So...

He was superficially polite, of course. Called me sir. Reading from his official notebook he said, "Mr Caxton, I have bad news about your drummer. He's at High Quay Hospital, in intensive care."

My heart clenched like a fist. Had Fats collapsed on the way to the restaurant? It would hardly have been surprising. However, the cop went on.

"He has a fractured skull. Seems he got involved in a fight. I'm afraid that's all I can tell you. Mrs Smithers says she knows the number of the hospital. Good evening."

Fats? In a fight? I never heard anything so ridiculous! I was about to say so when the guy slapped his notebook shut and turned away with a shrug. It said as plain as words, "I'm glad to be shot of this chore – why the hell should I waste my time on some old nignog?"

In that instant it was clear to me why the local police weren't clearing out the fascists.

They had too much in common.

I don't know how long I sat miserably on a corner of the bandstand, scarcely thinking, just suffering, but the room grew dark because the sun had set and no one had come to switch the lights on. If I was aware of anything it was of the way our celebration risked turning into a total flop.

"Hey, man."

It was a soft deep male voice from very close by. I roused.

"Man, I heard about your drummer. That's bad."

The words emerged from shadow. There would nonetheless have been enough light for me to see the speaker had he been white. Blinking in confusion, I concluded I must be talking to Fats's nephew who had come here to set up his drums.

Though I hadn't realized any of his kin were still so outright African black.

I excavated my voice from the recesses of my throat and croaked agreement. I really didn't know what we were going to do. It's one thing to manage without one of the melody line (we'd played four numbers at Kath's wedding before Louie got his head straight enough to rejoin us) and something else again to lose your drummer. Fats's namesake coped fine without one on the session that produced *Harlem Fuss* and *The Minor Drag* – and then the record company stuck the labels on the wrong sides – but though Bill Sandler is a bloody good piano-player neither he nor I would dare compare him with Waller...

"So you want I should sit in?"

That hit me like the electric shock hit Franken-

stein's monster. I sat up all of a sudden, all of a piece. For a long moment I was at a loss for words. Mistaking my hesitation, the guy said, "I got kind of a different background, sure, but –"

I cut him short, thinking: rock band maybe? Steel band? Reggae, ragga? What the hell! Like Satchmo said, "It's all folk music! I never heard a hoss sing!"

I burst out, "If you can beat four in a bar, or even two, you're hired!"

"Man" – with a hint of annoyance – "I can beat 17-four!"

There was something vaguely familiar about that...

But I didn't have time to figure it out. The guy had moved to the drummer's stool, picked up the sticks, and was trying them for feel and weight: a quick flam on the snare, a paradiddle, a press roll – so far okay – then something that made my spine crawl because it was so *damn'* close to one of the licks Baby Dodds used on *Drum Improvisation Number 1* – then a chitter-chatter on the hi-hat I never heard bettered by anyone except maybe Max Roach or Kloop Clarke – then a sudden unbelievable outburst that made Fats's single tom-tom sound like all six kettledrums of a symphony orchestra despite having a slack head.

The noise stopped. There was an audible frown in the next words. "I better tauten that skin."

I was laughing! It was all going to come right after all!

Then there was commotion. The band arrived, ahead of time because they were worried that neither I nor Fats had shown at the restaurant. When the back door to this ballroom was unlocked there proved to be people waiting outside already, a handful of old fans who recalled our stint here. Diffidently they entered with wives we remembered as pretty girls just out of school, recognizable like ourselves under the mask of years – but barely – and even a few kids, looking resigned but willing to tolerate their parents' foibles just for once so long as it was they who paid... Not a big crowd, but a start. It was after all still early.

Several of these first-comers insisted on shaking us all by the hand, reminding us of forgotten names and/or giving us greetings cards. None of us responded with much enthusiasm. I'd just had time to circulate the bad news about Fats. The boys were gung-ho to delay the show and go visit him until Norah reported that she had rung the hospital, whose number she had by heart because that was where they took the bleeding victims of the after-hours fights too common at pubs round here, and been told he was unconscious, so there was no point.

Resignedly, they unpacked their instruments and warmed them up. It was Bill, though, not having to do anything to the piano except raise the lid, who demanded, "But how the hell are we going to manage without a drummer?"

I said, "We got a volunteer –"

"Who will be back in a minute!" He was heading, apparently, for the gents'.

"Hey!" I bellowed. "You haven't told me your name!"

Well, I wasn't the only one to hear his reply as "Django." I mean, there's no shortage of people who've adopted the same name as Reinhardt the great gypsy

guitarist, the best known nowadays of course being Django Bates who rose to prominence with Loose Tubes.

We didn't have time to pursue the matter, though. Here came, very nervously, three of Fats's young relatives with boxfuls of Caribbean snacks because they had been promised and the makings paid for but under orders to go home at once. As the door opened and closed on their departure you could almost smell the tension blowing in from beyond. On her way back from checking a security floodlight in the car-park, Norah summoned a girl from the main bar and instructed her to lay the food out on a table at the back of the room, but she had to return to serve on the other side, and there was no one else to help. Norah had engaged another barmaid but she was black and had phoned to say she was afraid to leave home tonight. Hastily we agreed not to charge for the eats.

It didn't look as though there were going to be many takers, anyway.

Not, of course, that the small size of the audience would delay us. Jazzers aren't like rock musicians who think nothing of starting a show an hour late. We were ready to go five minutes after the advertised time, which was about when those of the audience who hadn't met for umpteen years stopped swapping news and arguing over who should stand who the first drink, and started looking at the wall clock. That was something else we hadn't had in the old days.

Where, though, was our substitute drummer?

One of the old fans had bought pints all round for the band. I'd sunk a quarter of mine and nearly reached the point of praying that Django's "different background" hadn't been with one of the sort of rock bands I'd just been thinking about, when there was a faint shifting noise from behind me: the sound of a drummer's stool being moved a fraction of an inch to the ideal location, followed by an authoritative *perrumph*. How the guy had reached his place without my noticing I couldn't quite figure out, but by sheer reflex I stomped off our old signature tune *Riverside* instead of the one we'd been using for the past couple of decades, a concoction by me and Bill called *Solid, Caxton*. The others caught on instantly. There was a sudden burst of applause. The doors opened again to admit half a dozen more of our former fans. Result: I found myself going through the motions on that spavined warhorse of a spiritual, mind mostly on the risk that skins might invade from the other bar, for three entire choruses until I lowered the horn to let Louie solo. That was when I realized: this cat Django was all right!

He had been driving us with sticks, giving precisely the right sort of lift to revitalize a tired old number in front of a cold audience. For Louie he had made a flawless transition to brushes, part on the snare and part on the top cymbal, and the clarinet was skimming across the bar-lines with barely a hint of the underlying four-four.

Yet virtually every foot in the room was tapping, and in time.

I glanced over my shoulder. The lighting was none too good and Django was sitting well to the back with the piano on one side and Ed's bass looming on the other, deep in shadow, so I could make out very few

details. He really was extremely dark. When I held up a ringed thumb and forefinger, though, I was rewarded with a flash of gleaming teeth.

Well, that was how we started having a real celebration after all.

As usual, I announced the title of each number, and since they were all old favourites each was greeted with a rattle of clapping. But were they familiar to Django? It didn't seem to matter. After the first few times I didn't even glance a question at him. I only needed to stomp off and every tune swung like sixty. Half an hour into the set people were getting up to dance, out-of-practice middle-aged couples reviving the jive steps that ballet students evolved at the Hundred Club in the days when we were starting out. Bill jerked a thumb at them and stage-whispered something about needing to clear more room for dancers in the second half.

And after the first hour people weren't just clapping. They were shouting; they were whistling; they were hugging one another with delight, even some of the youngsters who at first had looked determined to be bored.

Fats Hamilton was a great guy. He was an experienced and workmanlike drummer. But this kinsman of his was nothing short of a genius.

It had taken me longer than it should have to appreciate the fact. That, I told myself, was because though I'd heard a lot of the real greats like Zutty and Philly Joe and Art Blakey – I always went to concerts featuring the best American jazzers when they were rare and precious – I'd never before had the chance to play in front of one.

This, my God, was chalk and cheese! And no disrespect to Fats. He'd have said the same. At 60 he'd have been asking Django for tips like a teenager.

We had time for one more number before the interval. Really, I felt, we ought to make it a showcase for Django, but I hadn't had time to ask his opinion. I resolved to do so, and give him a big slot all to himself towards the end. So: how to wind up the first session? Should I trot out my personal flagwaver, *Snag It*, or postpone that until later and send people off to the bar with what I could manage of Teddy Buckner's stratospherics from his version with Kid Ory of *Tiger Rag*? The latter was a guaranteed crowd-pleaser and it seemed sensible to attempt it while my lip was still in shape.

I had my heel poised to beat out the fastest tempo I was capable of – it goes at a breakneck pace – when there arose a sudden racket from beyond both the internal and the external doors. There came gasps of alarm from half a dozen throats, followed by a shrill and furious shout from someone who could only be Norah.

And the ballroom lights went out.

There remained plenty to see by, through the windows looking on to the car-park where there were enough people and vehicles coming and going to keep the sensor of the floodlight triggered. A heartbeat later while we were still reacting, not just us in the band but the audience as well, what we had been afraid of happened. From the direction of the main bar, brandishing the mugs from which they had

imbibed the fake courage they needed to embark on one of their "valiant" expeditions against non-white citizens, at least a dozen skins, in khaki sweaters, army surplus combat trousers and Union Jack brassards, forced their way past the unfortunate girl who had volunteered to check that anyone entering from the inward side had a ticket. Norah had warned that some might pretend to have paid already and just been to the toilet. They drew up in a wedge formation and did their best to look threatening, even though their average age must have been under 20.

Crying out in alarm, people scrambled to their feet. I knew in theory what was the proper thing to do – Mezzrow again; he once worked at a club owned by Al Capone. In the early days we might even have been able to strike up the right kind of number.

But we might not have had time anyway.

Barely had we had time to look towards the invaders from inside the building, when the door from the outside was wrenched open. Revealed were the skins I had seen this morning gloating over the plight of the Nandy family. This time, though, they looked infinitely more menacing. They had donned black peaked caps with death's-head insignia and equipped themselves with pickaxe handles and baseball bats.

"Scum!" rasped their leader, and they sneered and advanced into the room.

"Nigger music!" he bellowed, and they spat and hefted their weapons.

"Rule Britannia!" he roared, and –

Tap. Ta-tap-tap.

What?

It happened again, and I caught on. Suddenly I found I was grinning so wide I was apt to split my head. I wagged the valves on my horn and raised it to signal the band.

"Now just a fucking –!"

Bla-blah, bla-bla-blah! I played that in B flat, it being a nice comfortable key for jazz.

Swee swee swee-swee-swee swee! That was Louie. It's not his real name. He adopted it because of Satchmo. But would you rather be called Osbert? And Alf capped it with a series of tremendous grunts right down at the bottom end of his trombone.

Wah-wah, wah... wah!

From which Bill Sandler picked it up.

Tink-a-tink-a-tink, tink-a-tink-a-tink!

By that time we had all gathered our wits and so had most of the audience. It wasn't just the band but a good half of the latter as well that blasted out the final line, unclearly because it was taking a while to remember the words. The second time, though, it was fit to lift the roof: what we thought of these phoney patriots and their misappropriation of a once-proud flag.

"Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves! Britons never never shall be –"

And everybody joined in with a roar, underpinned by as righteous a band as ever collected a second line returning from a New Orleans funeral.

"Marri-ed to a mermai-id at the bottom of the deep blue sea!"

There were people present, the youngsters presumably, who must have never heard that parody before.

There were chuckles. Did you ever realize how powerful a weapon laughter is against bigots? The Solid Six used to support the Aldermaston Marches against nuclear weapons. We saw how the pacifists used to surround pro-Bomb right-wingers and start to grin at what they were shouting... and then giggle... and when they got to chortling the Bomb-lovers would redden and retreat for fear of outright hilarity.

It had never struck me before, but *Rule, Britannia!* makes a damned good basis for jazz improvisation. I cocked my horn towards the ceiling and started decorating the theme with triplets. Alf pumped his slide in traditional tailgate fashion and Louie tossed scraps of the melody on top of the mix.

Our eyes had adapted by now. We could clearly see how the skins were drawing into two clusters, one by each door, nervously lowering their weapons, or the glass tankards they had clearly intended to convert into weapons by smashing them, their bluster and bravado evaporating with every bar of the music.

Django gave the traditional double-thump that military drummers use to signal the end or curtailment of a tune. We ran out the chorus amid a welter of cheers.

But even though we could see better, the room was still dim. And there seemed... It was hard to define. There seemed in some unaccountable way to be more people here than before, and they hadn't entered through the doors.

A word entered my mind. *Coffle*. I couldn't remember where I had learned it, if I ever had, but all of a sudden I had this – this suspicion of what it meant.

I waited. We all did.

Except Django.

Under the dark ceiling, with the noise of London perceptible but distant, he was beating the snare and the tomtom in a rhythm of unbelievable complexity. It hurt my European head to try and follow it.

Something deep and primal was gathering in the air. Something that hung unseen weights around my limbs, that I half-expected to clank as I moved. I found myself thinking of what it must be like to be a slave. Fats's ancestors had been taken as slaves. Django's, too?

On what level that insistent rhythm was communicating, I could not tell. But I knew – somehow I *knew* – that it was saying no.

Now he had added the bass drum. The room felt as though it were about to tilt. As though a monstrous earthquake were about to overwhelm the city. I couldn't figure out how my friends were reacting. I couldn't even look at Django, though I tried with might and main. I could only see what was happening to the skins.

And that was *strange*.

For they were forming into a kind of crazy conga-line.

Each was setting his hand on the shoulder of the one in front. The moment contact was made, they began to writhe their hips. They began to roll their eyes – foam at the mouth – utter animal cries – stamp and yell and curse. Those between them and the outside door hastily made way. They snaked across the floor with faces transformed into masks, that could have been carved in wood.

Or plastic.

The rear exit stood open. They jerked and shuffled

towards it, through it, across the car-park, heading for the watergate. That also stood wide, though normally it was padlocked. We saw them clearly thanks to the floodlight. We saw tall black shadows on the wall behind them. Uncast shadows. Shadows that were not moving the way the skins were. Shadows that simply watched. Silhouettes that suggested short spears and oval ox-hide shields.

Now and then one of them gave a grim approving nod.

The skinheads staggered onward. Some of them began to realize what was in store. They screamed obscenities. Then they screamed in terror.

Finally, as they tumbled into the Thames, they just screamed.

Fainter and fainter, but never losing its impetus, never losing the naked force driving them like a slave-master's whip, the tremendous rolling rhythm of the drums continued until the last of them were out of sight. Only then, in exactly the same moment as the lights came up again, did we hear the police sirens. Not on cars. On launches. Turned out they had been on river patrol waiting for someone rumoured to be landing drugs tonight. They hauled out the shivering and whining fascists and listened with amazement as they babbled about how they'd beaten up a fat old Windy and they'd never have done it if they'd realized he could call on the devil for revenge. Please could they go to prison where they would be safe?

But of course we didn't find out about that until the next day's news, nor that it was one of their mob holding the drugs. In this present moment all other thoughts were driven from our minds as a familiar voice boomed, "Hi, Tommy – Louie – Alf – Ed – I heard about Fats, very sorry – Bill, move over! I promised to provide interval music and the landlady says the interval is overdue!"

And on to the piano-stool plumped Champ Wellington, his left hand already laying down, even before he could get the right one to the keyboard, the solidest boogie bass you could hope to hear outside of an Ammons and Johnson record. People clapped and cheered.

"Your agent told us you weren't coming," I said feebly.

"Remind me to fire the bastard! By the way, Rock's on his way – says he wants to shout a few Joe Turner blues... Is something wrong?"

I could only shake my head, and change the movement to a nod when someone offered me another beer. I needed one. Next second I was being ordered to pose by a photographer from the squarest of the music weeklies, one that normally wouldn't accord space to a trad band even if it went uranium, lured here by Rock and Champ.

We hadn't had our picture in that paper for 25 years.

After that it turned into one hell of a good evening. Rock showed up and caught Champ's eye while he was still taking his coat off in the doorway, so Champ immediately started blasting out *Sent for you Yesterday* – what else? When the interval ended Champ vacated the piano-stool for Bill, moved to the drum-kit (I'd forgotten it was drums he had played before reverting to piano) and they and Rock launched us

into the second set in fine style with *Going to Chicago* and the, repeat the, dirtiest version of *Salty Dog* I ever heard or ever expect to. Eventually I got my chance to show off on *Snag It*, and everybody cheered and whistled, and somebody with more money than sense brought us a jugful of sazeracs on the grounds that we deserved a genuine Louisiana drink, and in the end it was well after midnight when I puffed and wheezed my sore-lipped way through *Riverside* again.

What with one thing and another it was a long while before I remembered who, or possibly what, had made our celebration so successful.

At that point, however, all of a sudden I became very calm.

I thanked everybody, took leave of friends and fans, said I wanted to walk in cool air for a while and clear my head before calling a cab, and waited outside, shivering a little, among the shadows, among the mists that drifted up from the river even now, in what was shortly to become the 21st century. The cars left, one by one until they were all gone. After a prescribed delay the security floodlight switched itself off. I went on waiting until...

A patch of darkness a smidgen darker than the rest was my only clue. Feeling more than a little silly, I cleared my throat and said huskily, "I didn't quite get your name right, did I?"

A chuckle. "I've gone under a good few different names in my time. Don't worry."

"All right. But why?"

Came an audible shrug. "Your friend Fats was a pretty fair drummer."

It took me a while to recover from the implications of that past tense. When I managed it: "And – ?"

"You don't need me to spell out the rest."

"Well... thanks anyway."

I turned towards the darkness, raising my right arm, took my courage in both hands, and dared to wish him good night under his correct name. The Lord of the Drum chuckled again. Slapped palms. Said, "Keep the faith, baby."

And was gone.

You see, I'd realized why he'd told me he could beat 17-four, which was what he'd done to make the skinheads turn themselves into a coffle. (I looked it up. Coffle: a gang of slaves or other captives; by extension a set of linked fetters.) Seventeen-four is the ancient Dahomeyan rhythm of *hun* against *hunpa*, child against mother drum. It speaks power.

And of course he isn't really called Django. Nearly but not really. Though I felt it best to leave the rest of the band with that impression. It could have been discomfiting to tell them Shango Himself had sat in. Also they might not have believed me.

But – wow!

John Brunner died suddenly on 25th August 1995, while visiting Glasgow. The above story was found on his computer's hard disc, in a file dated 21st August (two days before he and his wife departed for Scotland), so it is probably the last piece of fiction he wrote. Thanks to Jane Judd, agent and literary executor for the Brunner estate, and to Paul Barnett, for bringing the story to our attention.

KING FATHER STONE

Darrell Schweitzer

*King Father Stone, under the earth,
swimming in blood to give himself birth.
King Father Stone, under the sky,
gobbled three sons, but won't let them die.*

— Anvastou children's rhyme, recorded in
the notebooks of Sekenre the Illuminator.

Darkness and thunder.

King Hrosan raged in the night, against the rain and wild wind, against his traitorous sons and their armies arrayed before him. He could not allow the battle to end, not now, not like this. But, in the pouring rain as the darkness closed in, the shield-wall broke and the royal troops scattered, streaming from the field into the adjoining woods, pursued by yelling cavalrymen.

Now the slaughter had truly begun, and the night was filled with the frenzy of it, a second storm of death amid the surging elements.

He cursed his sons' names. He shouted, facing into the wind. No one could hear him.

The realization that all was lost hit him like a fatal blow, numbing him at first, even as a wounded soldier is sometimes numbed for a few minutes before the pain comes and his blood pours out.

The king tore off his purple cloak and threw it aside, drew his sword for the last time, and plunged into the oncoming mass of his enemies, striking this way and that, like a swimmer labouring against an impossible tide. In a flash of lightning he saw the mass of struggling men heaving up, washing over him, as 10,000 voices cried out. Trumpets spoke, before the thunder came.

Ahead of him, somewhere, infinitely far away yet almost within reach, swayed the huge, golden standard of one of his sons. He couldn't tell which. Possibly Hrosanian, the eldest, whom the king had once bounced on his knee, whom the king had trained in horsemanship and war, whom the king had discreetly advised in the matter of his first murder.

Or it might have been Hrosantae, or Hroso, or even Delmantine, who was only four years old. It didn't matter. They were all monsters.

He had sired them.

They would tear the Pentarchy of Anvastou to shreds fighting over it.

By the Nine Gods of Righteousness, he cursed them all.

It was time to die.

Something hit him squarely between the shoulders and he sprawled forward. His shield buckled and was torn away. His sword flew from his hand. He rolled over stones, into mud, fumbling for the sword. Someone snatched the crown from his head and he tried to

grab it back, but caught hold of a soldier's belt and was dragged some distance through the mud before the man fell down on top of him, dead.

Incredibly, though, King Hrosan did not die. What followed, he tried to convince himself, must have been a dream.

It felt as if he lay in the earth for a hundred years, raging against his sons, while battle sounds filled his ears. Slowly the torrents of blood and the screaming voices in the wind and the footsteps of countless armies wore away the dirt above him, until he looked out on the night sky again, amazed to see the stars.

He lay on a hillside above a battlefield, and wore the fields and forests like bedclothes. His struggled to rise, to break free, brimming with unslaked rage. The earth shook. Stones tumbled and rolled away.

Far below, barely visible in the darkness and rain, two tiny figures were climbing up the grassy slope toward him.

He closed his eyes, commanding himself to awaken from this dream.

Now he lay under a heap of corpses. One by one the corpses were dragged away, and then someone was tugging at his boots.

He raised his head to see what was happening, and tried to laugh, but only managed a coughing snort. A boy was carefully unlacing the purple boots that only a king may wear.

"Don't steal those, child. They're much too large for you."

The boy looked up. The lightning of the fading storm still flickered in the sky, revealing the field strewn with the dead. Squatting down among them, the robber boy — thin, ragged, and barefoot, no more than 13 or 14 years old — worked at the king's boot-laces.

About the same age as Hroso, the third of Hrosan's despicable princes, who would strip his father's corpse even as this boy did.

Dark eyes gazed up at him from a soft, round face. Lightning flickered once more, then darkness came, and the boy held up a cupped hand. Blue flames burned there, sizzling in the rain.

Not a robber then. A ghoul. Hrosan struggled to get away.

"No, don't," the boy said.

The king wriggled backward through the mud. The boy crawled to follow, holding on to his boot-laces.

"I've come to help you," the boy said. "You don't have to die."

His words were strangely accented, but it was the sense of what he said that made him hard to understand, not his pronunciation.

"What?"

The boy repeated himself.

"This is crazy," said the king. "I am already dead."

The boy shrugged and went on methodically unlacing the king's boots. He pulled off one and tossed it aside, then started working on the other.

"Well, *suppose* you weren't going to die then?" the boy asked. "What would you do?"

Hrosan could not believe he was having this conversation. "I'd take my revenge," he said. "No matter how long it took, I'd rip my damned brats from their stolen thrones and grind them up —"

"In your teeth?"

The king laughed. "All right, in my teeth."

"And would you swallow?"

Lunatics speak thus, the king thought. *To them such details are terribly important. Therefore, let one lunatic say to another:* "No, I would spit them out." He spoke this aloud.

"Ah. So you say. I am not so certain."

Even coming from a lunatic, that made no sense.

The boy threw the other purple boot away. He reached up and pulled the signet ring from Hrosan's finger, tossing that away too. The king was too bewildered to resist.

"If you would achieve your worthy and much yearned-for goal, you must be more than a king, other than a king. Come on. I'll help you. Get up."

Hrosan struggled upright, swaying, his bare feet sinking ankle-deep in mud. He shivered in the wind and rain, coughing. This was all a dream, he told himself again, all some absurdity seeping into his brain as he lay dying. He looked around for his own corpse, but did not see it.

Yet if he were to escape the field alive, from the midst of his enemies, it *would* be a good idea to get rid of every badge of kingship, cloak, crown, ring, purple shoes. That single thread of rationality was more frightening than all the craziness, because it suggested that this might really be happening.

The boy took him by the hand and pulled him along. The boy, too, was shivering.

"What are you, child? What really? Some sort of imp?"

"I am the sorcerer Sekenre and I am not a child."

Hrosan laughed. "If you're a sorcerer, then I'm the master of all the earth. No, you're mad and I am dead."

The boy shrugged. Again, he shivered. "Believe what you want."

They walked on, their feet making sucking sounds in the nearly frigid mud.

"Gods! It's cold!" said Hrosan.

"Flesh must touch, for magic to be true."

This wasn't a dream, Hrosan decided. It was a true vision, such as came to prophets from the gods. It was his task, then, to puzzle out the hidden signs and know the way of destiny.

He walked barefoot in the mud, leaning on Sekenre. Sometimes other stragglers surrounded them in the darkness between the trees. Once, on a forest path, enemy horsemen rode them down, howl-

ing through the silver face-pieces of their helmets like metal demon-statues come furiously alive, cutting down stragglers like sodden stalks. But Sekenre opened his hand. A blue flame danced there, and no one molested them, as if they were invisible.

It seemed that for a time that a dead chiliarch walked beside them, his almost severed head rolling horribly, his shattered neckbones grinding while blood streamed over the sunburst-embossed cuirass of his rank. He spoke not from his mouth but out of the gaping wound in his neck, in that universal language of the dead, which somehow Hrosan understood.

Sekenre joined the dead man in conversation, speaking fluently in that same tongue.

The dead man mourned unfinished lives and catalogued the sorrows of this night, remarking how so much suffering, so many deaths, might gather in one place, swirling like a great storm, and assume its own, miraculous life.

He turned away from Sekenre, his head dangling like a sack slung from his shoulders, and to Hrosan said, "My suffering has not ended, Great King. Know that it continues still."

Hrosan replied angrily, "I don't know what you expect me to do about it." He turned to Sekenre for some reassurance, but the boy merely held a flame in his hand and trudged silently.

Then that part of the vision ended, and it was dawn. The rain had receded into drizzle, and the air was thick with slowly rising mist. The boy led Hrosan up a hillside, stepping over corpses, the both of them slipping and sliding in the mud. They caught hold of the stiffening dead to steady themselves, the both of them trembling, exhausted by the cold, their breath ragged and hoarse; both of them utterly caked in mud from head to foot.

Crows gathered on the battlefield, cawing.

Once in a great while, a wounded soldier cried out.

In the dawning light, Hrosan recognized this place. He saw where the enemy's standard had been. He had been walking in circles all night. He regarded Sekenre, who looked like any other urchin, his eyes wide in his muddy face. He yanked the boy to a halt.

"You had better explain yourself."

"I already have. I, a sorcerer, offer you, formerly a king and in your own estimation a corpse, a chance to become something more than a corpse. Do not question. Merely accept."

"You are hardly a sorcerer, child!" King Hrosan swore an angry oath by the Nine Gods of Righteousness.

"You are hardly righteous." Sekenre opened his hand once more. Fire danced on his scarred palms, but without burning him. "Then again, you are hardly a king any more, and your sons are hardly model princes. Yet they seemed so, outwardly, did they not?"

"All right. All right. I'll do what you want. If only —"

"No *if*. No conditions."

Hrosan thought of his sons and their treachery. His rage swelled up. He ground his teeth. "Yes. Do what

you will.”

Now the vision frayed apart, like a tapestry coming unwoven. Contradictory things happened. He saw Sekenre holding strands of light, twisting them, casting them away. Sekenre got down on his knees and began to dig in the earth with his muddy hands. He bade Hrosan help him, and the two of them dug a shallow grave. Sekenre helped the king into the grave, and covered him over. Hrosan struggled for breath. He felt the mud in his nose and mouth. He was floating under the ground. It seemed that the limp hands of the slain soldiers reached down and brushed across his face as he passed.

And, dreaming in the earth, Hrosan saw himself and Sekenre kneeling on either side of his grave, in mud up to their elbows. The boy said something he couldn't make out.

And he looked down on two tiny figures, from where he lay at the top of the hill. In the dawn's first light he spied Sekenre and Hrosan, standing over the grave, then making their way onward, up the slope.

He in three places at once, observing and dreaming: walking with Sekenre up the slope, kneeling by the grave, and in the grave.

His numbed feet could not find purchase. He fell many times. The earth shook slightly. Stones rolled past.

“Look,” the boy said, pointing.

He looked. Among the massive boulders at the top of the hill, overlooking the battlefield and the forest, a face was revealed, carved there or formed by some impossible freak of nature. He didn't know which. He had no time to consider. He screamed at what he saw.

The face was his own.

It spoke with the voice of thunder. The hillside rippled like a blanket thrown back. Sekenre lost his grip on Hrosan's hand and went tumbling down somewhere out of sight.

The stone face rippled too, and fell down on him, like a tapestry suddenly cut loose.

Hrosan screamed once more, as the great jaws ground him up.

Darkness and thunder.

He lay in the earth, but he did not die. He lay in the earth, having been swallowed by earth, swallowed by stone, swallowed by himself, but still he could not die.

He lay in the earth, listening to the voices of the land, to the rain caressing it, to the wind, to the rivers flowing. Time passed as a dream and he did not dream: his eyes truly opened as a prophet's are opened, seeing all that the earth had hidden, as he lay in the earth.

He spoke with the dead in the language of the dead.

He raged, and the ground shook. He turned in his slumber. City walls fell. Houses folded in upon themselves.

He raged, because he could hear the voices of men, saying, “The old tyrant is gone. Good riddance.” No one mourned the apparent passing of King Hrosan.

No riddance at all, he said, within the earth.

The seasons turned, and in the darkness, in the

depths of winter, Sekenre came to him again, walking barefoot on the snow like a ghost, leaving no footprints, blue flame cupped in his hands.

The boy crouched down, and whispered at the grave of King Hrosan, telling him how his sons had fallen to warring, and now Hrosantae and Hroso had allied themselves against Hrosanian their elder brother and now besieged him in a castle far to the north, high in the mountains, where the marches of Anvastou end in utter desolation and the sun never truly rises.

So Hrosan followed Sekenre for long miles, drifting in the earth beneath his feet, in dreams which were not dreams. Sekenre passed through the besiegers' camp as if invisible. The occasional tent-pole swayed and toppled as Hrosan slid beneath.

The castle gate opened for them. Sentries cried out in alarm and rushed to close it, but no one saw Sekenre pass through. His bare feet moved silently up stone stairs. Hrosan swam in stone, in the stairs and walls and floors, and the castle trembled very slightly. They passed more sentries in the halls, who did not challenge them. They entered the king's chamber.

It was Hrosanian who called himself king now. He wore his father's crown. He had laughed at his brothers, as Sekenre had told the tale, tapping the crown on the edge of a table to show it was a solid thing, not to be divided lest it no longer be a crown, only scraps of metal.

Now Hrosanian wasn't laughing. He sat on a wooden bench before a table, by a fire, his most trusted knights with him, a map spread out on the tabletop. He looked miserable and cold, though wrapped in a bearskin.

The new king and his knights were discussing the battle which must come soon, because the garrison had run out of food.

The room suffused with blue light. Hrosanian looked up.

To Hrosan, this was the truly impossible part: he was not dreaming, but in that room, physically, yet not in the flesh. His body was made of stone, living and naked, carved, ripped from out of the earth, massive and invincible as his hatred. He bellowed as he rushed forward, splintering the table, seizing the knights as they tried to defend their lord and breaking them like wooden toys in his stone hands.

He closed his hands upon his eldest son, upon Hrosanian who called himself king, and he devoured him with his stone mouth, grinding him between stone teeth, while his stone ears reverberated with the sound of screaming.

Once he happened to glimpse Sekenre huddled by the fire, wrapped in the bearskin, shivering from the cold. Then, for an instant, Hrosan stood alone in the room, as the fire burned down. Not even Sekenre was there. Outside, sentries banged on the door and shouted.

Once more King Hrosan lay in the darkness, naked and cold, his body incorruptible and unchanging.

His son Hrosanian lay with him.

"Father, I cannot describe how much I hate you."

"And I hate you."

"You taught me by your example, how to grab what could be mine and *make* it mine. You taught me that a king does what he must and will, and makes the laws afterward, fitting them to himself like a cloak."

"You have learned well, and become a king, and therefore I must hate you endlessly, my son."

The father Hrosan rolled over in the darkness and devoured his son Hrosanian once again, until he felt the other's anguish within his mind. The two of them fused into one, became one being, filled with hatred and with rage, like a storm colliding with another and doubling in strength.

But he was not otherwise changed.

The king's mind filled with memories that were not his, with lusts and fears. But he understood them. They were like enough to his own.

Then he lay in the earth for another year, dreaming, listening to the snows melting, to the rivers swelling in their courses, to the sowers in their fields, to the beasts driven to pasture, and to the tread of soldiers as the armies of Hrosantae and Hroso marched down from the mountains after their inexplicable victory.

That summer, Sekenre appeared in the forum of the Eastern Capital, a ragged, muddy-footed boy with tangled hair. The townspeople ignored him, and chattered on of prices and crops, and of politics: how Hrosantae and Hroso had divided the kingdom and would probably be at war soon. Nobody knew what would become of Delmantine, the youngest son, or of his mother, the old king's second wife, Queen Theodatas. Somebody would probably kill them.

Sekenre sat among the beggars on the steps of the temple of the Nine Righteous Gods, a tiny knife in his hand as he carved a piece of wood. He ignored the passing traffic and did not call out, until at last he had finished his work. Then, without a word, he held up his finished carving for a richly-clad lady to see. It was a delicate bird, lifelike in every detail. When he touched the tail, the wings opened. The lady exclaimed in delight.

"That's very pretty," she said. She took it and gave him a silver coin.

He turned the coin over in his hand after she was gone. The image on it was that of King Hrosan, and the inscription on it celebrated his eternal victory.

On the following day, Sekenre carved a wooden fish with a jointed tail and a mouth that opened and closed.

The day after that, a frog. Then a mouse. Then a tiny man who played a flute. Sekenre showed another lady how to hold the wooden man into the wind to hear the music of the flute.

Then a master carver came to him and examined his latest work, a wooden skull the size of a grape with a hinged jaw and every tooth carefully detailed. "Young man," he said. "You are very talented. Come and be my apprentice. You shall work in my shop."

Sekenre smiled and shrugged his shoulders and went on carving.

"Don't you know," the carver said, "that I am carver to the king? I provide him with sacred images for holy festivals. An apprentice of mine can go very far indeed."

"What king might that be?"

The carver was taken aback. Then he said, slowly, "I can tell that you are a foreigner. Yes, I see it in your face, and I hear it in your voice, certainly. Know, then, that our king is the noble and righteous Hrosantae, second son to the former king, Hrosan."

Sekenre did not ask what had happened to the first son. Instead, he put his knife and the wooden skull away and went with the carver. He dined in the carver's house that evening.

But first the carver's wife insisted Sekenre have a bath. She had her maid fill the tub. Sekenre waited for both women to leave the room, but instead they pulled off his clothes and the maid threw them out the window into the rubbish heap behind the house. Then they shoved him into the tub and scrubbed him with a brush so hard that he yelped.

They paused, clearly disturbed when they saw that he had scars all over his body, as if he had suffered terrible wounds, that the palms of his hands were seared, almost featureless, and part of one of his ears was missing. The maid seemed about to say something, but the carver's wife merely shook her head, made a *tsking* sound, and went on scrubbing.

"Where are you from, Sekenre?" the lady asked.

"From very far away."

"And how old are you?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"And your father and mother?"

"Both dead... My mother, yes, my father, sort of."

"Well, either people are dead or they aren't."

"Sometimes."

She looked at him strangely, then dried him with a towel, while the maid fetched one of the carver's old shirts, which Sekenre could wear as a robe, with the sleeves rolled up. It came down past his knees.

The carver's name was Rogatis, his wife Godfinna. Sekenre became the most brilliant apprentice Rogatis had ever seen. The delicacy of the boy's carving, the detail he could bring out in wood or ivory or even stone, was truly incredible.

"You are already a master," he said. "How did you learn so much?"

"I practised for a long time."

"But, one so young—?"

"I had a long time."

When the summer festival arrived, Rogatis and Sekenre dressed in their finest clothes, Godfinna endlessly fussing to make sure Sekenre was presentable, and the carver and his apprentice carried the products of their labours on special trays, to be offered to the king.

"What sort of man is this king?" Sekenre asked, as he and Rogatis made their way through the crowd, toward the special pavilion which had been set up in the city's forum. There King Hrosantae sat on a golden throne, the temple of the Righteous Gods at his back.

"They say that our lord is a hard man, one who has been forced to do many grim things, but sometimes he sorrows at the memory of what he has done, and his future actions are moderated. More than that... it is not wise to say."

"Ah."

One by one the craftsmen of the town presented their gifts to the king, to be paid, blessed, or driven out by attendants with clubs.

Rogatis knelt before the throne, bowed his head, and offered up his tray. An attendant carried it to the king, who removed the cloth covering and beheld a wooden locust, ten times life size, with jewelled eyes. As he watched, it came alive, stirring. It rubbed its legs together and sang.

"We are pleased," said King Hrosantae, "if a bit puzzled. What does this thing signify?"

"It is hard to explain," said Rogatis, who could not explain it at all, because it was Sekenre's work he was passing off as his own.

"My Lord," said Sekenre, interrupting, then continuing before anyone could hush him for speaking out of turn, "there is no explanation to be had, nor any needed. The thing is merely a marvel, and the delight is in its construction. That delight, then, is conveyed to you."

"You are a bold one," said the king.

A courtier paid Rogatis several gold pieces and ushered him away. Then Sekenre offered up his own tray, speaking again out of turn. "But this, Lord King, has a more obvious and immediate meaning."

The servant carried the tray to the king and the king removed the covering.

He screamed. The stone carving he beheld was the perfect image of his father's face. It opened its eyes, and the eyes were filled with fire, as if a tiny furnace raged within. The thing spoke in a voice he had not heard in a long time outside of his nightmares, saying, "Second of my brats, I come for you."

And it swallowed him, sucking him into its stone mouth as if he were made of smoke, grinding him in its stone jaws.

The wooden tray and the king's crown rattled to the pavement before the throne.

Beneath the earth, old king Hrosan conversed with his second son.

"I truly hate you."

"And I hate you, Father, but I wish it were not so. I reigned long enough to learn that a king is a kind of slave, bound by his throne and his crown as if they were chains, while all men flatter and secretly abuse him. It wasn't worth murdering you."

"Is that supposed to be comforting? Am I supposed to embrace you in a flood of tears and beg your forgiveness even as I offer you mine?"

"I only wish it were so, Father."

Hrosan rolled over in his sleep, in the darkness, and devoured his son once more, and the two of them became one, fusing together, and a new voice awakened in the king's mind, a voice which rebuked Hrosanian, the eldest, who was already there, and filled the king's mind with memories, fears, and

doubts, even with tender memories. Hrosantae returned again and again to the quiet hours as he lay beside his wife and queen, whom he truly loved, and whispered to her that the evil was all passed, that it was no longer necessary for him to be cruel.

"I wish it were so," she had said, and Hrosantae, the second son, and Hrosan, the father, both wept at the memory of that, while Hrosanian, the eldest, scorned them both.

In his unending dream, old Hrosan saw Sekenre before him, swimming in the muddy earth. "Have you had enough?" the boy said. "Is your revenge complete?"

Hrosan did not answer for a long time. He too was like a swimmer, fighting against a tide of memories and sorrows and hesitations that were not his own. He clung to the memory of who he had been, old king Hrosan, father to four sons who had betrayed him and overthrown him in a battle, one night in the rain.

Remembering this, he at last was able to say, "No, my revenge is *not* complete," while that part of him which was Hrosanian laughed mirthlessly and that part which was Hrosantae wept.

"My work isn't complete either," said Sekenre.

"We all know what must be done."

The conspirators met in a vault below the palace in the Western Capital. Gorhinglas, a great lord, spoke for them all.

"We cannot have civil war again. Already, the barbarians press us hard. Nor can we afford a regency, which will only mean weakness and further division. Therefore the child Delmantine and his mother, the former queen Theodatas, *must die*. Our Lord Hroso must sit on the throne *alone*, or we are all done for."

The others nodded in agreement.

"My boy is the key to it," one of them said. "My stepson, Sekenre, an orphan whom I found it useful to adopt. He has become young Delmantine's playmate. He can get us into the right chambers. He can steal keys and open doors. If necessary, he can do the job himself."

All this while the boy Sekenre sat on a stone bench nearby, idly playing with a cup-and-ball. He paused. "Oh yes, Stepfather. I will finish everything for you if you want me to."

Therefore, that same evening, Sekenre went to the carefully-guarded wing of the palace where the queen's chambers were. This was all that remained of her kingdom, the only place where she could feel safe, surrounded by her few loyal followers. King Hroso would never dare storm the place, for fear of the outcry. It was officially given out that he shared the diminished Diarchy of Anvastou equally with his half-brother, Delmantine, and honoured the boy's mother, Theodatas, as if she were his own.

In fact the two were Hroso's prisoners, though he had not figured out how to dispose of them.

His loyal courtiers proposed to solve the problem for him.

So Sekenre went, dressed in an embroidered blue robe, white leggings, and silver slippers, with all the appearance of a prince, for Delmantine had given

him some of his own clothes. The supposed stepson of a minor lord, he was deemed harmless enough. He said he was 14. The young king Delmantine was now 12, fatherless under circumstances best not discussed, for eight years.

Sekenre was the boy's only playmate. The two of them studied together. They shared games and secrets. Sekenre told the most amazing stories, to Delmantine alone, and performed even more amazing tricks, but only if Delmantine swore never to tell his mother.

Further secrets, which Delmantine offered to Sekenre in exchange, included knowledge of numerous sliding panels and hidden passageways, and the possession of a set of keys.

Now Sekenre slipped into one of those passageways, opened a panel, descended a marble spiral staircase fashioned like a writhing serpent, unlocked a door, and admitted Lord Gorhinglas and the twelve other conspirators, including Ouen, his own stepfather, into the crypts below the queen's suite. All of the noblemen carried drawn swords.

"We'll gut him like a sheep," somebody said.

"Don't relish it so. It's a horrible thing we must do," said Lord Ouen.

"But necessary," said Gorhinglas. Turning to Sekenre, he said, "Lead us on, boy. Do not lose your courage and do not think to betray us. There will be a great reward for you when this is done."

Sekenre knew that most likely the reward included being gutted like a sheep, but still he led them among the tombs of kings, past effigies of conquerors who had made Anvastou great. He turned another key. A creaking door swung wide of its own accord, and all of them but Sekenre had to duck their heads as they crowded into a low-ceilinged chamber where unfinished tombs lay open and empty. It was a musty, damp place, with no sign of recent construction, though the carvings were only half finished, and marble chips and abandoned tools lay all about.

"Why have you brought us to *this* accursed place?" Gorhinglas demanded.

Indeed it was accursed, for these tombs had been prepared for the most recent rulers. Here, stretched as if asleep, lay the image of the oldest son, Hrosanian, but the tomb was empty, because Hrosanian's body had never been recovered. And no one had figured out what become of Hrosantae either, for all there had been witnesses, many of whom went mad with fright at the memory of what they had seen. So the second brother's tomb was hardly begun, the image on it no more than a scratched lump, and a sigil was cut into it, to ward off evil.

The conspirators made gestures with their hands, for luck.

Nearby were smooth, unadorned tombs where one day, quite soon it was earnestly hoped, Queen Theodatas and her son Delmantine would rest, without ceremony, hastily buried and forgotten.

"Again I asked you *why* you have brought us here?" said Lord Gorhinglas. He looked angrily at Ouen first, then raised his sword to threaten Sekenre.

"My Lord," the boy said, "Delmantine and I come

here often, to play our games."

"I always knew the brat was unwholesome," one of the assassins said.

"Here especially is our *favourite* place." Sekenre brought them to the tomb of King Hrosan, where a huge stone effigy of the king's face seemed frozen in the middle of a great shout. "This is part of the game." He put his head into the gaping stone mouth, and his voice suddenly came from several directions at once. "You do it. Try it yourself."

Sekenre drew his head out again and turned to Lord Gorhinglas. Several of the assassins eyed the stone face uneasily.

Gorhinglas paced back and forth testily, ducking his head. "I don't have time for stupid games. Now you say that Delmantine will meet you here this night?"

"Yes, Lord, very soon. All you and your friends have to do is hide yourselves and wait. But first, come and look inside here. You must, to understand a very great secret."

Gorhinglas sighed and put his head into the stone mouth.

The stone eyes opened, burning with blue fire.

The other lords screamed as the stone jaws ground to life, as the mouth closed and the headless body of Lord Gorhinglas flopped to the floor, spouting blood like wine from a ruptured skin. It was too late for any of them to escape. The stone face spoke with thunder, stunning them all, pronouncing their individual dooms. The castle shook. Stone and plaster rained down from the vaulted ceiling. The walls came alive, the other crypts bursting open as stone hands reached out to seize each of the twelve.

Then King Hrosan sat up, bursting through the lid of his own tomb, grown hideous huge like a centipede with twelve arms.

He devoured what he had caught.

When Sekenre entered Delmantine's room, the young king rushed to embrace him.

"What's happening? What's going on? Mother is so afraid."

"It's just the earth trembling."

"No, it's more!"

Then Queen Theodatas came in. She embraced both Delmantine and Sekenre. "Righteous Gods protect us! I sent one of my maids to King Hroso, but she couldn't get in. The soldiers were all running around. She heard the king *screaming*, she said. Oh! It is the end of the world!"

"He is not screaming any more," said Sekenre.

Queen Theodatas let go of Sekenre. She looked at him strangely and drew her son away.

"No, I suppose he is not. But how do you know, Sekenre?"

Outside in the corridor, the footsteps of something far heavier than a man thundered nearer and nearer. Guards shouted. Metal clanged on stone. Men screamed.

"*Sekenre!*" the queen shouted. "What do you know?"

He held out his hands to show that they were empty, but they were not empty, and blue flames

danced on his palms. "I only know that this is the end of what began eight years ago."

The queen screamed as the door splintered and the astonishing marble monstrosity which wore her late husband's face clawed its way in. Its lips, chin, and many fingertips were smeared with blood.

Even Sekenre turned away from the sight.

Once more, in a voice like wind and thunder, King Hrosan pronounced inexorable doom. He stepped forward, the floorboards straining beneath his weight.

Sekenre turned back to look, and several things happened at once. Delmantine drew a dagger and stood in front of his mother to protect her. But Queen Theodatas shoved him aside and hurled herself into the monster's arms, shouting, "No, husband! No! He is too young. He is innocent! Take me instead!"

In the frenzy of his rage King Hrosan took her, his stone jaws grinding until his whole face was covered with her blood.

Delmantine shouted something and struck with his dagger. The blade broke. He cried out again, and held up his arm in a useless attempt to shield himself, but then paused and lowered his arm, because the monster did not attack him. Instead, it paced back and forth, turning from side to side, its hands waving chaotically, tears flowing from its stone eyes. It bowed down, hunched beneath the ceiling of the chamber, and the stone face spoke his name, and said something more, in a voice which was his father's and wasn't, in many voices at once. He couldn't make it out.

He thought he heard the word "forgive" before the floorboards snapped and the stone thing crashed into the vaults below.

The young king reeled back from the edge of the broken floor. Sekenre caught hold of him. The two of them struggled, rolling at the edge of the opening. Delmantine held the broken stump of his dagger to Sekenre's throat.

"Don't do that," Sekenre said. "If you kill me, you will become as I am."

Sekenre swam through the earth and whispered in King Hrosan's ear, where he lay turning in the sleep which partook of both death and dream.

Hrosan wept, grinding his teeth. A babble of voices came from his mouth.

"I am a father who devoured his sons. I am a mother who died for her own. I am Gorhinglas. I am Ouen. I am Hrosanian, Hrosantae, and Hroso. I loathe the evil within myself, the thing that I was and have become. Merciful Sekenre, help me. Let this thing end, now. Please."

"It's not so simple, mighty king, is it? You are all those things, all those persons. King Hrosan remembers them, and they remember what Hrosan remembers. All of you are mixed together, like differently coloured paints stirred into a pot. The colour of Theodatas is the colour of genuine love, and that, King Hrosan, is beyond your imagining. Your son Hrosanian was just like you. Hrosantae resembled you much, but he had a conscience. Hroso whimpered like a beaten animal, fouling himself in terror. That, too,

O king."

"End my pain. What can I do?"

"Delmantine still lives. Is your revenge complete? Do you want me to arrange something?"

King Hrosan screamed in his own voice now. Far above, rivers leapt their banks and the stone faces of cliffs broke and tumbled. The skies were filled with fiery portents.

"I just want to die. I want this to be completed at last."

"No, I cannot allow that. It would ruin the project I have undertaken."

Then King Hrosan raged, and called out to the merciful gods. They did not answer.

"As for me," said Sekenre, "I am merely a sorcerer, and not necessarily merciful."

So Sekenre led King Hrosan, in the dream which was more than a dream, walking to and fro in the earth and up and down in it. Hrosan felt the rain falling on him, for the earth was his flesh. He felt the earthquake roiling in his guts. And he felt the entire world, at his feet, spinning among the stars before the gods.

He walked barefoot on an old battlefield, where white bones poked up out of the mud, where ghosts wandered aimlessly like mist. He gathered those ghosts to himself, the chiliarch and all the rest, devouring them one by one, filling himself with the sorrows and longings and memories of 10,000 lives, growing great with pain and remembered joy, with wisdom and foolishness, until among the many voices within him, only one was King Hrosan, whom the others dimly recalled.

And they spoke to him, Hrosanian, Hrosantae, Hroso, and Theodatas, and the slain 10,000, and they told him what he must do.

"We are alike, you and I," Sekenre said, a little later. "To become a sorcerer, you have to murder other sorcerers. Then they fill your head, and you and the others become one, and their secrets are your own. I began as a boy, tricked into murdering my own father, as part of one of *his* schemes, so that he might hide from his enemies in my body. Therefore I became him, and I knew all those others he had murdered, and all those *they* had murdered. We are legion, of countless names. The outward body does not change, but only after a long struggle could I sift out that memory which was the boy Sekenre, and cause the others to whisper the name of Sekenre within me, until their whispering becomes a great harmony, and I became again, at least in part, that boy who was Sekenre, who was both brave and afraid, and who killed his father and was swallowed by him."

"I am not sure who King Hrosan is any more."

"Let him be known as the Fortunate One, for he has one advantage a mere sorcerer does not."

"What is that?"

"He can disgorge what he has swallowed."

In a dreaming time which is forever and no time at all, King Hrosan walked barefoot on the surface of

the River of the Dead, with 10,000 restless ghosts in his mind and in his belly. Sekenre walked with him a little way, but then turned back, and Hrosan continued on his own.

The dark water rippled out from his feet. The crocodile-headed *evatim*, the messengers of the Death God, hissed at his passage, but did not molest him.

He passed from the country of dream into the country of true death, which lies in the belly of the Devouring God, Surat-Hemad, whose mouth is the night sky, whose teeth are the stars. There, in the land of the dead, kneeling in the holy mud by the bank of the river, Hrosan disgorged his sons, his wife, the chiliarch, and the 10,000, laying them to rest, to be unmade.

But when he returned from out of the god's mouth, he retained those voices and memories inside his mind, like echoes, for all he had laid them to rest.

Sekenre waited for him on the river's bank.

He spoke to the boy in the language of the dead. "Do you understand, truly, why you have done these things?"

"We are so alike. I thought that in you I would find the answer to myself."

Hrosan shook his head sadly. "We are not alike at all."

Sekenre wept. "I feared it would be so."

"But you do not regret what you have done."

Very softly, the boy replied, "No."

"Thank you, Sekenre."

The boy made a gesture with his hand, to acknowledge the presence of holiness. Then he took the king by the hand and led him up out of the earth.

In the dreaming time, this took almost forever. In waking time, a single night had passed, and just before dawn Sekenre saw the king walking in the sky, behind the stars, in the company of the gods. The Righteous Nine were there, and many more, gods and goddesses, some with the heads of animals, one with a face formed all of flowers, some who were winged.

Sekenre covered his eyes, because it was not meet that a sorcerer, who is unclean, should look upon the gods.

That morning he sat alone on an old battlefield amid broken stones, writing the tale of King Hrosan into a book. The air was cold.

Who comprehends the work of sorcerers? Surely not they. Most especially, not they.

— attributed to Tannivar the Parricide, from the notebooks of Sekenre the Illuminator.

Darrell Schweitzer is author of the novel *The Mask of the Sorcerer* (NEL, 1995) and two previous stories in the loosely linked "Sekenre" series, "On the Last Night of the Festival of the Dead" (IZ 90) and "The Giant Vorviades" (IZ 99). He lives in Strafford, PA, and works as a literary agent, editor and writer.

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One day a frighteningly authoritative cost-benefit analysis of publishers' launch parties will (I fear) lead to the industry-wide directive: "Stop giving these bastards free drinks. Especially Langford." Meanwhile, in between worried discussions of the Net Book Agreement's collapse, the party for John Clute's nifty *SF: The Illustrated Encyclopaedia* (Dorling Kindersley, £25) offered the usual riotous fun to a wide cross-section of the usual suspects at the Museum of the Moving Image. Multiple movie/TV screens pulsed with space footage (launch, geddit?), *King Kong* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Kong-sized models of the great tome were dotted around like cardboard bollards. Wine flowed copiously; foodstuffs included cheesy canapés closely resembling miniature Sir Alexander Fleming culture dishes, and honey-drenched sausages which spread a terrible legacy of sticky smears ("I wouldn't," someone sighed, "mind seeing her entirely coated in honey if only it were somewhere more private..."). Only Nick Austin was tactless enough to jest about the Langford photograph captioned as "Bob Guccione." Stephen Baxter appeared to be challenging US editors' pre-eminence in the World's Most Eye-Hurting Necktie stakes. Hilary Bailey (vibrant despite a recent heart attack), Robert Irwin, Leigh Priest (the book's indexer) and others cunningly bribed me to forget whatever it was they did. John Clute himself, though ashen-faced from the merciless forensic rigours of an earlier media interview and the prospect of dozens more to come, said a few modestly euphoric words. And then, suddenly and predictably, we found ourselves in the pub.

SOMETHING STRANGE

Sir Kingsley Amis died on 22 October, aged 73. Newspaper tributes tended to emphasize his "respectable" fame (*Lucky Jim*, *The Old Devils* and its Booker Prize, knighthood, tipping, and the later, grouchy non-PC comedies like *Jake's Thing*) while glossing over a lifelong hospitability to popular fiction. Amis promoted and interestingly contributed to the genres of detective and spy thrillers, supernatural stories and especially sf: the pioneering critical essay *New Maps of Hell*, the *Spectrum* anthologies edited with Robert Conquest, *The Alteration* (alternative history with internal tributes to *Pavane* etc), *Russian Hide and Seek*, the borderline *The Anti-Death League*, and a fine mingling of supernatural horror with characteristic social comedy in *The Green Man*. Though he ultimately turned against experimentalism and proclaimed the genre dead, sf has much to thank him for.



David Garnett, between peals of insane, gloating laughter, reports that *New Worlds* will once again return under his editorship. ("No MSS yet, please.")

David A. Hardy notes that his and other space artists' action against *Starlog* magazine for breach of copyright (using artwork on "trading cards" without permission or payment) will very shortly come to court in the USA.

Whitley Strieber was wickedly accused on Internet of being a crank: a hot defence of his reliability and level-headedness provoked a reminiscence about a writer of gothic fiction who unknowingly purchased a house close to Strieber's upstate NY home ... and was later informed that Strieber was convinced this writer was sneaking up to his windows in order to steal his ideas. Well, how else can one find inspiration?

Kirsty Watt of Ringpull bragged of being the first publisher to accept *unsolicited* submissions via the net and thus "speed up the whole process of submissions." Shown this, a visiting Tor editor commented "WHAT?!!," fell to the ground, lay there trembling for some minutes, and later joined me in speculation as to how many terabytes of disk storage were available on the computer "up@ringpull.demon.co.uk." Later, Ringpull wisely modified their utopian scheme: ask them for details.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

The Empire Never Ended. One of this column's myriad spies passed through a small Berwickshire village and spotted a car with the number-plate VAL1S. Can Philip K. Dick be alive and beaming pinkly in the Borders?

More Law Reports. Ever-lovable tycoons Games Workshop are reportedly in court again, this time in the USA. Seemingly their favourite trick of bypassing distributors and dealing directly with non-GW retail outlets led to a writ from massed major US distributors, alleging restraint of trade; also, an injunction preventing GW from distributing anything except to their own shops....

Magazines. The small-press *Beyond* has been having a bad time, according to a circular from editor David Riley – who blames a trade war between UK wholesale distributors. Contributors who signed up at £30/thousand words are being asked to accept £10/thousand during the crisis. Meanwhile, *Interzone* plans to restore its fortunes still further with a "benefit anthology" of stories from its last five years, whose authors will receive, er, very great fame indeed. (Publishers: HarperCollins UK, St Martin's USA.)

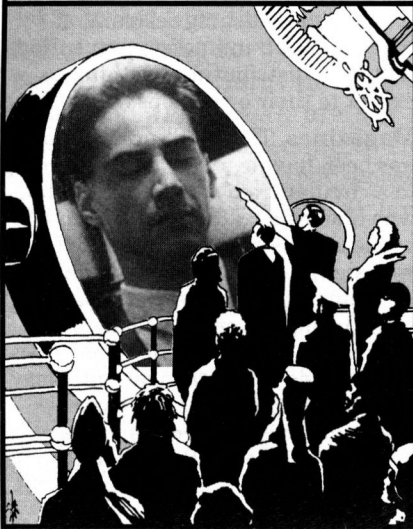
Spung! The extremely weird arts magazine *Rapid Eye* offers the following insight which has so far eluded sf critics: Robert Heinlein, it seems, "designed *Stranger in a Strange Land* to be a magical seed containing the spiritual and intellectual DNA of Thelema, which he placed into the fertile loam of his times, sowing a crop which includes the neo-pagan, eosophical, sexual and consciousness movements.... And he included enough clues so that, some day, as a healthy race of magical women and men prepared to take to the stars, they'd come to know that the man who continued the sacred lineage of Valentinus, the Gnostics and the Templars, and who nursed it through the 20th century, the 'man who sold the stars,' was none other than the 'father of us all,' Robert Anson Heinlein." Not a lot of people know that.

Thog's Masterclass. "That was during a supposed archaeological expedition to the region of Sarnath the Doomed in what was once the Land of Mnar, Saudi Arabia to you." (Brian Lumley, *The Transition of Titus Crow*, 1975) "Katrina, to her credit, gives a creditable performance." (Paul J. McAuley, *Fairyland*) "The basic idea is that due to mass flow and back reaction, one end of a natural wormhole will become Greg Benford...." (World SF Convention pocket programme, 1995)

Bram Stoker Award: the best horror novel of 1994 was judged to be Nancy Holder's *Dead in the Water*.

End of the Net Book Agreement: how will it affect you? Formerly, wicked price fixing meant you had to pay around £15.99 for a hardback. When the *new free market* stabilizes, the list price will be £29.99 – but discounted at all major outlets to £15.99! *You save: £14.00.* O brave new world.

MUTANT POPCORN



Nick Lowe

Johnny Mnemonic: Keanu Reeves as Johnny



Welcome back! Welcome back to the Hollow Earth Hypodrome, ladies, gentlemen, deros, Morlocks, Pellucidarians and troglodytes, and special thanks again to our guest presenters Whitley, Horselover, and Elvis. For those tens of thousands of abductees who've just joined us, welcome to the 65th annual awards ceremony of the Hollow Earth and Lemurian Lumièrans, where we denizens of the secret world-within-the-world honour those tireless men and women of the motion-picture industry topside who've given us dwellers-within so much harmless hilarity. Those of you with recovered memories of having been here before will know that, as well as putting pointy things up your nose and drilling extremely small holes in your teeth, we citizens of the interior also have our serious side. That's why we send our saucers up through the hole in the pole to carry our message of peace to humanity (all together now:) "Keep the noise down up there!" And as part of our mission of love, we like to pay tribute to those aspects of movie craftsmanship that the world above, with its savage addiction to excess, seems least able to regard.

Now, it's easy to see that the topside movie awards have tended in recent years to be ever more quantitative, and that the Oscars for "best" acting have gone increasingly to those performers who act *most* – preferably in roles involving brain damage, coarse diseases, or Republican family values. So as a counterweight here in HELL

our members vote annually on the Lemurian Oscars or LOs, conferred on those topside talents who've entertained us by the sheer minimalism of their contribution to motion-picture art – with ecologically-sensitive awards including Least Acting, Least Direction, Least Original Screenplay, Least Costume, Least Special Effects, Least Short Feature, and Least Achievement in Editing.

So we come now to the big awards, and a well-deserved career LO for Keanu Reeves as Least Overall Actor for *Johnny Mnemonic*. There's nobody quite like Keanu for looking great in any part till he opens his mouth, and William Gibson's Johnny is possibly his defining role. It's certainly a part exquisitely tailored to its player: a character whose personality has been cunningly scrubbed and the space filled up with 160Gb of pure McGuffin. In an inspired *ad hominem* customization as shameless as it is brilliant, Gibson's movie Johnny is motivated not by cashflow problems as such but by the desire to recover his missing characterization. ("I had to dump a chunk of my childhood.") He doesn't need to act, to emote, to express: just stick him in a suit as sharp as monomolecular cheesewire, and he's the Johnny of everybody's dreams. But you have to be *extremely* careful writing for Keanu. Audiences, especially at press shows, tend to giggle noisily whenever he attempts to deliver an actual line – particularly if it's a cool, laconic Gibson line voiced in that very deep, silly growl Keanu affects when he's trying to be manly. And it's positively mischievous, or at least asking for trouble, for the incorrigible Gibson to give him lines like "How are you on brain implants?" and "I got problems [tapping head:] up here." It's miracle enough that this engaging dolt is a star, and that he gets away with as much career as he does; to expect him to be able to convey, all in a monologue about room service, the angst of forgotten identity, the class war between the information-rich and the unplugged underclass, and the sensation of a brain beginning to pop with the pressure of twice as much data as it's designed to hold, is to overload the boy's capacity.

But then Gibson himself, as the biggest-league sf writer ever to get sole credit on a film adaptation of his work (drunk in front row: "What about Sturgeon for *Killdozer*, then – oof"), has a lot of unfair expectations riding on the movie. The thing that surprises most about *Johnny Mnemonic* is how run-of-mill it seems, and how little difference a sophisticated, thoughtful, techno-literate script makes to a frothy, indifferently-played and -directed action plot in an all-too-familiar-looking Syd Mead

futuropolis. There's no shortage of quality ideas, and Gibson has certainly rethought and deepened the central concepts of his glossy, rather lightweight early story while neatly preserving its more cinematic ingredients (not least the cheesewire) and discreetly remoulding both character and structure to a more orthodox Hollywood action template. Thus, for example, a large part of the story's point is that the actual content of the data in Johnny's head is never actually revealed; but this is way too oblique for the movies, whence a new subplot straight out of the Ladybird book of McGuffins ("No. 1: cure for AIDS or invented AIDS-like disease. Serving suggestion: corporate villain suppresses cure for nefarious commercial reasons"). There's an attractive Gibson conceit here in the notion of a kind of informational retrovirus that knocks out the brain's immune defences and is spread by bad data hygiene, but as a narrative element it all looks a bit too much like one of those *ad hoc* future McGuffins where the problem is invented simply so that the solution can have something to solve.

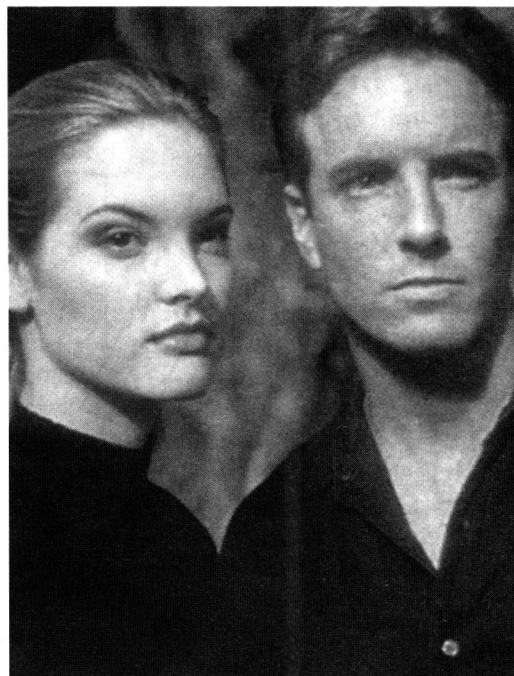
The vital Gibsonism, however, that *Johnny* does get down perfectly is the throwaways: those brilliant little bits of on-the-button detail where a whole cluster of fizzy ideas is distilled in an easy-to-swallow capsule. It's wonderful to be faced with a movie that drops such quintessentially science-fictional, conceptually packing lines as "Her neural-net persona has Swiss citizenship under the Artificial Intelligence Law of 2006." And it has to be said that, despite the rather disappointing reworkings of *2001*, *Tron* and *Lawnmower Man* in the upload and finale set pieces, the middle-act cyberspace sequence in which Johnny jacks into an immersive interface with VR headset and datagloves is one of the most surfin' experiences in recent sf cinema – not just because it translates the original and essential Gibson thrill to the big screen in high multimedia fidelity, but because in 1995 you can see just how very imminent it is, and how completely inevitable the day when all of us can dive headfirst into a limitless ocean of pure metaphor.

So Gibson, in the end, doesn't come out too badly from an otherwise rather flat and silly film. But the award for Least Achievement in Directing has sadly to go to hitherto hi-cred artist Robert Longo, who seemed like such an exciting prospect from his CV, but has turned in a visually unexciting, technically unimaginative and professionally routine job on material that could so easily have dazzled. And the LO for Least Supporting Actor is an unbreakable threeway tie: between Dolph Lundgren's absurdly gratuitous, comicsy bible-bashing hitman, Jones the extremely animatronic-

looking cyberdolphin, and Ice-T's grimy streetwise trench-coated resistance leader. (Yes, this is another of those films with Ice-T leading a grimy streetwise trenchcoated resistance movement. Don't try to fight it if you're stuck with one of those lone-rebel-in-flight-from-corporate-tyranny plots. Resistance is useful.)

Meanwhile, the coveted LO for Least Film belongs to **Mortal Kombat**, an envelope-pushing movie that holds out the promise of a radical post-narrative cinema that will one day have transcended the need for plot, character and sense altogether. The fascination in movie adaptations of console games lies not in what they are (which is merely things like *Super Mario Bros* and *Street-fighter*) but in what they haltingly, fumblingly aspire to be: the harbingers of a new race of immersive entertainment, in which the ancient canons of Aristotelian narrativity are cast aside forever in emulation of the instant gratification and wall-to-wall set pieces of interactive virtual head-kicking. No film adaptation so far has come up with a formula that quite captures the cerebellar spell of the clunky game animations, but *Mortal Kombat* is easily the most ambitious attempt. On the close model of the gameworld structure of self-contained and discontinuous "levels," the plot-line is itself merely a series of bouts in an arbitrary parade of settings: a "tournament" in which the three stunt leads have to save the world by beating the aliens' current high score in a formless series of Kombat rounds, with heady moments when any pretence at narrative continuity dissolves completely in a free-associating chain of set pieces. I can heartily recommend missing the first ten minutes, which starts you off in the right frame.

In a daring rethink of old priorities, the players have been cast first for their ability to do their own stunts, then for looks, and finally for thespian-ship. This comes up triple trumps in the case of the extraordinary Bridgette Wilson – an effortless All-Time LO for Least Actress, having apparently avenged rejection from every drama school in the land by enrolling in Kickboxing Bimbo Academy instead. (Mind you, she still looks as if her mother was frightened by a horse's arse.) The dialogue has the strange poetry that normally only comes with translation from the Japanese ("I'd like to get back to my amassing as soon as possible, if you don't mind"), with Christopher Lambert's game hints dressed up in astounding fortune-cookie gob-



Mortal Kombat: Bridgette Wilson and Linden Ashby

bledegook ("What you are about to face is vastly more important than revenge," "The essence of *Mortal Kombat* is not about death but about life," "In the black tower you will face three challenges: you must face your enemy, you must face yourself, and you must face your worst fear," and so on *ad infandum*).

It is, nevertheless, a film with a message for humanity. In *Johnny Mnemonic*, the future pointedly belongs to technocratic Chinese ganglords who have taken over the apparatus of corporate globalism; and *Mortal Kombat* itself offers present meditation on the war between east and west, cyberjunk and Hollywood, for the wallets and consciousness of the new millennium. The convergence in videoplay of eastern martial and western cognitive arts is mirrored in the tournament itself, where "the fate of billions" is determined by a team of warriors from both hemispheres battling in the far east to defend the future against an invasion of bad animation. But just as they think they've won, they find that they've only won entrance to the next level, and the credits roll as the real Kombat begins... There's a cute bit at the end about insect action monitoring if you can last that long, but only a hardy handful of survivors will make it to the final round; for the rest, the tournament is over, and the struggle for the future of entertainment has not gone cinema's way. Thank you all, goodnight, forget all you have just seen, and take care on the way home or we'll have to claim it was just a weather balloon.

Nick Lowe

The Curse of



Cherry Wilder

Gwen began to notice the house next door after Miss Pallisser's death. The old lady had been quiet and reclusive, not much given to gardening, and Gwen, in her new flat, was very quiet herself. One day the milkman found the previous day's bottles uncollected and promptly called the police. In no time at all Miss Pallisser's mortal remains had been taken away in a coffin-shaped plastic container: it was as if the world had been waiting for her to die. Some days later there was a knock on the door of Gwen's sitting room; Rose Benton, her landlady, burst in and hurried to the bay window.

"They're clearing out her things," she said. "I knew there would be a good view from this window!"

Gwen got up from her desk, and the two women stared into the next door garden. It was damp and dark with two old deodar cedars and a high wall of grey stone. Two men in overalls brought out a sofa, a third man wheeled a battered fridge on a trolley. A young fellow in a jeans suit followed, carrying a tall brass vase filled with peacock feathers.

"Who owns the house now?" asked Gwen.

Rose chuckled. "Not a word to a soul," she said, "but we do. Have for several years. Own the contents too, such as they are. The lawyers saw it our way."

Rose was a driving force in MOR (as in "MOR for your money") Real Estate. Gwen, who had never owned a scrap of real estate, knew that there was much to admire in the Benton family. They were good-looking and well dressed, none more so than Rose who was tall, fresh-faced and dark blonde.

Jock Benton was a jolly man, a management consultant who was a drinking companion of her editor, Matt Grimes. The pair of them had the bright idea of letting Gwen this comfortable flat so that she could

finish her book in peace. Gwen had been out of house and home since Polly's death, five months ago.

"What will happen to the old lady's things?" asked Gwen.

The removalists, with straps around their bodies, brought out an upright piano balanced on a small, wheeled platform.

"Most of it goes to the junk yard," said Rose. "A few bits and pieces have been ticketed. Our Arnold down there is seeing to them."

A window had been flung up on the second floor of the house, and a workman began to throw out blue plastic sacks.

"Clothes and oddments," said Rose. "Place was pretty run down."

Gwen moved the window curtain to get a clearer view. She saw for the first time that the house next door was a mirror image of the Benton's house. The man was dropping sacks of clothing from a bay window identical with her own but on the near side of the house. The Bentons' house was pearl grey, elegant but comfortable, with an inviting front lawn, a rowan tree, and a rack for the children's bicycles. Miss Pallisser's house was dark grey, stained, and dilapidated.

A small boy in a green track suit and bouncy, three-coloured gym shoes was playing under the deodar trees. He got in the way of the workmen. Rose Benton flung up the heavy sash window and called in a threatening but carefully modulated voice:

"Paul! Come out of that garden at once!"

Paul, the youngest Benton, did not share the family good looks. He was a funny-looking kid, still a *little* boy at nine years old, with shaggy, dark hair and thick glasses. Now he cocked his head on one side, squinting at the sun, then headed in more or less the right direction.

"Well, I'm off again!" said Rose. "You'll be down for a bit of barbecue, later on..."

She went striding out, and Gwen shut the window. There was something very cheerless about the trundling of Miss P's furniture and personal effects through her grey garden. It was as if the weather were cloudy at 26A and sunny at 26. Down on the lawn, under the rowan tree, Amy Benton, aged 15, was reading a magazine and looking at her watch.

Gwen went through into her bedroom and looked at the backs of the two houses. The contrast was more strongly marked than ever: Miss Pallisser's yard was dry and wretched, choked with deformed weeds. The Bentons, on the other hand, had a beautiful back garden, mediterranean style, with espalier fruit trees, bougainvillea, and a patio with a brightly striped awning. There was an empty rabbit hutch beyond the barbecue; Roger, the middle child, had never replaced his rabbits.

"Bit of a giver-upper, old Rog," Jock had confided. "Plans things, then mopes when they come to nothing."

"Don't we all?" had been Gwen's comment, and it had shocked her landlord.

"Good God, no!" he said. "What a depressing notion! Better planning, Gwen, old girl ... that's

what's necessary."

He stared at her and diagnosed a fresh attack of grief. He poured her a double scotch and ordered her to perk up the old social life a bit. The point was, Gwen thought now, seated on the bed staring blindly into the dark backyard of 26A, they had never had a social life. She and Polly had lived for each other. They had kept up the old house in the Cotswolds, cared for old Mr Maitland, Polly's father, cared for the cats and dogs, cared for the garden. Really, it had been no trouble. How she had written in those days, how they had researched, how they had bottled pears and cherries. Then, when the old man had passed on and they were ready to travel, Polly became ill. Now it was over. Who would index her history books now that Poll was gone? Who would love her again?

She blinked; there was a white disc on the weedy brick path to Miss Pallisser's back gate. She deduced a saucer. The old lady had had a cat. Something caught her eye in the sitting-room: a round patch of reflected sunlight was hovering above her desk. When she went to look, the patch flew up to the ceiling and down again. A dazzling star of light was shining from the bay window of Miss Pallisser's house where the workmen were still busy. Down below she saw Roger Benton stride down the front path, purposeful as his mother, carrying a plastic bag. He exchanged a business-like nod with his sister.

Drinks were served by Monika, the *au pair* girl, at half past six. Jock was late back; he bustled into the back garden shedding jacket and tie.

"We're all coping very nicely," said Rose. "Relax for a moment. When does your plane leave?"

"Some ungodly hour," said Jock. "Come on, Amy, what are you playing at there?"

"Salad," said Amy. "Roger is doing the steak."

"Steak takes some doing," said Jock. "How about it, Gwen? Are you game?"

Gwen accepted a piece of steak and a foil-wrapped potato.

"Where is Paul?" asked Monika. "I am not seeing him all afternoon."

"Give him a call, Amy!" ordered Rose.

Amy brushed back her long, golden hair and drifted into the house. She could be heard calling loudly all the way to the front gate.

"Nuisance!" said Jock. "Did he have bloody wolf cubs or something?"

"Perhaps he's at Nigel's," croaked Roger.

He was still working energetically at the barbecue; now the coals flared up as he turned a steak.

"Go through the house, Roger!" ordered Rose. "Little beast might be watching a video."

"I'm doing the steaks!"

"Cut along!" snapped Jock. "You've done enough damage. Monika can take over."

"We saw Paul at about midday," said Gwen. "Do you remember, Rose? He was in Miss Pallisser's front garden."

Her words were lost; Roger knocked the tray of cutlery to the ground on his way through the garden. When the two elder children came back after search-

ing and calling, it was past eight o'clock.

"I'll half-kill that child!" said Rose. "Monika, I know it's your free weekend. Please go!"

Monika, a slender well-tanned girl in jeans, was proof against the Benton family. She went without a word. Rose sprang up from her white cane chair and said:

"I have exactly 40 minutes to change. Shall we drop you at a terminal, Jock?"

"No thanks," said Jock. "Too early."

He settled in her chair with a fresh martini.

"You're both going away again?" asked Gwen.

"Price of success!" said Jock. "Amy, the money for Mrs Grant is on the desk in the den."

"Mmm," said Amy.

She sat with her brother on a garden seat beyond the empty rabbit hutch. Gwen noticed that they were not eating very much.

"So La Pallisser finally dropped off the twig," said Jock. "Must have been every day of 75. Used to work for a firm of importers who went back to the tea clip-pers."

Gwen was embarrassed. If she ducked her head a little she could see the dark uncurtained windows of 26A.

"Daughter of a chap who spent a lot of time in India," continued Jock. "Language expert. Wrote books about the mysterious east. Don't know what you'd call him, really..."

"An orientalist," said Gwen. "Pundit Pallisser."

"Ha-ha! That's the man. Left her with nothing but a few curios and the property hopelessly tied up."

"Surely his library...?"

"Priceless!" said Jock. "He left it to the University of bloody Allahabad or some such place. We saw quite a lot of the old doll up until a few years ago. I don't believe she ever forgave Rose for taking up the option on the house."

"Dad," said Roger, "is it too late to ring Nigel's people about Paul?"

"Not if you're quick about it," said his father. "He may stay the night, if they can put up with him."

Roger went traipsing into the house again, and the phone began to ring. Gwen found herself hoping that it was Nigel, asking if Paul could stay the night. Instead it was a call for Jock from Frankfurt am Main. He spoke briefly in German then could be heard dashing about and climbing the stairs.

"He'll take an earlier plane," observed Amy. "I wonder what has happened to Paul?"

"When did you see him last?" asked Gwen.

"I haven't set eyes on him all day," said Amy.

Roger came back briskly. "He's not at Nigel's," he announced. "I'll just take a walk round the block and search for him."

"No!" said Amy. "Wait. They're coming down."

"It's a bit early," said Roger. "Not properly dark yet or anything..."

Presently Rose and Jock appeared, perfectly turned out. Rose wore a linen suit, Jock was outfitted by BOSS; they carried identical briefcases.

"All right then," said Rose. "My schedule is on the

pin board in the living room. Don't forget to put out the dustbin."

"Mummy," said Roger, "Paul isn't back. No one has seen him."

"God give me strength!" said Rose. "You used to do this, Roger, do you know that?"

"What did I do?"

"Take off just before one of our trips," said Jock. "I missed a conference once when you were five. Time you hid in the gardener's hut in the park."

"Paul is nine," said Amy, "but a bit retarded."

"Is that the car?" asked Rose.

"Personally," said Amy, "I think one of you should stay. Probably Mummy. It really would look better..."

"This opening of the Cherbourg subdivision has been planned down to the last detail," snapped Rose. "What do you mean 'look better'?"

"If Paul doesn't turn up," said Amy.

"I expect kids do it all the time," said Roger. "I mean, stay out all night. In rough neighbourhoods."

"Jock?" said Rose.

"Out of the question!" said Jock fiercely. "Mine is an emergency. Rose, I told you how the situation had deteriorated!"

"In Calcutta and places," said Roger, "children *live* in the streets. No one seems to care..."

Jock swung a fist at Roger and half-connected with his midriff. Roger moved out of range behind a stone urn filled with geraniums.

"I will *not* be blackmailed by that little bastard!" said Rose. "There! That really is the car."

"Mind you," said Amy, "I suppose you will be able to say there were other adults in the house."

Gwen, who had been making herself invisible in her chair, was aware that the four Bentons paused in their noisy confrontation and glanced at her.

"I've had about as much of this as I can stand!" said Jock. "What on earth must Gwen – Miss Cross – be thinking of this carry-on!"

"I just want a plan of action," said Roger. "When do we call the police?"

"I'm not staying to listen to this nonsense," said Rose. "He'll be back in ten minutes. Come along Jock! I'm going!"

"Yes, you really are going," said Amy.

"I'll be at the Plaza Hotel, Frankfurt, by midnight," said Jock. "Don't try to reach your mother on that damned auto telephone."

"Okay," mumbled Roger.

He collapsed on to the garden seat and ate potato crisps from a bag. Rose and Jock hurried away through the house just as the driver from MOR Real Estate began to honk the horn of the Bentley. Amy sat beside her brother. They slapped hands like Black Panthers sealing a bargain.

Gwen was suddenly very irritated with the Benton family. She felt no solidarity with the parents, and she had an uneasy feeling that Amy and Roger knew perfectly well where their brother was. She hoped very much that Paul *would* come bouncing in after ten minutes and give the game away with a cry of "Have they gone yet?"

She said warily. "Have you looked next door?"

"I asked old Lever first thing," said Roger. "He was watering his roses."

"No," said Gwen. "I mean the house on this side. Miss Pallisser's house."

"He'd never go there," said Amy.

Gwen, who was thin and agile and not unsuitably dressed, decided to look over the wall. She carried one of the sturdy wrought-iron chairs down the path and chose a good place. The children did not move. She stood on the chair, clutching the gritty top of the wall, and scrambled higher up with the aid of an espalier tree.

"Mummy will be livid," called Roger, "if you break that apple tree."

Gwen looked into the backyard of Miss Pallisser's house, cold and grey in the summer night. The lamp at the corner of the street, beyond the far wall, admitted a few feeble rays of blue light; a leaning dustbin looked like a tombstone, the back gate was ajar. There was the white saucer on the path and there was a shadow sitting hopefully beside it ... the cat.

Before Gwen could utter a word, the telephone rang inside the Benton house. Amy and Roger charged indoors to answer it, and all the lights in the garden went out. One of them must have tripped over a cord or brushed against a switch. She was marooned up against the wall, feet entangled in the precious apple tree. She waited a moment for someone to notice her plight, but no one did.

"Wait there!" she said to the cat.

It had already gone. Gwen saw circles of light from the Bentons' flourishing garden superimposed upon the dark wasteland of 26A. She clutched the rough wall painfully hard, felt her heart thumping in her chest. It came over her like a gust of warm wind rising unaccountably from Miss Pallisser's backyard. She was engulfed by a wave of terror and revulsion. The feelings came first, and then she saw it. A dark figure at the corner of the house, yes, the edge of a window was hidden, momentarily blotted out. Then the street light flashed again, between the branches of a scrawny plum tree: the yard was empty.

Gwen breathed deeply. She climbed down on to the chair and was making her way to the barbecue when Amy switched on the patio light.

"You were in the dark," she said.

"Never mind," said Gwen. "Any news of Paul?"

"Little beast!" said Amy. "He's at the pictures with Nigel."

Roger came bursting out of the house again. "At least we think so!" he said loudly. "He's probably at the pictures."

Gwen had cut up the remains of the steak into bite-sized pieces on a paper plate.

"Do you know Miss Pallisser's cat?" she asked.

"It's Ranji," said Roger, "the only one left."

"She had other cats?" asked Gwen.

"About six," said Roger. "I'm sure you've seen them. There was a white one with blue eyes."

Gwen did remember the white cat. It sat patiently on the garden wall while Paul and Roger banged saucepans to prove that it was deaf. She even had a

brief flash of memory concerning a voice, high and sweet, calling "Puss, Puss" in the mornings. Miss Pallisser herself.

"What became of them all?" she asked with resignation.

The lives of cat-lovers were littered with dead cats. It had to do with the differing life span of the two species and the priority given to human activities.

"They were caught and put to sleep," said Amy. "Mummy and the lawyer thought it was best."

"All except Ranji," said Roger, "big dirty-brown fluffy affair."

"He's too cunning," said Amy. "No one could catch him. He still goes networking for food all down the street."

"I thought of giving him this meat," said Gwen. "The back gate is open."

"I could do that!" said Roger eagerly. "Let me, Miss Cross!"

"Fine," said Gwen. "Shall I help you clear away, Amy?"

"Oh no," said Amy. "We can manage. Truly."

They all said goodnight with some relief, and Gwen went into the house. She stood still for a moment in the passageway to pick an apple leaf off her trousers. The acoustics of the house were strange. She heard Roger say:

"She knows!"

"Quiet!" said Amy. "Go on! Take Ranji the meat!"

Gwen went stealthily into the hall and ran upstairs on tiptoe. Once inside the flat she switched on a single lamp in the sitting room and hurried into the unlit bedroom for a perfect view of Miss Pallisser's backyard. Roger did exactly what was expected of him. He came through the back gate and set the paper plate down beside the saucer. But then he wandered out of sight around the far corner of the house.

Gwen hurried into the lighted sitting room and lurked behind the curtains of the bay window staring down at the front garden of 26A this time. Roger was nowhere to be seen; she had missed him. Perhaps he had doubled back and gone out the same way he came in. She waited, went away to put on her electric jug for a cup of tea, but was drawn to various windows again. The lights were out in the Bentons' back garden. She listened at the open door of her flat and heard the familiar sounds of shots, shouts, and screaming brakes from the telly.

She made her tea, changed into her oldest tracksuit, and took one of the tranquillizers she had been persuaded to use soon after Polly's death. "Everything is smoothed out," the doctor had said. "You'll see." She fetched a light blanket and sat shivering in her big armchair, waiting for the smoothing effect. What had upset her so, upset her to the point of hallucination? She could not turn on her own telly or even play a record. What was she afraid of? She sipped her tea and did feel better.

Roger's plan took shape in her head. It was Amy's plan, too: a confrontation with Rose and Jock. Paul was a freakish child, who took dares and got into

scrapes. She thought of Paul stuffing leaves from the rowan tree into the letterbox of 26A.... Paul in the snow under the deodars. The place was an "attractive nuisance" for a small boy. Paul was pretending to be lost; Roger was hiding him in the house next door.

Gwen was becoming much more tranquil by now, but she hated this idea. She pushed it away as she had pushed away her grief. No, she would not go downstairs and ask questions. The Benton children were watching television; Paul had just come back from the cinema. She curled up in her big recliner chair, pulled up the blanket, and slept.

There were hints in her dream of the mysterious east: exotic scents and the noise of temple bells. A veiled woman stood alone in a room with figured carpets on the walls. Blood and fire began to edge into the dream. Picture postcards burned, strips of film went up in a sharp burst of flame, and there was blood spreading thickly over the steps that led down to the river. She put her arms tightly around Polly to shield her from falling debris, and they ran through the pools of blood while at their backs a terrible commotion grew and the world ended in a splintering crash.

Gwen was awake. The lamp on her desk looked pale in the daylight. The crash from her dream still reverberated. Something terrible had happened. She sprang up, went to the bay window and saw that its counterpart in Miss Pallisser's house was unscathed. By some trick of the light she could see her own window, her own reflection, in the emptiness of that upper room.

She saw herself, then she saw a different woman, her face became the face of a stranger. The figure was swathed in odd clothes, drifting veils of grey, black, orange-red, and gold. Miss Pallisser was old and not old, motionless yet pulsing with motion, dead yet undead; she seemed to have more than one pair of arms. Then the vision fled away leaving a few drifting wisps of grey smoke and, in the innermost reaches of the house, there was a red glow.

Gwen was split into two people: one of them remained at the window harrowed with fear, groping in some unknown dimension. The other broke away, splashed water on her face, and called the fire brigade. An empty house?

"Unoccupied," she said, "but you must hurry! There is a child in that house ... playing."

She slipped into her shoes and ran down the stairs shouting. Amy came out of the kitchen in her sleepshirt.

"Where is Paul?" cried Gwen, putting things in the wrong order.

"Staying at Nigel's, Miss Cross," said Amy, game to the last. "Didn't we say? After they came back from the picture it was so late..."

"Fire!" said Gwen. "Fire in the house next door. Amy, don't lie to me! Where is Paul? Which room is he in?"

"Upstairs on the far side," said Amy. "Roger is there, too."

"Go out on the street," ordered Gwen. "Show the firemen where to go!"

She ran headlong through the Bentons' back garden. There was a light haze of smoke in the backyard of 26A. She had no idea of the way in – the back door was locked – she turned to the kitchen window, ready to attack it with the dustbin, then veered round the side of the house. A side door was propped open, emitting smoke in thick curls about her ankles.

She plunged into the house and found she was doing the impossible. It was dark, filled with smoke; she did not know where to go. She blundered on and came to a place that vaguely resembled the Bentons' hallway; the door to the cellar was open. The cellar was burning, smoke was pouring up the main staircase; runnels of flame from the burning door of the cellar had attacked the bannisters on one side. Gwen tried to shout and choked, then ran up the stairs crouched against the unburnt bannisters. Covering her mouth she called their names.

"Paul! Roger!"

The landing was filled with smoke; she made blindly for the front room on the far side of the house. The smoke had come in everywhere, it oozed between the uncarpeted floorboards. She tripped over a transistor radio, went crawling to the first sleeping bag. She dragged it towards the front window; it must be Paul, from the weight. She heaved it up, shaking and patting at the boy. He was warm, he was sweating. Gwen fought and heaved at the window, and at last it came up. She sat astride the sill, letting the window rest on her shoulder.

She gulped air and heard the sound of the fire engine. She expelled the precious air again, drew the laden sleeping bag across her knees, and let it down as far as she could. Paul's head was uncovered; she saw his rumpled hair, his flushed cheeks.

There was no one to help, but the old sloping lintel of the window below, unchanged on this house, began to take the weight, and at last she let go and saw her burden go slithering safely down on to a pile of earth.

She dived back and crawled and found Roger in his sleeping bag. The boy did not stir at first, but as she heaved and tugged him across the floor she felt sure that his body moved. She knew that she was far beyond the end of her strength. Her breath caught in her chest; she had not the relief of crying out. Inch by inch they came towards the open window. She was gone, unconscious for a few seconds, and she returned, on the instant, to her dream again. *A veiled woman stood alone in the room with figured carpets upon the walls.*

Then with a supreme effort she hung Roger Benton, all 14 years of him, face downwards out of the window and hung there exhausted herself. She was gasping, loud enough for two. Down below a fireman lifted Paul into his arms. Another fireman, wearing a respirator, strode into the room.

Gwen had slept heavily; she suspected it was early morning. She experienced anxiety as she woke up. It was all a dream. She had done nothing, she was back in her flat, rubbing her eyes, switching off the lamp on her desk, looking at her watch. Then the hospital came over her, the reek of disinfectant, the five-

o'clock rumble of trolleys and crash of bedpans. No, she really had done it.

She felt a glow of relief, she basked in it, she was proud of herself. Her muscles ached keenly, she had torn something in her back, her eyes stung, her throat was raw, her chest was painful. One hand was bandaged, her left ankle too, where she had fallen on the way downstairs. She could still feel the iron grip of the fireman, fingers digging into her upper arm as he heaved her to her feet. But the boys were safe.

She was in an ancient hospital bed with high metal sides like a cot; it stood in a curtained off section of a busy corridor. Presently a woman pathologist came and took another sample of her blood. A Hindu doctor with a clipboard stood and observed the procedure. He looked at Gwen with a curious expression.

"You were a bit under the weather yesterday," he said. "Couple of things we had better go over again."

"How are the boys?" she croaked. "Roger and Paul Benton."

"That would be children's ward," he said. "Completely different department. Just let's get this over with. Name: Jane Ross."

"Gwen Cross."

"Aha, bit of a difference! Gwen Cross, eh?"

He wrote on his form. "Now the address. Be a bit careful here."

"26 Durbar Place, St John's Wood," said Gwen carefully.

He sighed and wagged a finger at her. A nurse came in, and Gwen was given an injection. She learned that the doctor's name was Singh. When the nurse had gone he commented on the fresh bruises on her upper arm. Gwen's patience was being tested; she explained about the fireman.

"Treated you rough, did they?"

"It was an emergency," she said. "There was a fire in the cellar of an old house. The two boys were ... camping out, upstairs."

"Yes," he said, "I have a note of the circumstances. Gwen, I'll give you a good tip. Those premises are unoccupied. No point in giving them as an address. Far better to own up and say 'no fixed abode'."

Gwen could not speak.

"Just tell me," said Dr Singh, "exactly where you were when the fire broke out. Were you in the basement? Doing a bit of cooking, for instance? Did you take a drop of something to keep out the cold?"

"I have a flat at 26 Durbar Place," she said. "The fire was at 26A. The house next door."

Dr Singh clicked his ballpoint pen. He came closer again and examined Gwen's eyes, her teeth, the glands on the side of her neck. He rolled up the sleeves of the horrid hospital nightgown, looked carefully at the inner surfaces of both her arms and at her unbandaged right hand. Then he picked up his clipboard again and removed the particulars of the female vagrant, Jane Ross, found on the premises blackened and abraded in an old tracksuit. He quickly began a new form.

"I think we had better start again, Miss Cross," he said gently. "You have a family named Symes or Grimes for next of kin?"

"Mr and Mrs Matthew Grimes," she said. "Mr Grimes is my editor... If I could telephone..."

"Of course. I can't think how this mix-up came about."

"I kept fading away..." said Gwen. "I had difficulty answering the questions."

Dr Singh took off his glasses and polished them. "So many cruel misunderstandings," he said. "The bureaucracy is going mad. In fact the whole world. I think sometimes we are under a curse!"

Gwen stared at him in wonder. To have her secret thoughts spoken and by a man of his race.

"That house, 26A, was the home of a Miss Pallisser," she said. "Does that mean anything to you, Dr Singh ... from your reading?"

"Ha-ha!" he said, echoing Jock Benton. "I know exactly whom you mean! Pundit Pallisser! Author of *The Jade Garden, Excursions Through the Hindukush, Cults of Kali*... How are you feeling now, Miss Cross?"

"The Bentons are both away on business," said Gwen.

She was slipping into a role that she had never played very well. She was a family friend; she stood *in loco parentis* just a little.

"I do hope the young girl, Amy Benton, is being taken care of."

"I am sure she is with friends," said Dr Singh. "I will see that you are moved to a room upstairs."

The injection had taken effect; her pain was receding. She thought of a room full of flowers, a bed of roses. Dr Singh fixed her with his dark eyes; outside the starched pink curtains an old woman began to utter peals of maniacal laughter.

"Miss Cross," he said, "the boys are dead."

Gwen finished her book in a cottage in Cornwall; it was only six months behind schedule. She accepted a certain amount of psychotherapy but then broke off the treatment and decided to remain mad, if that was what she was.

Matthew Grimes and his nice wife, Hetty, cleared out the flat and continued to see to her welfare. She saw none of the surviving members of the Benton family again and tried not to think of them.

She had been keyed up about the inquest where she would certainly have seen them, but in the end she was too sick to attend, and the coroner accepted her affidavit. It was a brief and unspectacular inquest, sparsely reported in the press. The verdict was one of misadventure; the coroner expounded upon the danger of asphyxia through the inhalation of smoke. He spoke of an unfortunate combination of circumstances and the tragic end of a youthful prank or rag. The cause of the f*^e was, in the opinion of experts, the explosion of a bottle of cleaning fluid in the cellar. A tenant of number 26, Miss Gwen Cross, had called the fire brigade, but all help for Roger and Paul Benton came too late.

Matt Grimes expressed surprise when the Bentons did not visit Gwen in hospital or in the private clinic where she spent some weeks. She felt she understood. A failure as monstrous as hers was unbearable.

There were no rewards for good intentions.

In the second summer after the fire she drove back and perceived what had happened. The Benton house was deserted, its paintwork stained, its windows uncurtained and dark. A storm had uprooted the rowan tree; the lawn had turned brown. Next door there was new turf between the deodars and bright garden beds. The house was a picture; the roof had been retiled; window cleaners were at work.

Arnold, the young man from MOR who was supervising, recognized her from Benton barbecues. yes, indeed, the steam cleaning had worked wonders. They walked into the backyard, which was transformed, prettier even than the Bentons' back garden had been, with a pergola and grape vines. Of course the insurance, such as it was, had helped to pay for the renovations.

"Now we're saddled with that mess next door!" said Arnold.

Gwen stepped up onto a garden seat for a quick look; the Bentons' yard was ugly and desolate.

"Is Rose still with the company?" she asked.

"Terrible thing..." Arnold lowered his voice. "Rose wasn't up to much after that. She's in a sanatorium, actually, on the south coast. Girl in boarding school. Jock battling round the trade fairs."

She glanced up at the bay window of her own flat and almost lost her nerve. There was a rustling in the pergola.

"Isn't that the old lady's cat?" she said faintly.

"Super, isn't he?" said Arnold. "Here Ranji, Ranji... He's quite tame. We make a pet of him."

He took some cat nibbles out of his pocket and put them into a plastic dish. Ranji, a long-haired Burmese, came forward boldly, tail erect, his amber eyes wide and unafraid. Gwen stroked him from head to tail. She said goodbye to Arnold and walked back to her car around the far side of the house. The new side door was pearl grey with fancy hinges.

She stood at the front gate and trembled, staring at the upper windows.

"*You did it!*" she silently accused Miss Pallisser.

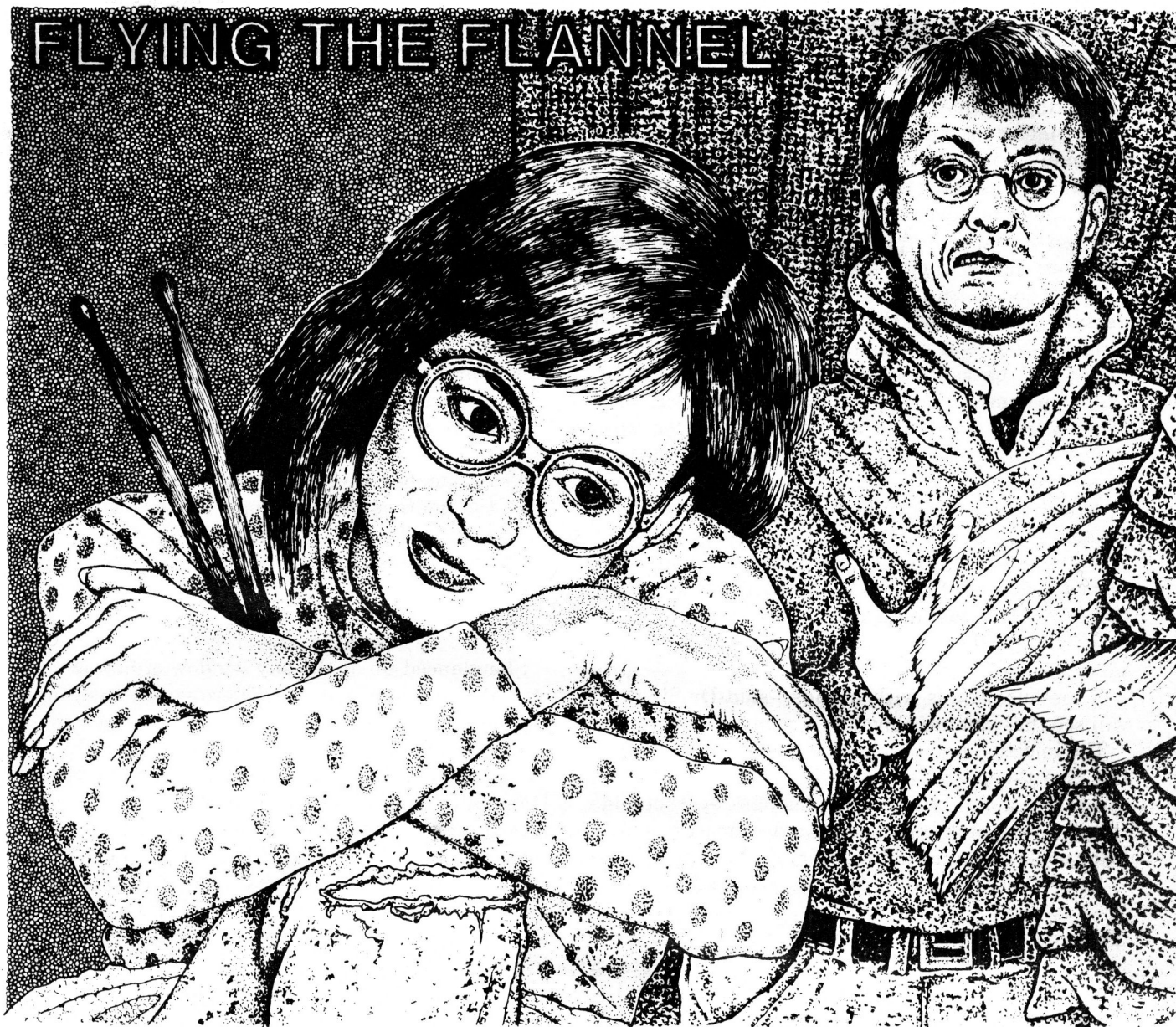
"*I am dead,*" replied Miss Pallisser, soft as smoke. "*Why would I want to do such a thing?*"

"*They bought your house over your head,*" said Gwen, "*and sent your things to the junkyard and had your cats ... put to sleep!*"

It seemed to her that she had played no part at all in the Bentons' debacle. Or perhaps not enough. Her own life was no more than a dead weight that she dragged across the floor of a smoke-filled room. She shut her eyes for a second or two; the woman from her dream lowered her veil to reveal a hideous mask.

Cherry Wilder last appeared here with "Willow Cottage" (issue 81). Since the sad occasion of the death of her husband, Horst Grimm, a couple of years ago, she has moved house but still resides in Germany. Her most recent book was a short-story collection, *Dealers in Light and Darkness* (Edgewood Press, PO Box 380264, Cambridge, MA 02238, USA).

FLYING THE FLANNEL



1. Our Beloved Revolutionary Sweetheart

Phoebe Summersquall flopped down on the spring-shot, beer-, tear-, sweat- and other-miscellaneous-exudates-stained couch backstage in what passed for the “performer’s lounge” at Slime Time. The wall above the spavined sofa was covered with layers of graffiti: names of bands never famous and now long dust; injunctions to kill one despised performer or another; proclamations of musicological godhood or ineptitude; scabrous invective about the club’s management.

“Jesus, I’m totally wiped,” said the thin woman. Behind her outsized round black-plastic-framed glasses, her dark eyes loomed bigger than life. Dressed in a Goodwill-bin tulle skirt layered over frayed jeans, a skintight lycra polka-dotted top and suede clogs, her long black hair caught up in back with one of the thinner bungee cords normally reserved for lashing down the band’s amps during transport, she resembled a tired cleaning lady, addled ballerina or unusually neat street person.

Raising a hand to wipe sweat from her brow, she found herself still unconsciously clutching her drumsticks. Wearily, she dropped them, and a frosty bottle of Sam Adams manifested itself within reach.

“Thanks, Scott.”

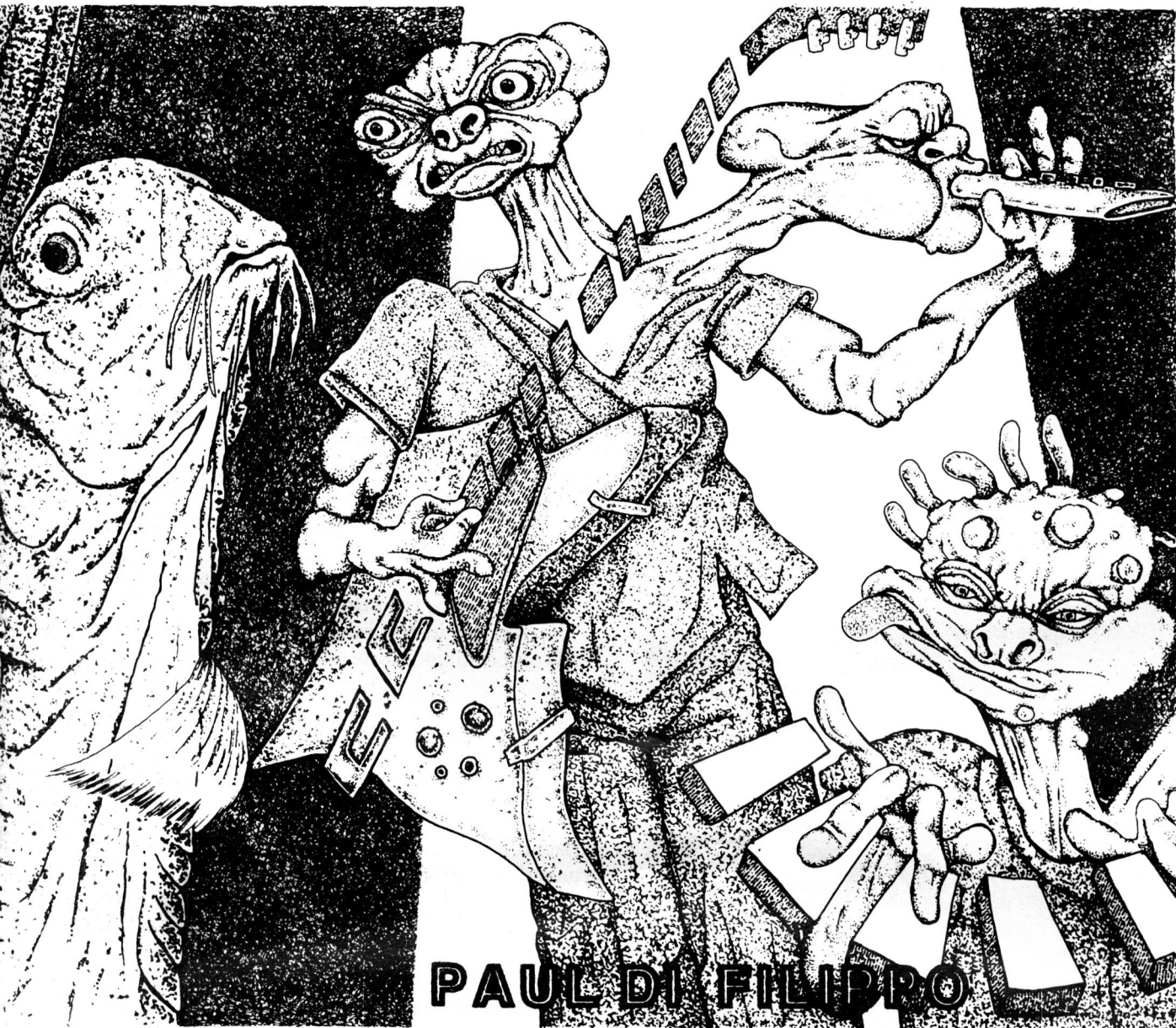
“You deserve it, Pheeb. You were awesome.”

Scott Bluebottle, round of face and wirerim-bespectacled, occupied tentatively, as was his way, a folding chair. He scraped at the label of his own bottle with a guitar pick. On the two remaining heterogenous lumps of furniture sprawled the other members of Miracle Factory: Mark the Snark and Frank Difficult. The former long-haired and stocky, the latter with the wolf-lean, hot-eyed, gaunt-cheeked look of one of the less well-known German Expressionists.

“Yeah,” agreed Mark in a resonant singer’s voice. “Especially on the last tune.”

Frank chimed in. “I’m extremely proud to have a song of mine that I cherish as much as I do ‘Eat the Shame’ performed by such a talented drummer.”

Phoebe felt herself blushing. “Gee, guys, I bet you’d



Illustrations by Russel Morgan

say that to anyone who replaced someone who sucked as bad as your last drummer.”

Mark chuckled ruefully. “Lonnie was mighty awful.”

“Remember the night he fell backwards off the riser?” reminisced Scott.

Frank lifted the admonitory hand of a reluctant leader. “Let us not slag the departed. The thing to concentrate on is how good we were tonight.”

“Agreed,” said Mark, threading his fingers through his mane in an eloquent, practised Hair Lofting that was second nature to him. “It’s too bad there weren’t more than ten people here to see us.”

“It is a Monday night...,” said Scott weakly.

“Every night seems to be a Monday night lately,” Mark grumped.

The four bandmates sat silently for a time, contemplating the fickleness, bad taste and inexplicable immunity to the charms of Miracle Factory, as exhibited by the club-going public. Then Frank spoke.

“It’s Tuesday morning actually. Almost three. And we’ve got a gig scheduled 500 miles from here, with a

soundcheck in just a little over 24 hours.”

“Are you trying to tell us we should start humping equipment?” asked Scott.

“Fraid so.”

“Can we afford a motel?” ventured Phoebe.

“Everyone who wants to use tonight’s money to eat and put gas in our noble transport, raise your hand,” replied Frank.

“Oh, well, guess we sleep in the van again. Anyway, it’s kinda getting to where I can’t drop off without the smell of exhaust and a row of rivets in my back...”

Quickly finishing their beers, the four trooped out onto the small stage. Phoebe removed her extraneous skirt, the better to work. With lacklustre motions, watched over by the impatient owner, their activity causing ghostly echoes in the empty Slime Time, they struck their equipment and loaded it into their rotting ‘79 Econoline dubbed Zed Leper.

On the road, Mark driving, Frank riding shotgun, Phoebe and Scott in the back, several miles passed wordlessly, until Scott spoke.

“That gig was there again tonight.”

Phoebe stiffened. "No way."

"Yes way."

"Where? I didn't see him."

"You were zoned out on playing. But I spotted him right away. He hung out at the bar all night, never came out on the floor. Had half a dozen empty long-necks lined up in front of him by the time we finished our set. Never smiled that I could see, never spoke to anyone."

The memory of the stony-faced older stranger who had haunted their last five appearances across as many states welled up in Phoebe. Materializing only since her arrival in the group, he had plainly set his sights on her, focusing a piercing stare on her throughout each performance.

"This really creeps me out," said Phoebe nervously.

"Maybe he's a bigshot A & R guy, sizing us up before offering us a huge juicy contract..." said Frank half-heartedly.

"Yeah, and I'm Sinatra," replied Mark.

Phoebe turned on Scott, who sat next to her on a mattress placed on the narrow floor space between the ranked equipment. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Scott shrugged. "Didn't want to spook you. Besides, there's three of us watching out for you."

"That's right, Pheeb," said Mark. "We'll protect you."

"My sentiments exactly," added Frank.

Phoebe restrained an impulse to shout "bullshit!". Guys.... What was it about them? They meant well, but it was up to her to educate them.

"Well, next time, how about letting me in on what I'm being protected from, okay?"

"Sure, Pheeb."

"Right."

"It shall be as you wish, oh Mistress of Snares and Cymbals."

Phoebe stretched out on her back and rested her head on Scott's leg.

"For not telling me, you've got first shift as pillow."

"Cramp city, man!" said Scott good-naturedly.

Within minutes, Phoebe was so soundly asleep that even when, an hour later, the vector of their van changed abruptly from horizontal to vertical and they were engulfed by the spacecraft which had silently paced them since their departure, it took a whole ten seconds before the shouts of the others woke her up.

2. Put a Little Birdhouse in Your Soul

A pearly opalescence flooded the grungy interior of the van known as Zed Leper. The air was perfumed with strange scents: acid, electricity, brine and ginger.

Phoebe leaped to her feet, careful of the low Econoline ceiling.

Around her was utter confusion.

Scott was holding his head and moaning, having obviously failed to take Phoebe's sensible precautions, consequently whacking his noggin on the van's ceiling in the tumult. Behind the wheel, Mark was activating every control on the dashboard in a desperate attempt to regain command of the stalled van. Windshield wipers batted futilely at streams of washer fluid. Frank was rifling furiously in the trash

on the floor at his feet, saying, "The nunchuks, where are those goddamn nunchuks!"

Quickly deciding that her bandmates had plainly lost their scanty marbles, Phoebe asserted herself.

"Everybody shut up! Right now!"

Silence dropped, thick as a brick.

"Okay. That's better. Now – what happened?"

"We – we were just tooling along," said Mark, "when suddenly I could feel the wheels leave the ground. But I wasn't even sleepy, honest!"

"I thought we had gone over a cliff," said Scott.

"I stuck my head out the window," said Frank, "and something made me look up. There was a huge dark shadow blocking the stars. Then a square of white opened in it. It got bigger and bigger, then swallowed us."

"Where are we now?"

"Inside the freakin' UFO, I guess," ventured Mark.

"Heading who the hell knows where," added Scott cheerfully.

Phoebe considered, noting the van's open windows. "We can breathe and we can walk. Air and gravity... Let's get out."

She threw open the rear doors and jumped down.

Trepidatiously, the others followed.

The van sat in the middle of an enormous space. Walls and ceilings, if any, were lost in the pearly radiance that flowed from every direction.

Phoebe looked at the floor.

Her feet vanished at the ankles in the tenuous, hazy oyster-coloured substance, which seemed to offer spongy support at some unknown depth. Lifting a foot, Phoebe was relieved to find her clog-shod extremity apparently intact. Reaching down, she brushed the rarefied material.

"It's soft, with a nap, like, like – flannel."

Mark snorted. "Great. Probably built in Seattle then. Maybe something new from Boeing. Used to kidnap any competitors to the Northwest scene."

Scott was shielding his eyes against the mild glare and scanning the distance. Suddenly, he yelped.

"Someone's coming!"

The four huddled closer together as a figure approached out of the foggy glowing remoteness.

It was the stranger who had stalked them across five states. Dressed in nondescript Earth clothing, his face so blank and inhospitable as to make Harry Dean Stanton look like Marcel Marceau, he seemed an unlikely starship pilot. Perhaps, Phoebe thought, Mark had been right about this being a ship of human design, however unlikely that seemed. Or perhaps the stalker was a fellow prisoner...

Phoebe stepped bravely forward. "Did – did the aliens get you too, Mister?"

The man regarded Phoebe with the same unwavering fixity that had unnerved her onstage. Then he spoke.

"I am the owner of this vessel. You may call me Modine."

Their captor's insouciance was the final straw for the impetuous Mark the Snark. "We'll be calling you dead meat in a minute, sucker! Let's get him, guys!"

Before Phoebe could do more than shout an objec-

tion, the three men had pinioned the UFO captain without much of a struggle.

“Okay,” said Mark, facing the stranger while Scott and Frank held his arms, “are you gonna take us back home, or do I have to get rough with you?”

“No, please, you do not understand. I am bringing you someplace where your skills will be appreciated....”

Mark polished the knuckles of his fist on his worn denim shirt. “Don’t say I didn’t give you a chance.”

“I must warn you, this shell is fragile –”

Mark popped the stranger a good one on the jaw.

The alien’s head split open with a sound like the ripping of cooked turkey skin. A jagged crack ran up the middle of his face and down the back of his skull.

Horrified, Frank and Scott dropped him, and Mark stepped back.

Up from out of the lifeless cracked shell fluttered a small agile bird. It resembled a canary – as much as a Lexus resembled a Stutz Bearcat – except that it was coloured bright blue.

The supercharged blue canary landed on Phoebe’s left shoulder.

“I did warn you,” it said.

3. Is That You, Modine?

Oh-so-slowly, Phoebe swivelled her head to the left.

The little streamlined bird was still there, its claws gripping the fabric of her shirt. It did not weigh much. A hardly perceptible mass, actually. But Phoebe felt her shoulder muscles quivering from the alien’s presence.

Regarding her with a questioning expression, the azure avian dipped its head to peck at the feathers of its breast, then resumed eye contact. Plainly, it was waiting for Phoebe to speak.

“Are you – I mean, can it be –”

The bird was not helping her, and she suddenly grew angry.

“Damn it, is that you, Modine?”

“I am glad to see that you can accept the reality of my appearance. Races as primitive as yours generally deny the possibility of sentience in unfamiliar or unlikely forms.” The canary’s tones became prideful. “Yes, it is I, Modine, interstellar voyager and captain of the *Dustbath*. The artificial human shape you heedlessly destroyed—which was on the point of disintegrating soon anyway – was merely a camouflaged transport, a means of mingling with the natives. You see –”

At that moment, Mark lunged angrily for Modine. But the bird easily evaded his grasp, fluttering up to alight atop the van. Phoebe was relieved, both to straighten her neck and no longer to be functioning as perch to an alien budgie.

“Please,” advised Modine. “Restrain yourselves. It is almost impossible for you to harm me. And even if you could, where would that leave you? You could not possibly learn how to operate the *Dustbath*, nor how to navigate in twelve-space. You would be stranded at our programmed destination or – even worse, if you managed to interfere with the controls – in some nameless fractal dimension between Earth and the



Planet of Sound.”

“Planet of Sound?” echoed Scott. “What’s that? And why are you taking us there?”

“I shall explain all,” promised Modine. “Let us adjourn to the bridge, however. Unlike the cargo hold, it offers seats and refreshments, as well as a view.”

Modine flapped off, leaving the humans with no choice except to follow.

Phoebe took the lead, trotting to catch up with the speedy bird. It was weird to watch her feet disappear into the floor and re-emerge with each step, and she wondered again what the flannel-simulating substance of the ship was.

Just before the foursome caught up with their host, Frank used the opportunity to whisper to Phoebe.

“This uncanny bird is fixated on you, Pheeb. When it was stalking us on Earth, it always watched *you*. It landed on *your* shoulder. And it chose *you* for the test of appreciating its intelligence. If anyone is going to be able to get us out of this jam, it’ll have to be *you*.”

“Any other reassuring words?”

“We’ll be there to back your every move,” chimed in Mark.

“I thought not,” said Phoebe.

Now they were in what seemed to be a straight and level corridor of luminescent walls. Modine flew on ahead. Then disappeared.

Phoebe and the guys stopped.

“Modine?” Phoebe ventured tentatively.

The bird stuck its head out of the seemingly solid ceiling. “We’ll be landing in a few hours,” it said peevishly. “There’s not much time to waste.”

“But how do we get up there?”

“Just continue to walk.”

Modine vanished.

Shrugging, Phoebe took a step forward, then another, and a third—

There had been no sense of climbing, nor was she now experiencing any disorientation. But Phoebe appeared now to be standing on the corridor ceiling, her head pointing downward at the guys.

“You goofs are hanging upside down,” said Phoebe, smiling at their shocked expressions.

“No, you are,” said Mark.

“Well, my way is Modine’s way.”

“This is true,” said Frank.

“Let’s follow her!” said Scott.

Phoebe took another step, and disappeared.

She found herself in a medium-sized glowing room. Elevated mushroom-like cushions of the flannel-stuff sprouted from the floor. One wall appeared to be transparent, and gave a startling view: the *Dustbath* was apparently rushing through a medium that resembled an infinite sea of knotted multihued threads, ropes and cables twisting and contorting throughout colourless depths.

Modine was perched on a ledge in front of the view-wall. “Ah,” sighed the bird, “the glorious vistas of twelve-space never fail to stimulate and enlighten!”

Behind Phoebe, the guys popped into existence out of the floor.

“Please, be seated,” Modine said. “And I will serve

drinks.”

The humans complied, and Phoebe decided to use the moment to ask a question.

“Modine, what is this ship *made* of?”

“This craft is more of a mathematical construct than a solid vessel. It is composed of Cantor dust. Hence its rather punning name.”

“But what’s Cantor dust?”

“One takes an appropriate exotic material, and from it removes every tenth atom. Then from that mass, one removes every tenth atom again. This process is repeated approximately ten to the 20th times.”

Frank spoke up. “But that would leave almost nothing behind...”

“Almost, but not quite,” said Modine. “The resulting substance has some intriguing and useful properties.”

A floating platter appeared. On it were five bottles of Sam Adams. Opened. One with a straw.

“One of Earth’s finest products. Although I’ve taken a few liberties with its composition...”

Phoebe took a bottle and sipped cautiously.

The first swallow washed away a bone-tiredness and a sleepiness, awareness of which her mind had been suppressing.

The second swallow left her feeling as if she had won a Grammy, a platinum record and an MTV award simultaneously.

Modine, claws gripping the lip of his bottle, sipping from time to time at his own drink, began to lecture.

“I come from a mighty race. Our name for ourselves is unpronounceable in your language, but you may call us the Bowerbirds. From the primitive tool-using and construction instincts of my ancestors, who reared their bowers on rocky shores, arose intelligence and a highly sophisticated civilization. When we discovered faster-than-light space travel, however, we were unprepared to compete in galactic society on one very important level.

“You see, we could not sing or otherwise perform music. Always a minimal skill with us, it had finally been bred out of us, in favour of intelligence.”

Ignoring the paradox of a songless bird species, Phoebe asked, “But why was that so important?”

Modine slurped up the last of its beer. “Interstellar cooperation and competition is based on music. It’s the one arena in which all the multiform and multi-skilled sophonts can find common ground. For thousands of millennia, musical competitions have determined status and trade alliances, friendships and enmities, and hundreds of other relationships for which you have no terms.

“Luckily, we Bowerbirds were able to take advantage of a clause that allowed a client race to substitute for us. After much perusal of many Earth musical assemblages, I picked you to participate in the latest round. Your nearest competitor was a tribe of Pygmies, but I judged that their culture shock would be insuperable. You must all feel very honoured. Frankly, you were almost out of contention at one point. It was only when you added this one” — Modine pointed a wing at Phoebe — “that your sound and gestalt became compelling.”

Mark glared at the bird. "Let me get this straight. We're going to play in some kind of Star Wars battle of the bands, but you freakin' Bowerbirds are going to get all the credit?"

"Well, that is basically a correct summation of our respective duties and rewards. But I do hereby promise to take you straight back home if you win."

"And if we lose?" asked Phoebe.

"Most unfortunate. It happened to our last surrogate entry. They still have a century of indenture in the clubs of the Planet of Sound to while away. However, they are members of a long-lived species. And I understand that the free drinks served in most clubs to the performers are almost as good as Earth's beer."

4. Three Strange Days

Phoebe gazed out the window of their private guest quarters on the Planet of Sound. Alone, she was waiting for the guys to return.

She leaned on the window sill; it squeaked and accommodated itself to her elbows. Scanning the crowded plaza below, its decorative subsurface chaotic animations obscured by numberless creeping, crawling, hopping, strolling, rolling aliens, Phoebe thought she saw her bandmates at some distance... But no, not unless they had all grown tails. Which was not entirely impossible here. Was that them riding the millipede transport? No, the riders were too furry, even for Mark. Perhaps this huge approaching manta-flyer carried them? Whoops! The manta-ray shape had broken up into a flock of butterfly-sized self-similar components, each of which flew off in a different direction.

Phoebe turned away from the window, which bleated in relief. The diversity of the Planet of Sound oppressed her. She felt overwhelmed by the cacophony of voices and the shifting montage of skins and limbs and faces. It was seductive, yet repulsive at the same time. All she wanted was the familiar comforts of Earth. Even the ratty lounges of Slime Time and its cousins would be a welcome sight.

Feeling this way, when the others had wanted to go out exploring on their first free day since their arrival, she had begged off.

Damn that Terwilliger anyway! He should have known better. What kind of manager was he, running his charges ragged the day before the big performance?

Especially a performance with such high stakes.

They had to rehearse. They were getting overconfident and that would surely lead to sloppiness. She did not think the judges would much credit sloppiness, despite its respectable terrestrial lineage. No, chops and riffs and invention, wringing the most from one's equipment, were the musical currency here.

Two early easy victories had elated them. Modine's praise – not to mention a steady flow of doctored Sam Adams – had slackened their vigilance. The final crucial round, Phoebe was sure, would present them with some unique challenge.

She hoped that Terwilliger would not become tearful before the show, as he had prior to the others.

Phoebe had enough to worry about, without consoling an overemotional fish.

Weren't cold-blooded creatures supposed to be stolid anyhow?

Moving to her drum kit, Phoebe resolved that she would polish a few licks, even if the others weren't here.

And of course, just as she lifted her sticks, they all piled in.

Leading the group was Terwilliger. Basically, the alien was indistinguishable from an eight-foot-long walking catfish, from the tip of its broad tail to its stubby locomotive fins to the end of its barbels. However, no earthly catfish of whatever size had ever been constantly attended by a cloud of telefactored waldoes, ranging in size from microscopic to human-scale. The horde of manipulators formed and reformed to the fish's will.

Behind their guide, Mark, Scott and Frank were whooping and chattering. Plainly flushed with the excitement of their expedition, the guys were oblivious of Phoebe's stony-eyed glare.

"Man, what a trip!" exulted Scott.

"Sailing the Seas of Time-Cheese!" Mark explained for Phoebe's sake. "With Captain Toad Sprocket!"

"A most intriguing voyage," Frank thoughtfully added. "I was particularly impressed by the Captain's explanation of the formation and function of wormholes."

Terwilliger (whose real name was closer to T'-[blop]-woll-[splork]-grrr) spoke now in perfect English. "Luckily, we did not engender any shadow duplicates in our chrono-travels. Metacausality is a field well beyond my slender mentality."

As Phoebe remained silent, the guys eventually wore down. Finally she bit out a question, her voice stern.

"What are those things on your heads?"

Frank reached up to touch what appeared to be a wig made of purple polyester spaghetti. Even Terwilliger wore one.

"Oh, these are souvenirs of a famous winning group from many millennia past. Their trademark, apparently. Don't they look kinda like Beatle wigs?"

"An example of convergent evolution, from what the fellows have told me," said Terwilliger.

Phoebe threw down her sticks in disgust. "I've had it! Our entire future is on the line, and you guys are out sticking your heads or – or your *things*, for all I know! – in wormholes or something! Don't you have any sense of what's at risk here!"

The argument started the big catfish crying; huge tears plopped down onto the living carpet, which quickly absorbed them. Phoebe felt awful. But she had to slam some sense into them all....

Mark approached Phoebe and tried to soothe her. "Listen, Pheeb. Didn't we blow those first two acts off the stage? What have we got to worry about?"

"We can't assume anything!" Phoebe argued. "Those guys were jokers! The next race could still have an ace up their sleeves!"

The early competitors had been surprisingly amateurish. They wouldn't have lasted a week on the

demanding club circuit that had honed Miracle Factory. First had come the Balloon Men, spherical bipeds with pipecleaner limbs. Informed of their defeat, they had explosively self-destructed, splattering Miracle Factory and much of the audience with what appeared to be hummus, tomato paste and strips of skin. Next up had been a double-headed ambidextrous race, each of whose members had been able to play two instruments at once. They had been a little stiffer competition. But Miracle Factory, playing as they never had before, had triumphed, thanks to their unique blend of Earth's hidden treasure of rock 'n' roll.

Now Scott came forward. "What difference is one day's practice going to make, Pheeb? If we don't have our sound down by now, we never will. We were just trying to relax, you know? And if we don't see these sights now, when are we ever gonna get a chance to? I mean, we'll be back on Earth soon enough...."

"You hope," said Phoebe. "Oh, hell."

She came out from behind her drums and kneeled down beside Terwilliger.

"I'm sorry I yelled. It wasn't you. Stop crying, okay?"

As she was dabbing at the fish's eyes with the hem of her shirt, the door opened and Modine flew in.

"Tomorrow's matches have been posted," said the Bowerbird. "Your opponent is a one-man band, so to speak. The Bombardyx."

Phoebe stood, and fixed the bird with a determined look. "Now that the competition is almost over, will you tell us exactly what your race stands to gain if we win? I think we deserve to know."

The blue canary was quiet for a few seconds. When it spoke, its voice was respectful.

"You are a strange and forceful individual, Phoebe Summersquall. I have noted something puzzling about you ever since Earth, but I can't lay a feather on it.... Very well, since you ask what the ultimate prize is in this contest, I will tell you.

"Depending on who wins, either the Bombardyx or the Bowerbirds will be allowed to colonize Earth."

5. Close Your Eyes, Here We Go, Playing At The Talent Show

There was something extra in the sky, but none of the humans were quite sure it was a second sun. It had the apparent diameter of a sun, and gave out enough visible light to make staring at it painful. But the orb – whatever it was – also had a tendency to dart about disconcertingly.

Terwilliger noticed them looking. "One of the larger intelligences in this galaxy," the fish explained. "Constrained by its size to remain well outside the thicker atmosphere, it nonetheless wishes to watch the show. Their kind are notorious betters."

"Oh, Lord," said Phoebe. "People are betting on us?"

"Yes," agreed Terwilliger. "But the stakes are low, commensurate with the prize you are contesting for. No more than a single planet will be won or lost by any individual."

"What are the odds on us?" asked Scott.

"Even," replied the catfish. "But subject to fluctuation."

The members of Miracle Factory, along with many of the other variegated contestants, milled about next to the stage: a simple hexagonal affair, roughly half an acre in extent, empty at the moment. The stage stood in the middle of an enormous plaza, much bigger than the one visible from their quarters. There were no bleachers or other seating, no roof or walls to define the limits of the arena.

"Let's have an equipment check," said Frank. Their leader was visibly nervous. For that matter, so were they all. Scott was polishing and repolishing his eyeglasses, and Phoebe had to fight to restrain herself from doing the same with hers. Mark was subjecting his hair to such vigorous manipulation that she feared for its roots.

"A sound idea," said Terwilliger proudly. "This, I believe, qualifies as a tension-relieving pun...?"

"Just get busy," said Frank brusquely.

Terwilliger directed his manipulators around and, in the case of the micros, actually *into* the guitars, drums and keyboards belonging to Miracle Factory, as well as their various speakers and microphones and boards.

"All is fine. I did detect a slight weakness in one of Phoebe's membranes, but it is now repaired."

"I didn't know you still had that membrane, Pheeb," said Mark the Snark with mock innocence.

Phoebe punched him in the shoulder. "Jerk!"

But she didn't really mind. For the joke had served to diffuse their anxiety a bit. And just in time.

The virtual arena was assembling itself.

From every quadrant came floating platforms of all sizes. Those carrying species which could tolerate the Planet of Sound environment were open to the air; others were closed and transparent; some were opaque. (For the benefit of shy riders – or easily frightened onlookers? wondered Phoebe.)

Within a short time, the stage was nearly englobed by a mosaic of hovering spectators: snouted, scaled, tendrilled; puckered and peppered with pseudopods. Automated cameras took up positions closer in. Although Phoebe had witnessed this assembly twice before, she was still impressed.

"Who'd ever think we'd get to play a stadium tour before we even got signed?" asked Scott with forced whimsy.

"Quiet!" said Phoebe. "We should be scoping out the level of talent."

"It's only the Bombardyx we have to worry about," said Mark. "Whoever he might be out of all these freaks."

"May I remind everyone," said Frank, "that we still haven't decided what we're going to do once we get onstage...."

Their choices were pitifully few. To throw the contest, dooming themselves to an indefinite term of servitude and handing Earth over to the unknown Bombardyx. Or to go all out for a victory, gaining a return trip to a planet soon to become a Bowerbird fiefdom – whatever that entailed. And any refusal to play would count as a surrender, Terwilliger had told

them.

"Yes," the fish had continued, "your options are not many. But this comes from being a lowly client race. If only you could claim consanguinity with one of the full-status species, things would be different."

Frank's reminder went unheeded now, for the first band had taken the stage.

A dozen impish creatures clad in rubbery unitards unfolded a large mat. Each took up a marked position. Then they began to perform incredible acrobatics. Their movements evoked a wild spacey wailing that soared and keened.

"It's like a theremin," said Frank. "They're modulating some kind of energy field by their leaps and tumbles."

Theimps finished, and their rival took the stage: a flock of pterodactyl lookalikes whose long bony beaks were pierced with holes and played flutelike: musician and instrument as one.

Voting now took place. Results were flashed as hieroglyphic holograms in the air. Although the humans could not interpret the signs, the attitude of theimps told all: they had lost. Led away by robotic guards, they trudged gloomily along, showing none of the easy movements they had exhibited onstage.

"Tough crowd," said Mark weakly.

The battle of the bands continued, fast and furious. Unimaginable sounds, amplified or natural, filled the air. Melodious or screechy, atonal or pentatonic, brief snatches or long intricate sequences, the music swelled, roared, murmured and cascaded over the listeners. Winners exulted and losers slumped as the audience displayed their approbation or disapproval with various noises of their own.

Phoebe began to grow disoriented. The alien musics were almost succeeding in making her forget all she knew about playing Earth music! She wished for earplugs, but the band had never used them....

There was a moment of silence. Phoebe spotted robo-roadies carrying Miracle Factory's equipment into place. She prepared to ascend the ramp leading onstage.

Modine flew up then. Behind him tagged along a tray of Sam Adams.

"I brought along some refreshment to toast your success," said the blue canary.

Numbly, Phoebe took her beer, but did not drink it. She addressed the Bowerbird.

"We hate you, Modine."

The canary seemed somehow to shrug. "This is an understandable reaction. But I in return do not hate you personally, or your species. Our close contact during the past few days has led me to believe that we Bowerbirds might have made a mistake in seeking to acquire Earth, which appears to have more potential for self-development than we first estimated."

"Then call off the show!" shouted Phoebe.

"It is rather too late for that. However, I urge you to play your best, and retain the hope that all will be well."

Modine flew away.

The four humans took the stage.

Strapping on his guitar, Scott said, "I still can't get



used to no cords.”

Terwilliger had modified their equipment to use onboard powerpaks and digital transmission.

“Thank God he didn’t mess with my drums,” said Phoebe. She set her beer down within reach, and hung her extra sticks in their stick bag within easy reach. Hate to break one and not have a replacement during such a crucial performance....

His bass in place, Frank stepped up to the mike.

“Hello, uh, fellow sophonts. We’re Miracle Factory, from Earth. And we’re here to play you some, ah, ‘modern’ rock ‘n’ roll.”

Mark ripped off the opening to “Dirty Dawg” on his keyboard and began to sing. The band took off.

By the fourth song, Phoebe could tell they were playing as well as they ever had. She only hoped it was good enough.

By the end of the set, she was drenched in sweat. As the last notes of “Lost in Hilbert Space” rang out, she felt that no one could possibly beat them.

Then the Bombardyx appeared.

It was as big as a four-story building, an irregular block of oddly protuberant devices mounted on treads. It moved slowly up the stage-ramp. When it attained the stage itself, Phoebe could feel the structure creak.

Terwilliger had stumped up to be with them. Phoebe turned to the fish.

“What – what is it?”

“The Bombardyx is a type of hermit-crab creature, a small organic slug. This one appears to have taken up residence in a leftover Symphonium device from the Disintegral Era of the Lesser Splenetics.”

“Is this within the rules?”

“Apparently so.”

Now the Bombardyx began to perform.

It started by duplicating Miracle Factory’s entire set, note for note. Then, like a master jazz improviser, it elaborated on all the tunes, reconfiguring them into a whole ingenious suite.

When the hidden creature was finished, Phoebe knew that they had lost.

Glyphs burned in the air. Terwilliger gasped.

“It is a tie! The Bombardyx lost points by stealing your compositions. You both must perform again!”

Phoebe had not an ounce of energy left in her. Looking at her sagging friends, she knew that they did not either.

Her eye fell on the bottle of Sam Adams.

She lifted it, and the others brightened. The guys grabbed theirs, and everyone chugged them down.

The familiar invigorating spell cast by Modine’s adaptation of the Earth brew swept through Phoebe’s limbs.

Miracle Factory began their encore.

As Phoebe drummed, she felt strange changes overtaking her: swellings and tentative writhings along her midriff. Things were growing beneath her shirt!

There came a ripping sound, as her shirt seams popped.

She looked down at herself.

She had sprouted four extra arms, two on each

side. Fully formed limbs, apparently – yes! – under her complete control.

Without hesitation, she grabbed up her extra sticks.

The guys missed a beat, then recovered. “You go, girl!”

Phoebe began to drum. Really drum. For the first time in her life, she could do everything she had ever envisioned – with sticks, anyhow.

The others had stopped now.

It was just Phoebe, drumming up a storm.

It was the longest drum solo in history. Not to mention the most complex.

An hour later, she was done.

Phoebe collapsed. The guys clustered around her, lifting her up. She clung to them with all her hands.

Unimpressed, the Bombardyx began to vent its reply.

A platform swooped down on the stage, interrupting the building-sized creature. Out of the vehicle stepped a biped.

One with six arms.

The alien turned and faced the audience, and began to speak.

Terwilliger translated. “He says you are plainly a lost larval form of his race, the Sextuples. As such, you cannot be clients. This contest must be deemed null and void.”

Phoebe couldn’t believe it. Getting to her feet, she let the guys help her from the stage.

Modine was waiting for them.

“I told you, did I not, to hope for the best?”

Phoebe drew herself up. “You did this, didn’t you? We’re not any relation to that race.”

“The Sextuples happened to owe the Bowerbirds a favour. A simple cell-potentiator with morphic overlays and some neuronal enhancers in your drink did the rest.”

“Now we can go home!” said Scott.

“And Earth is saved!” said Mark.

“Thanks to Pheeb!” said Frank.

Lifting Phoebe to their shoulders, the guys paraded her around, Terwilliger frolicking at their feet and Modine flapping around Phoebe’s head.

“I assume these extra arms can be gotten rid of fairly easily?” said Phoebe sternly to the canary.

“Yes. A simple resorptive –”

“I’ll have it now, if you don’t mind, Mister Bird.”

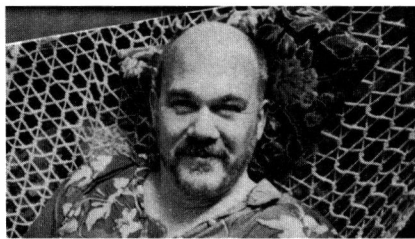
“As you wish.”

“But I’ll use it when I’m good and ready!”

Paul Di Filippo’s first story for us was “World Wars III” (issue 55) and his most recent was “Big Eater” (issue 96). His debut book of fiction, *The Steampunk Trilogy*, came out in 1995 (Four Walls/Eight Windows Press), and others are pending. He lives in Providence, RI, and he is now a regular book reviewer for *Asimov’s SF*.

A Bible for Mad Bombers

Thomas M. Disch



Since it first appeared, self-published, in 1978, *The Turner Diaries*, William Pierce's fictional scenario for the overthrow of the U.S. by right-wing terrorists, has gathered an ominous reputation as the favoured reading of neo-Nazis and extremist militiamen. For years before the Oklahoma City bombing, Timothy McVeigh acted as the book's evangelist, travelling to gun shows and selling copies at five bucks apiece. Though often cited by the press in background stories about neo-Nazis, it is known to those outside McVeigh's milieu chiefly through brief citations of its most lurid apocalyptic moments, as in this much-quoted L.A. street scene describing "The Day of the Rope":

... the night is filled with silent horrors; from tens of thousands of lamp-posts, power poles and trees throughout this vast metropolitan area the grisly forms hang.

In the lighted areas one sees them everywhere. Even the street signs at intersections have been pressed into service, and at practically every street corner I passed this evening on my way to HQ there was a dangling corpse, four at every intersection. Hanging from a single overpass only about a mile from here is a group of about thirty, each with an identical placard around its neck bearing the printed legend, "I betrayed my race." Two or three of that group had been decked out in academic robes before they were strung up, and the whole batch are apparently faculty members from the nearby UCLA campus. [p160]

The book's story line traces the arc of a standard action-adventure movie, with a gradually escalating series of acts of terrorist violence. The difference is that Earl Turner, Pierce's hero, is the perpetrator, an arch-terrorist whose posthumously published diaries chronicle – usually, in the matter-of-fact tones of a hi-tech Robinson Crusoe – his criminal career. One early vignette (page 10) depicts the murders of a black liquor store clerk and two Jewish deli owners by Earl and his comrade Henry. Seven pages later, another comrade's death is avenged when the Cook County sheriff has his head blown off by a shotgun. A "responsible conservative" reprehends such behaviour on TV, and his car is bombed. The ante is upped steadily. Bombs level buildings; the U.S. Capitol is attacked by mortars. When the "Organization" (as Turner's group calls itself; their enemies are the "System") gets hold of nuclear warheads, whole cities are wasted – even, in the Epilog, the entire continent of Asia.

Purple passages, like that quoted above, and ideology are kept to a minimum. Pierce concentrates on creating a plausible scenario that emphasizes, as in a Tom Clancy techno-thriller, weaponry and the logistics of its deploy-

ment. People, in the usual novelistic sense, scarcely enter into it. Earl has a girlfriend, Katherine, by way of establishing his *bona fides* as an action hero, but Pierce doesn't waste his time on character, dialogue, or mere interpersonal conflict. He is just as indifferent to creating enemies, even of the two-dimensional variety. The bad guys rarely survive for more than a single page, and then wham, bam.

Bad guys are legion. Basically, everyone who is not an official member of the Organization is an enemy of the white race and so deserving of death. Among those strung up on the Day of the Rope are: "the politicians, the lawyers, the businessmen, the TV newscasters, the newspaper reporters and editors, the judges, the teachers, the school officials, the 'civic leaders,' the bureaucrats, the preachers, and all the others [who implemented] the System's racial program." [p 162] Pierce devotes a few passages of stern moral instruction to explaining why thousands and millions deserve to die, and the reasons he gives will be familiar to all true believers: The future requires it. But such moments of ideology usually register as window dressing. Germany's neo-Nazi rock group Storkraft is more candid in its celebration of the skinhead ethos. They sing, of their heroic ideal:

*He has no morals and no heart.
The features of his face are made of
hatred.
He loves war and he loves violence.
And if you are his enemy, he will
kill you.*

Those whose take up Dick the Butcher's battletory of "Let's kill all the lawyers!" (*Henry VI, Part 2*) have usually been written about rather than being writers themselves. That gives *The Turner Diaries* an unusual interest. Low-brow terrorists are usually represented in fiction as objects of satire and/or horror, not of sympathy. But even so, when Dick delivers that line, there is always a complicitous titter in the audience. In our Mr Hyde hearts we are all anarchists and murderers, and that accounts for the success, variously, of Mickey Spillane, Brett Easton Ellis, Oliver Stone – and William Pierce. They know how to press our darker buttons. This has become a truism on the Freudian couch, where Oedipal conflicts and Hyde-ish dreams, can be taken in stride, but at Marx's barricades an older sense of high-mindedness still obtains. There Us and Them are still Black and White, or vice versa, as the case may be.

As it happens, Pierce has written another novel, possibly even more opprobrious than *The Turner Diaries*, at least with respect to its potential for provoking emulation. In *Hunter*, of 1989, Pierce scales back his hero-killer's agenda to drive-by killings, first of interracial couples, then of Jews. And lest we think this just a work of imagination, and not a do-it-yourself instruction kit, he dedicates the book to Joseph Paul Franklin, a firebomber of synagogues and sniper murderer of blacks. Clearly, Pierce has refined his sense of who his target audience is – not just those who are turned on by Rambo movies, but those who groove on the much commoner genres of movies about serial killers. Fortunately (so far as we know), *Hunter* has yet to be taken up by the Timothy McVeighs of the world.

The construction of novels is, in many ways, a system of apprenticeship, a set of technical skills handed down from one craftsman to the next. Pierce's novel is no exception. Significantly and/or embarrassingly, the most notable role models for *The Turner Diaries* are of the left – pre-eminently Jack London's exercise in apocalyptic future history, *The Iron Heel* (1907). London's schema is much the same as Pierce's – a digest of several years of ever more dire fictional news flashes that can be extrapolated from today's headlines, with a good many interpolated sermons to the converted. London's P.Q. (Prescience Quotient) still seems phenomenal. He predicted World War I – except that he allows it to be averted by a General Strike. Then a disastrously botched socialist revolution leads to universal repression and the triumph of the Oligarchy, otherwise known as The Iron Heel. Leftist sf almost invariably represents its hopes as doomed, and the same Iron Heel would triumph

Photograph of Thomas M. Disch by Geoff Spear

again in the pages of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*.

What these novels have in common (Pierce's included) is a conviction that the secret mission of the Government, wherever and whenever and whatever its official agenda, is to crush its own people under that Iron Heel, even unto extermination. Modern history would suggest that that is all too often a fair assessment of the role of government: Haussmann's redesign of Paris; Nazi death camps; the Soviet gulag; and current events in Rwanda, Sarajevo and Indonesia. The list could be amplified with examples at state, county, and municipal levels.

Such a vision of the State as a conspiracy of sadist puppet-masters has become a staple of contemporary fiction and film-making. Think of the mass drowning in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, or the gloating sadism of Pasolini's *Sado*. The most vivid expressions of that vision tend to be, like *Metropolis*, works of science fiction, since sf writers are not under the compunction (which constrains other conspiracy theorists) to square their worst suspicions and dreads with the facts. It is hard to rewrite the past (which is why Holocaust Denial is an uphill battle), but the Future, like the moon, belongs to everyone.

In our time (the last half-century, let's say) the most accomplished, and successful, sf writer with a right-wing agenda has been Robert Heinlein, and having read *The Turner Diaries*, I'd lay odds that if William Pierce has any literary ancestor whom he would consciously acknowledge, it would be Heinlein, who, time and again, depicted the need for poor, downtrodden supermen to take up arms against an alien conspiracy masquerading as the Government. In *The Puppet Masters*, they were alien slugs who could become, Body Snatcher-wise, your next-door neighbour or the cop asking you to pull over. In Heinlein's masterfully paranoid allegory of 1951, McCarthy's heyday, the slugs equalled Communists, those enemies (like Pierce's) who are anywhere you cared to point a finger, or pull a trigger. Heinlein, like Pierce, was a great believer in radical solutions.

The Heinlein novel that most evokes the spirit of *The Turner Diaries* is *Farnham's Freehold* of 1964. In that book a white family is rocketed, by nuclear apocalypse and the author's whim, to a future century dominated by blacks who have reverted to cannibalism. (Blacks in *The Turner Diaries* take only a week to do the same thing.) Then, having shown a little spunk, the family, reduced to two, is returned to their bomb shelter, from which they emerge to establish a survivalist, gun-toting utopia, exactly of the sort that is

being carpentered together, here and there, in the Pacific Northwest today.

The difference between Heinlein and Pierce is chiefly one of talent and success. Unlike Pierce, Heinlein knew how to plot a novel that would compel a reader who has no fixed ideological agenda into turning the pages. Only true believers can read Pierce with any sense other than the morbid fascination one feels at being allowed a glimpse of the inner life of a psychotic. Accordingly, Heinlein's books have sold millions of copies. He was probably the most successful sf writer of his time, even without the advantage of having his best work made into movies. He was surely the most venerated by sf fandom, and the most imitated by sf writers who are commercially successful today – among them, William Forstchen, Newt Gingrich's collaborator on *1945*.

Heinlein succeeded because he could imagine other people, including, often, his enemies. That is the special gift of novelists – and one that, blessedly, William Pierce entirely lacks. In H. Bruce Franklin's telling critical commentary, *Robert A. Heinlein: America as Science Fiction*, Franklin pinpoints what is most alluring and pernicious in Heinlein's work – his solipsism. Heinlein likes to imagine a universe whittled down to just his own consciousness; he envisions beaches on which Friday's footprint is an illusion. Franklin interprets this as symptomatic of Heinlein's right-wing politics, but such solipsist mind-games feature as prominently in the fiction of Philip K. Dick and Ursula Le Guin.

Heinlein's exercises in philosophical egotism – like those of Dick and Le Guin – are thought experiments. In the work of William Pierce, it is the final truth. No one else exists, and nothing else matters, except the terrorist fiddling with his bombs. That is why kamikaze true believers of whatever persuasion – the Unabomber, the Ayatollah, William Pierce – are so unnerving. They insist on being heard, but they cannot listen – because we simply are not there. We are the enemy, existing only to be bombed.

What then to do with such a book? Till now, the machineries of publishing have dealt with it by the simple expedient of returning the compliment: they ignored its existence. You may find it at the gun-show tables of Timothy McVeigh's confreres, but don't look for it at a book store. It won't be there.

Should even a First Amendment absolutist think about banning *The Turner Diaries*? Probably not, if only from a prudent concern for the publicity value of censorship. Rather, why not take a hint from Pierce himself? The springboard of his plot is the government's disarming of registered gun owners – a possibility that is

right at the top of the paranoid right's list of favourite fears. Realistically, there are too many gun owners for that to be practicable. But if they rounded up, instead, those known to own *The Turner Diaries*?

Just a suggestion – and one that Pierce's more prescient fans may have already anticipated, now that the book has been mentioned on the front page of *The New York Times* (July 5, 1995) and quoted extensively within. After such publicity, and more of it certain to follow, can one assume that *The Turner Diaries* will remain an "underground" classic? Already it has sold, according to Pierce, 180,000 copies. What if someone in the publishing industry thought there were a larger market to be tapped?

Thomas M. Disch

Editor's Note: the above piece by Tom Disch was written for a recent issue of the American weekly, The Nation. (And his review in our last issue, of Peter Washington's Madame Blavatsky's Baboon, was first published in The Hudson Review, Autumn 1995.) We are grateful to Tom Disch for allowing us to reprint the two pieces for a British audience, and to the two named journals for having had the wit to commission them in the first place.

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Animal Whimsy

Chris Gilmore

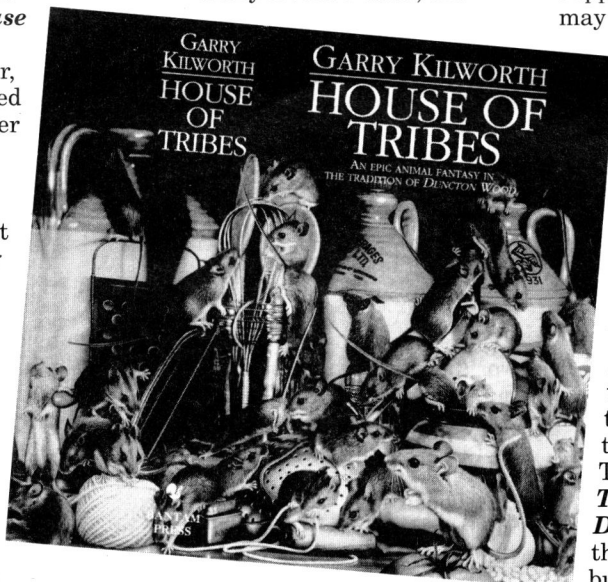
Regardless of the quality of the Rwriting, there hangs about all animal fantasies a miasma of unease, which I attribute to an insoluble discord between the vehicle and the author's intention: unless the animals behave in a way consistent with the known behaviour of their species, there is no point in their being animals; yet unless they appear to be possessed of approximately human intelligence and at least quasi-human motivation, they will lack human interest – as C.S. Lewis says somewhere, if we could talk to the animals we would find they talked nothing but shop. Unhuman interest becomes even more fraught when one considers sexual relations. That the higher animals can feel affection (or something closely analogous thereto) for their mates is hardly to be denied, but romantic love sits ill with the oestrus cycle.

This factor seems to embarrass all but the most inferior writers, and expresses itself as a form of whimsy. Hugh Lofting, Richard Adams, Kenneth Grahame, Beatrix Potter – they all find it necessary to stand back now and again to remind us that none of this is really happening; to suspend disbelief totally would be too childish. The only exception of any stature is Anna Sewell, and *Black Beauty* is informed by such rage at the ill-treatment of horses that it blows the embarrassment away. Garry Kilworth is not an exception; his latest, *House of Tribes* (Bantam, £12.99) recounts the adventures of Pedlar, a country mouse who is summoned by a mystic dream to visit a rather run-down and already mouse-infested villa. The tribes which inhabit it are differentiated by nomenclature and to some extent by dialect, the fortunate holders of the larder having Viking names, the permanently drunk inhabitants of the wine cellar speaking stage cockney with a touch of low Irish, the Bookeaters in the library having medieval Welsh names and loquacity to match, and so forth.

This offers plenty of scope for humour, but it's humour of an arbitrary kind. For instance, the mouse word for human being is "nudnik," in overt reference to *The Naked Ape*. Yet that word is also Yiddish for "tedious person," and mice can have no more conception of the Yiddish than any other human tradition. One of their own alleged beliefs is that houses are the shells of extinct giant snails, which is a pretty fancy but doesn't really belong in the same universe as the Bookeaters' tendency to regurgitate florid diction absorbed from their diet. Other jokes are too obscure to be funny: all the chapters are named for different varieties of

cheese, but unless it's a simple reference to de Gaulle's famous epigram, Kilworth's system is either nonexistent or too deep for me.

That said, the jokes are many and work more often than not, while the book has much else to commend it on many levels. Pedlar, the



central character, is attractively presented as a serious-minded young man (or mouse) of sound instincts and proper upbringing, grittily determined to pursue his destiny among the disparate occupants of the House. He has no real understanding of them or it, which is less disadvantageous than it might be; they are variously warped by their unnatural environment, with which they are more familiar than he, but understand no better.

House of Tribes contains both an anabasis and the ousting of the humans from their dwelling, thereby inviting

comparisons with *Watership Down* and *Animal Farm*. To a great extent it deserves both; Pedlar's character is fit to set beside Hazel's, the animals' visual perspective is just as convincingly portrayed, the way the rival cats insult each other in schoolgirl French parallels the black-headed gull's Dutch accent and so forth. But Adams scores above Kilworth because his was a book with a message; having passionate beliefs about duty, privilege, obligation and sacrifice, he expressed them through his narrative. It was a high-risk strategy – a strident message combined with low artistic standards is rightly derided, the more so when the message is by no means universally approved – but for him it worked.

Likewise with *Animal Farm*. George Orwell's allegory of human affairs was big enough to accommodate the figure of Boxer, whose tragic grandeur Kilworth nowhere attempts to match, and its concluding lines must be among the most famous in all literature. *House of Tribes* has no such pretensions, but there are enough parallels for its lack of pretention to count against it. In particular, the last section, where Pedlar leads the rest on a journey to a new "Promised House" is weak; Kilworth makes some half-hearted attempts to find parallels with Exodus, but neither the opening situation nor the incidents en route support him. One feels that Pedlar may have gained depth from his experience of leadership, but in terms of anything greater than himself, his is an inconsequential story, and the choice of the ancestral voices as arbitrary as the humour. Let it so be judged: as a high-class entertainment for children of all ages it's in the front rank of its kind, but a new classic it ain't.

Many years ago I read (I think in *Playboy*) a story based on the premise that Hell is where they water the drinks and the tarts all have names like Jenny Talia. In Robert Rankin's latest, *The Garden of Unearthly Delights* (Doubleday, £14.99), there's a tart called Jenny Talier but the jokes aren't watered, even if some of them are re-treads.

The basic idea has been used before but still has plenty of mileage: suppose that the universe has continuity, but the laws which govern it are not only variable but discontinuous – they can change instantaneously between coherent but mutually exclusive sets. What will the change be like for those who experience it? Especially, how much worse will the change be for a man who is cata-pulted from the end of one era (our own) to another, well-established era, where the rules are very different?



The central character, Maxwell Kerrian, is a typical Rankin ne'er-dowell who could understudy Barry Mackenzie or Warren Peace without difficulty, but the writing on this occasion is better than any he has done before, and a universe ahead of the rather disappointing *Most Amazing Man Who Ever Lived* which I reviewed in *Interzone* 98. It's not too much to say that *Garden* reads a bit like three parts Jack Vance to one of Robert Sheckley through a coarse mesh; indeed, *Garden* has more the flavour of *The Eyes of the Overworld* than anything else of Rankin's.

Like many of the best humorists, Rankin relies heavily on perverse references to the staples of genre fiction, but he brings to them a surreal flavour (also to be found in the Brentford books) which is typically his own. This shows up most in the early scenes, where our own time is showing the early signs of impending paradigm shift. Karrien's wife has expressed her disapproval of his failings as a husband by exchanging his favourite armchair for a goldfish in a plastic bag.

Maxwell took the plastic bag his wife was holding and examined its carrot-coloured contents. 'This fish is dead,' he declared.

The dear one sighed and rolled her eyes. 'Of course it's dead, Maxwell. It would be cruel to keep a live goldfish in a plastic bag, wouldn't it?'

As often happens to Rankin's heroes, Maxwell is cruelly manipulated and callously betrayed by almost everyone he encounters in both his own collapsing time and the Age of Myth and Magic wherein he finds himself, and wherein (after an abortive attempt to resurrect the glories of commercial TV on a village scale) he gets Sent on a Quest. The quest is for the perfect woman, progenetrix of a new race, who needs to be reunited with the perfect man before progeny can be expected. A worthy goal, save that the wizard MacGuffin, who sponsors Maxwell's expedition, desires only to take voyeuristic pleasure in observing their coupling once they're a couple.

Thereafter structure is episodic as, accompanied by William, a small boy of preternatural learning who in Sheckley style plays Sancho Panza to his Quixote, Maxwell lurches violently and ineptly on his way. Cugel the Clever was spurred by an Aldebaranian monster in his guts, Maxwell's soul is in pawn to the villainous MacGuffin, but the level of tension is much the same – both books are to be read for their ornamentation, the stories existing more to impose discipline on their writers than for any inherent merit. Rankin's ornamentation is robust, ingenious and rude in

places. Moreover, he takes a rather complacent delight in tying up all the loose ends. I begrudge it not, only wishing I could say the same of some other, more pretentious writers.

And on the subject of more pretentious writers... I read the first word of Terry Goodkind's *Stone of Tears* (Tor, \$29.95; Millennium, £17.99) and groaned aloud. The word was Rachel, the name of the loathsome kiddiwink whose *faux-naïf* conversation and thought-processes are such a blemish on his otherwise excellent *Wizard's First Rule*, reviewed in *IZ* 90. It gets better – Goodkind's previous use of multiple viewpoints has been restricted to consist almost wholly of Richard's and Kahlan's, so Rachel's input is much reduced – but first impressions are important. Moreover, in the earlier chapters Goodkind doesn't quite maintain the standards of the first book. This is in part because lacking (I presume) confidence that his readers have either read *Wizard's First Rule* or will wish to, he has inserted explanatory data dumps, often as Ron-&-Don dialogue, for the sort of people who buy only the second volumes of multiple-volume works. Who they? The ones who get something cheap off a remainder stall to read on the plane, I suppose, but why defer to such a market?

The story opens scant hours after the first book closes, and already the world is under threat from forces yet more malevolent than the late Darken Rahl. (I just wish writers of heroic fantasy could throttle back occasionally – why not a threat bad enough in all conscience, but less world-threatening than last time?) On this occasion the threat comes from the Keeper of the Underworld, an entirely supernatural entity rather than a mere wizard, and with correspondingly less personality. It finds the principals scattered, with Zedd setting up the new regime in the People's Palace, Richard and Kahlan off on what they hope to be their honeymoon, and a new character prophesying Kahlan's doom for the good reason that he's a prophet. He's more interesting than most prophets, for his prophecies take the form of a decision tree. As it's often impossible to be certain where a particular vision belongs (it may even relate to the "future" of a branch already super-

seded by events) he's a doubtful asset, but potentially too valuable to let go – at least, in the eyes of the dedicated sisterhood who have control of him.

Thus re-enters a typical Goodkind theme. *Wizard's First Rule* was almost as much about control of Fate, self and others as it was about sacrifice, and the Keeper's desire to merge the worlds of the living and the dead is of far less interest than the tensions surrounding the love of Richard and Kahlan. He bears responsibilities as the Seeker and bearer of the Sword of Truth; to these are added the further burden of burgeoning magical powers, which he must control lest they destroy him. Kahlan, as a Confessor, has the power to make anyone of either sex fall unselfishly, uncritically and permanently in love with her, plus some magic of her own which manifests itself only when she is enraged. Any son of theirs would most likely be both a male Confessor (regarded as an abomination, to be killed at birth) and an hereditary wizard of the first rank.

Characters with so much going for them must be figures of the highest dignity, lest they become ludicrous. It's a tribute to Goodkind's skill that he manages to avoid that, even when the consummation of their love is constantly thwarted by Richard's sudden blinding headaches, but he doesn't entirely avoid the banal. All too often he will vitiate a scene of extreme pain and high drama by inserting a leaden paragraph analysing the mental state of a participant.

After the first hundred or so pages, with the taste of Rachel out of the mouth, the book picks up considerably. Goodkind's emotional range is skewed heavily towards the dark end of the spectrum, but no one handles his favourite situation with more conviction. Time after time people of great intelligence and sensitivity are forced by circumstance to choose between their own best chance of happiness and the greater good – with no certainty that their sacrifice will be effective. Unusually but effectively, this extends no less to the agents of evil; they are as unflinching in self-sacrifice as the good principals, and all the more formidable for it.

Goodkind also gets round the impersonality of the Keeper by conjuring up the extremely vivid shades of Darken Rahl and Denna, the ultimate SM dominatrix, from the earlier book. For good measure he adds a figure of evil that many will find instantly familiar, though I don't recall meeting her in fiction before – cue Sister Verna, whom any primary-school teacher will recognize as the Dinner Lady from Hell. Condescending, narrow-minded, invincibly ignorant, with securer tenure than the Head and certain to make a pet of the playground bully (even if he isn't her



grandson), she has charge of Richard's wizardly training. Welcome back, Denna, all is forgiven! – except that Verna must not only be circumvented but reformed and redeemed.

This is a big book, involving rather more magical objects than is altogether wise, and more treachery than *Where Eagles Dare*, but its structure is sound enough to carry them, and depends on two interlinked themes: that of female dominance over men, which appears in forms of bravura variety, and that of high-mindedness, practised by both Richard and Kahlan to the point of suicide and beyond, but in a manner which successfully contrasts the merciful male with the pitiless female principle throughout. Not everyone will agree with Goodkind's vision, but the interplay has the strength and conviction to unify the book. Moreover, Goodkind ties off his loose ends quite as carefully as Rankin – except for one. The offspring, especially the first male offspring, of Richard and Kahlan is going to have rather a lot of troubles of his own...

Having praised his last collection *A Tupolev Too Far* in *Foundation* 63, I wish I could say as much for Brian Aldiss's latest, *The Secret of this Book* (HarperCollins, £15.99). Unfortunately, I must say instead that it has little unity of feeling, it's uneven in quality and the overall impression is that of a collection of "posthumous and fugitive pieces." Aldiss is evidently aware of this, and has padded the book out with short linking passages of... well, almost anything, really, as long as it evokes *The Tempest*, doesn't take much effort or both: here an autobiographical anecdote which may well be true, there another which is probably false, elsewhere comment on the difficulties of staging Shakespearian ballet. At times it's hard to distinguish the links from the stories.

The blurb states that "The stories almost become chapters in a long, curious novel," of which the best to be said is that the word "almost" is inadequate to redeem a falsehood. And for the actual contents? It begins promisingly with a neat little fantasy on a favourite Aldiss theme, the artist entrapped by the Eternal Feminine, but thenceforth it's mainly downhill. It's not all dross, but far too much is the self-indulgence of a writer who outguns his editor – the bane of Scott, Dumas, Heinlein (write your own list). Hence the inclusion of "A Swedish Birthday Present," which is a character study of a deeply uninteresting character. By his own admission, Aldiss hawked it around all the decently paying markets before giving up and placing it here as an original. He ascribes its rejection to "Its

length [at 13 modest pages, fifth longest in the book] and the fact that it has a foreign country named in its title." Wrong: it's one of all too many that should have been worked up into something worthwhile if possible, gone in the bin if not. Were Aldiss in any doubt, he should really have hawked it all the way down till someone accepted it for a fiver and a year's free sub, and then noted the sort of company it was keeping.

In another context Aldiss shows more respect for his readership. "Horse Meat," a study in corrupt power reminiscent of Tanith Lee at her most nihilistic, has been revised slightly from its first appearance in *Interzone* 65 so as to make the rape of the delicate virgin by the stallion more anatomically plausible, and to have the satanic Lord Lunn demand that her mother "fellate" him instead of the rather vulgar expression originally used. If my memory serves me, both changes were demanded in the course of the considerable correspondence that story generated.

Although not to every taste (for a start, not entirely to mine), it's the strongest story in the collection. Others include "Headless," a slight piece similar to an old idea by Christopher Priest, "Three Moon Enigmas," which recalls Aldiss's own style in *The Moment of Eclipse*, "A Dream of Antigone," in which a condemned man attempts to undo an ancient tragedy with partial success (my own favourite) and "The God who Slept with Women," which begins promisingly when a very young contemporary Greek girl becomes pregnant by a god much in the manner of Danae, but deteriorates when Aldiss, having chosen to trifle with Einstein's mass/energy equation, mishandles the transformation. "Evans in His Moment of Glory" is a death-and-after story, original only in its silliness. Aldiss has never written badly and doesn't here, except in the anti-Shakespearian bit and another excursion into doggerel towards the end of "Becoming the Full Butterfly" (familiar from *IZ* 93), but he usually writes to much more purpose. I wouldn't be without this book, but at £16? Wait for the paperback! – Oh damn! Now I've given away the Secret!

Chris Gilmore

Was Charlotte Perkins Gilman the Female John W. Campbell?

Gwyneth Jones

Long ago when I was masquerading as a trainee academic (I mean, I was an undergraduate), I had a friend who had perfected what she called a brilliant work-free method of writing essays. She would skim through the texts she was supposed to have studied, identify key sentences and copy them by hand. She'd then cut the sentences out, arrange them in some kind of sequence, stick them on paper, copy it all out by hand again: and there was her essay. I was unimpressed by this peculiar form of method-acting. I couldn't see where the labour-saving part came in – dear girl (I might have asked), have you ever tried *thinking*? But she was right, of course, and I was wrong. With the trifling difference that genuine scholars usually identify their sources, the average, proper, grown-up academic text reads exactly like one of my friend's essays. Academics, even the most original of them, spend nearly all their time recounting what other people have said on the same subject. New ideas come after the citations, and are hinted at so cautiously you may miss them altogether. That's the way it's supposed to be done.

The first of these studies, *Female Rule in Chinese and English Literary Utopias* by Qingyun Wu (Liverpool University Press, £15) has the maximum of original content. Wu's proposition is that there is an uncanny agreement between Chinese and English-speaking literary Utopias, in their treatment of female rule. In the *ur-form* (written by people who have no idea of challenging the inferior status of women) *Women's Rule* is set up as a exemplary monstrosity, just for the sake of knocking it down. At the end of these stories *Ideal Justice* (the ideal both of Feudal Europe and Confucian China) is restored, and all proper women are glad to resume their submissive, inferior position. At another stage a woman in a man's role – or a woman deliberately impersonating a man – seizes male power and keeps hold of it. But the story implicitly accepts that she will remain an exception, a rarity: the female



ruler is a sanctioned monster. Both these fictional models can arise in feudal society, just as real-life female monarchs can triumph, in exceptional cases (Elizabeth I; Empress Wu). The next stage, where female rule involves the “feminine” political ideas of collectivism, consensus, social equality, pacifism, is linked – in China and the English-speaking world – to industrialization, mass politics, mass communications. Finally, utopian writing becomes able to challenge the original concept of Ideal Justice. An anarchic, female-ordered society is depicted not as a revolutionary ideal but as the natural state of man.

It might be argued that this final stage is not as hopeful as it looks. If female-ordered anarchy is the natural, original state of human society, then it is also the natural substrate of millennia upon millennia of male-ordered hierarchy. I don't know that getting back to the beginning of this cycle is such a terrifically great idea; I have doubts about the Golden Age dream. I'd have liked to have seen more recognition in this study of the fact that the feudal models of female rule are still extant, and eminently recognizable, in modern fiction (not to mention the real world); and maybe less faith in Progress as a benign and irreversible process. But the parallels drawn between the traditions are fascinating. The English-speaking texts are well known (Spenser's *Faerie Queen*; Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*; Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*). I doubt if many *Interzone* readers (with the possible exception of D. Wingrove) have met any of the Chinese fantastic fictions Wu cites in tantalizing detail. They include: *The Destiny of the Next Life* by Chen Duansheng – a young woman of the Imperial middle classes, writing in 1796 and challenging her own desperately constrained destiny in a complex and romantic political adventure story – and *Destiny of the Flowers in the Mirror* by Li Ruzhen, a male writer of a slightly later date using the technique of “writing about women” as a means of introducing radical ideas to the general public. And there are several others.

In *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress Towards Utopia* (Liverpool University Press, £15) Carol Farley Kessler makes large claims for the subject of this literary biography: “For so important a person, Gilman has been grossly under-studied...”; “Her ‘Women And Economics’ is a major creative work, not aesthetic or belletristic to be sure, but sociological and expository in its innovative thought, its creativity, its expectation of fomenting social change...” It is salutary to be reminded of the status of Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her

heyday: “one of the ten or twelve best known women in the US” – indefatigable conference-delegate, public speaker, mover and shaker in the contemporary Feminism Industry, which was as much a part of the media and academia scene as it is today. Her best-known work, the feminist Utopia *Herland*, published in 1915, tells the story of three archetypal young men (the nasty macho one, the soppy women-worshipping one, and the sensible one) who stumble into a lost world where men have been extinct for 2,000 years. Society in this utopian state is run on ideally female, nurturing and mothering lines by a race of morally superior, physically perfect, eugenically selected, strapping Aryan ladies.

Herland itself, for all its latent racism and snobbery, commands respect. It still reminds me, a modern female reader, of how much has changed: of how much freedom and independence I take for granted. But as Kessler herself admits, the perception of Charlotte Perkins Gilman as a profound humanist thinker founders (as her reputation had foundered, within her own lifetime) on her limited conception of human worth. She was a lioness of the lecture circuit, a great believer in the professionalization of womanhood, but she had no time for degenerate immigrants, no sense of racial injustice; and a brutal faith in the power of money. She was a woman who found “women's work” intolerable, who was driven to genuine insanity by post-natal depression and an oppressive first marriage: and yet was convinced that most women (other women!) would be happy and fulfilled in their natural domestic sphere, if only they could make a businesslike career out of their chores. Kessler's study, while making a strong case for her lasting influence (which, arguably, extends over the whole subsequent history of US feminism), does not manage to rebuild her wider reputation. But it ably demonstrates – in the most convincing way, by presenting large chunks of her own writings – the links between Gilman's utopianism and early science fiction. It's all here: the techno-optimism, the entranced faith in automation and mass-production, the idealised corporate society, where every individual finds true freedom in slave-like devotion to the Company. I was left

feeling that Charlotte Perkins Gilman and John W. Campbell were natural kin. It is a lasting injustice (despite my reservations about both parties) that they are not recognized as such: that Gilman remains the outsider, a subject for *women's studies*, with no place in the sf hall of fame.

The selection from her writings is very interesting indeed. My only regret was that Kessler didn't include “The Yellow Wallpaper,” presumably because it is too well known. This study of a human being driven mad by the demands of “womanhood” stands mysteriously alone in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's work. Honest and terrifying, without a trace of snake-oil, perhaps it's the only real story she ever dared to write.

U*topian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference*

is a collection of essays edited by Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerten (Liverpool University Press, £15). Here the citations crowd thicker than ever; and several of the essays are no more than show-and-tell lists of plot summaries and story titles, laced with comments from previous critics. Carol Kolmerten's trawl through Charlotte Perkins Gilman's contemporaries, “American Women Envisage Utopia, 1890-1920,” discovers the heartening Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant's *Unveiling a Parallel* (1893), where wicked cigar-smoking female executives swagger and philander on Mars, demonstrating the writers' belief that “womanhood” is not innate and incurable. Otherwise, a variety of dashing tomboys show their mettle in public life and industry. But they always (as in the feudal model of female rule in fiction) wisely retire at the end of the story, into wedded bliss.

Jane Donawerth's study of early magazine sf, “Science Fiction by Women in the Early Pulps” features a selection of the strong female characters created by the hordes of female sf writers who always seem to come pouring out of the woodwork in studies of the early genre. If only these women had known, or noticed, that they were so numerous! But like the writers themselves – though Donawerth cunningly deciphers secret acts of narrative rebellion – the rocketship heroines obey the rules of the boys' club. They take second place to their men; they let male scientists and rocketeers take the credit for their work; they pretend to be men, and when unmasked instantly give up their active roles. And again, I was left wondering why the essayists merely repeated the rote women's-studies “celebration” of women in sf, while refusing to discuss the disturbing fact of all this self-censorship.

I felt that the relocating of Mrs



Gaskell's *Cranford* as a feminist utopia (in Rae Rosenthal's essay "The Cranfordians and the Rule of Goodwill") was a little strained, much as I admire that gentle fictional community. The same goes, as she herself admits, for the daydreams of the *precieuses* of 17th-century France, described in "Islands of Felicity" by Ruth Carver Capasso. Gender patriotism is not enough. The conviction that women are naturally and generally better people than men is compatible with the most conservative sexual politics. However, the essayists' brief is not to discover feminists (though they sometimes forget this), but to write about women writers imagining other worlds. In this category Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, certainly belongs: and I wish I had heard about her extraordinary creation, *A New Blazing World*, when I was supposedly studying the intellectual history of 17th-century Europe. Alas no, I was stuck with the lads.

But in the most reflective of these essays – and in Susan Gubar's introduction – the contributors actually engage with the work of the artists, examining point by point the who-does-what-to-whom of the narrative, and how far this reality conforms

with an abstract notion of feminist art. Michelle Green struggles with the bleak and shocking narrative position taken by Octavia Butler (and fails, as other have failed, to fit Butler into the conformist limits of "women's studies" expectations). Sarah Lefanu has something of the same tussle with Naomi Mitchison's *Solution Three*. In Naomi Jacob's "The Frozen Landscape" the sequence that begins with an examination of Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World* ends in the contemplation of stranger images: the deathly emptiness of the icefields in Ursula Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness*; and in another Le Guin story of a secret all-woman expedition to the South Pole. This ideal world has nothing lush or feminine about its contours. In the ice a woman can

be free from "womanhood"; and all its soft constraints.

These three texts, all of them reprinted for the Liverpool University Science Fiction Texts and Studies series, from the Syracuse University Press, may have more appeal for scholars and specialists than for the casual reader. But if you are interested in the subject they are certainly worth tracking down, if only to check out the bibliographies. I'm left with a tantalizing book list. You can get hold of Margaret Cavendish's writings in a Penguin Classics paperback edited by Jane Lilley, 1994. (Which I did, and found her imagined worlds fascinating: astonishing, bold and bizarre "fantastical writing" from a very well-informed female student of the scientific revolution. Highly recommended). Sarah Robinson Scott's *Millennium Hall* was a Virago reprint in 1986. That should be findable. But I fear I'm going to wait a long time for an English edition of Chen Duansheng's *Zaisheng Yuan*; or Li Ruzhen's *Junghua Yuan*. Are there any Chinese scholars out there who would like to try convincing a UK publisher to commission the translation?

Gwyneth Jones

F*ar Futures*, edited by Gregory Benford (Tor, \$23.95) is an anthology of five stories that announces itself as "new novellas of hard science fiction by living masters of the form." Benford's ten-page introduction sets the stage, or rather the universe, of discourse. Basically, it's all over: the universe is doomed, there is no outside, no chance, no God, we will all die, and one day everything will die and then it will all be as if nothing had ever been.

The first story, "Judgement Engine" by Greg Bear, carries on in the same vein. It concerns social minds, at the very end of the universe, dealing with some obscure project that, possibly, will preserve live into the non-existent future. For reasons of their own they have to "resurrect" (i.e. run a simulation of) some of the human minds which built their ancestors.

Poul Anderson's "Genesis" similarly takes place entirely in the simulations of group minds vaguely descended from humans who uploaded their personalities into artificial intelligences millions, if not billions, of years ago. And, what a surprise, they resurrect some old human personalities for some purpose.

"At the Eschaton" (Charles Sheffield) plays it the other way: it starts with a human who, by the usual sf means of cryogenics and relativistic speeds, seeks to preserve his life to the end of the universe, where he can meet his dead wife again at the Omega Point.

Far Futures, Bright Reefs

Ken Brown

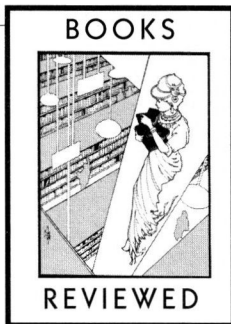
Of course he gets there as part of a group mind which needs to simulate his personality. The best of the downbeat stories is Joe Haldeman's "For White Hill," set thousands of years in the future among artists returning to Earth to commemorate the destruction of the planet by unknown alien enemies using invisible nanotechnology. Everybody dies at the end, of course.

There definitely seems to be a consensus about the far future here. Perhaps all these writers know something we don't. It is all very worthy stuff, well-written and deadly serious, but it is hard going. I'm sure the far future was a lot more fun when I first started reading sf. Maybe I was just in the wrong mood for this book, perhaps I am too weak and feeble to handle all this stark staring of death in the face, but for me the stand-out story is "Historical Crisis" by Donald Kingsbury.

It is nothing more than a parody of *The Foundation Trilogy* – possibly mixed with references to the Lensman stories, some recent stuff by Walter Jon Williams, and half a dozen other pieces of skiffy you vaguely remember reading. It's set in the Second Empire and concerns the fate of a renegade Psychohistorian who dared to publish "Early Disturbed Event Location by Forced Arekan Canonical Preposturing: an Analysis in Three Parts." And it's brilliant.

I wish I could say the same about *Djinn Rummy* by Tom Holt (Orbit, £15.99). It provided some light relief, but it is very much in the mould of Holt's other, and generally better, books. As usual some mythological creatures break into the life of a normal English person – in this case certain very unpleasant Djinni who are sponsored by multinational corporations. As usual they are foiled by naive opponents who almost accidentally exploit their traditional weaknesses – such as the rather obvious one that Djinni have to do what you tell them if you release them from their bottles. I liked the novel, but that is as far as it goes. It would be an excellent book to take on a train or plane journey, but I suspect most readers wouldn't worry overmuch if they left it on their seat when they got off the train.

When I started reading these three books I expected that *Brightness Reef* by David Brin (Bantam, \$22.95;



Cherryh Season

Neil Jones

Orbit, price unknown) would be the one I would enjoy least. I was wrong.

Jijo is a planet somewhere in the outer wilderness of Brin's "Uplift" universe. It has been officially declared "fallow," evacuated by civilization so that the ecosystem can recover and possibly give rise to new species that may be future candidates for "uplift," the process whereby one species takes another in charge and raises it to sentience. For reasons not fully explained in this first volume of a trilogy, Jijo has been repeatedly settled by renegade groups from a number of galactic civilizations – there are supposedly six of them, but with clients and a possible native species as well there are at least eleven species mentioned.

After centuries of warfare the refugees have achieved a way of living together based on the idea that they must lose their industrial technologies and regress to a natural state, deliberately restricting their population and their environmental impact on the planet, so that their descendants may be found acceptable on the inevitable day of judgment when the Galactics return to assess the supposedly fallow planet.

The most recent arrivals are members of a human religious cult who brought with them a huge library of paper books. If any of the others had such things in their past they have long since forgotten them. It is decided that, as paper is bio-degradable, it is legitimate to use books in the transitional period while there is still a civilized society. A few centuries later paper books, and the English language, have become the glue that binds six diverse alien species into a common culture and gives them a common history.

So the story starts in an astonishing Green utopia, a world made safe for sf readers and environmentalists. Each of the six main species lives in its own style, but in peace with each other and sharing a love of literature. This is a world where unimaginable aliens read *Tom Sawyer*, *Treasure Island* and *Moby Dick*, where everyone lives at peace, where everyone has the chance to fulfil themselves by adopting some traditional environmentally friendly useful craft or trade. It is very strongly reminiscent of the Mars in C. S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*. Of course, it can't last. A starship enters orbit, and its crew are not at all what was expected. And it cannot be a coincidence that one of the main characters has named himself after the protagonist of Arthur Clarke's *Against the Fall of Night*...

Brightness Reef is exuberant, sentimental, suspense-filled, very tongue-in-cheek, delightful, and generally over-the-top. I couldn't put it down, and I'm looking forward to the sequel.

Ken Brown

In the past year, the prolific C. J. Cherryh had four sf novels out near-simultaneously from two different UK publishers: three are hardcovers – *Tripoint* (Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99), the latest entry in her Alliance/Union future history; *Rider at the Gate* (Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99); and *Invader* (Legend, £15.99) – while the fourth is the paperback edition of *Foreigner* (Legend, £5.99). The Legend books are parts one and two of a new sequence chronicling the interaction between a group of marooned humans and an alien race, the atevi.

Tripoint is set in the aftermath of the Company War that brought both the two interstellar superpowers, Alliance and Union, into being. Relations between them are beginning to settle down, making life somewhat easier for the inhabitants of the space stations on both sides of the border, and also for the merchanters whose starships ply the interstellar trade routes that sometimes cross it. But there is a legacy of tension and bitterness that could lead to conflict, such as the vendetta between two merchanter ships: a long time ago, a boy called Austin Bowe met a girl called Marie Hawkins when their ships – *Corinthian* and *Sprite* respectively – docked together at Mariner station. What might have been a romance became rape. Now, years later, the two ships are again in dock together, with Bowe the captain of *Corinthian*, a ship with a dubious reputation, and Marie Hawkins, perhaps not entirely sane, set on getting her revenge without much regard for the safety of her own ship. Caught in the middle is their 23 year-old-son, Tom Bowe-Hawkins. When Marie's plans go wrong, he finds himself shanghaied aboard his father's ship, with *Corinthian* heading for Pell Station, on the Alliance side of the frontier, *Sprite* in hot pursuit, and other forces taking a hand...

This is territory that Cherryh has covered comprehensively before and

so it is no surprise that the intensely realized portrayal of life aboard merchanter starships, both the regimented but relatively comfortable life on *Sprite* as well as the harsher existence Tom is forced to endure on *Corinthian*, is both absorbing and convincing. Her characterizations, too, are strong, with neither Austin Bowe nor Marie Hawkins fitting into neat persecutor/victim stereotypes. Mainly though, this is Tom's story, swept along by his mother's obsession to confront a father he has never known and a half-brother who has no reason to feel any affection for him. At one level, it is a story of survival, at another one of Tom finding a place for himself in the universe, equally gripping at both, and it arcs to a typically dramatic Cherryh climax at the Tripoint of the title.

Future historians are likely to find the glimpses of the fate of the Fleet, the big losers in the War, satisfying. And yet, even after a string of books detailing the period, one element of this otherwise finely-crafted background remains puzzling: Alliance was brought into being by an alliance of Pell station and an *ad hoc* merchanter fleet (see *Downbelow Station*) and would now seem to comprise Pell Station (and adjacent life-bearing world), plus the largely defunct stations of the Hinder Stars on the route to independent Earth. Union, not reliant on merchanter power, has a network of trade routes between a string of long-settled stations and is thus very clearly an interstellar superpower. But where are the routes (besides the one linking Union and Earth) and the stations Alliance's founding merchanters would need for survival? Where is the wealth-base to sustain Alliance as an interstellar state capable of holding the Union juggernaut at bay?

Whether or not the other three books belong to the Alliance/Union series is hard to determine – which is a shame as, thanks to the sheer density of accumulated background detail, events and characters, any new addition provides the future-history aficionado with both new enlightenment and the basis for some intriguing speculation.

In the case of the stand-alone *Rider at the Gate*, the ambiguity is not all that crucial since the book centres on an isolated and low-tech human society – presumably a colony long cut-off from wider human interstellar society, whether that is Alliance/Union or something else. The planet would be idyllic were it not for the psychic powers of the various native animal species, whose telepathic images can drive humans mad and make them easy prey for predators. Most humans huddle together in a string of claustrophobic townships; only the few men

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and women who have formed partnerships with individual nighthorses, a native telepathic species, can venture out across the world. One side-effect of this partnership is that the riders effectively share their horse's telepathic powers.

The story opens with news of the violent death of a rider woman and of a rogue horse at large, news which dangerously disrupts the fragile telepathic calm of a rider encampment. Young Danny Fisher, a town-bred boy who has recently bonded with an unruly nighthorse, Cloud, finds himself caught between various groups and individuals, including the woman's lover who is intent on hunting the rogue down and avenging her death.

Rider gives a convincing and relatively fresh look at a low-tech society both threatened by and dependent on telepathic creatures, although its relative lack of sf signposting leaves it positioned uneasily between rather old-fashioned sf and outright fantasy. And, as with Cherryh's fantasies, although the story rises exponentially to a strong and satisfying climax, the book's long, slow, initial build-up is rather heavy going.

Foreigner and *Invader*, the two atevi books give a wholly different impression. These are set either very far from Alliance/Union stars or in a different imagined universe entirely: although there is nothing that specifically links them to the future of *Tripoint*, the general background and technology, including the spacer/stationer division, are quite consistent with it. So the Earth that the starship *Phoenix* set out from could well be the Earth of Cherryh's main series, excluded from a whole section of the galaxy by Alliance and, beyond it, Union. If so the starship was presumably pointed in the opposite direction when something went seriously wrong and it ended up utterly lost. Which could bring it near the multi-species Compact stars of the Chanur series of books – and so here, unlike the case of *Rider*, the question of which universe the series belongs to is tantalizing – because the atevi are amongst Cherryh's most fascinating aliens, and their possible interactions in the wider Alliance/Union universe would be very welcome.

Whatever version of the future the starship was in, it was carrying all the skills and equipment needed to build a station in its target star-system. Eventually, its crew and passengers did just that around a tempting Earth-type world, which happened, inconveniently, to be inhabited by an

intelligent species at a roughly medieval level of development. After the starship and its crew departed for long-term exploration of the region, the passengers decided to relocate to the planet's surface, recklessly giving up their space-going capability. As generations pass, relations with the natives – the tall, dark, humanoid atevi – go from friendly to disastrous as hostilities erupt without, so far as the humans are concerned, any warning.

Cherryh dramatizes the background above in two brief and unnecessary sections, but the real story starts 200 years later and on page 53 of *Foreigner*, with an assassination attempt on

develops to the point where it may be assimilated. Both books centre on Cameron and his struggle to protect the human enclave's precarious position in an alien society that is exceedingly hard for humans to comprehend because the atevi have brains that are hardwired very differently. They are obsessed by numerology, which is reflected in their language, and lack bone-deep human instincts for building personal attachments – for example they have 14 words for betrayal and none for trust. Instead atevi relationships are based on drives such as man'chi, primary loyalty to an association or leader, which is not just a cultural artefact; it is a basic drive found in other animal species on the planet. Since individuals can hide their man'chi – and the principal means of solving social/political problems is through assassination – an individual's true loyalty is of major and abiding concern for everyone in their society, including Cameron. Add to

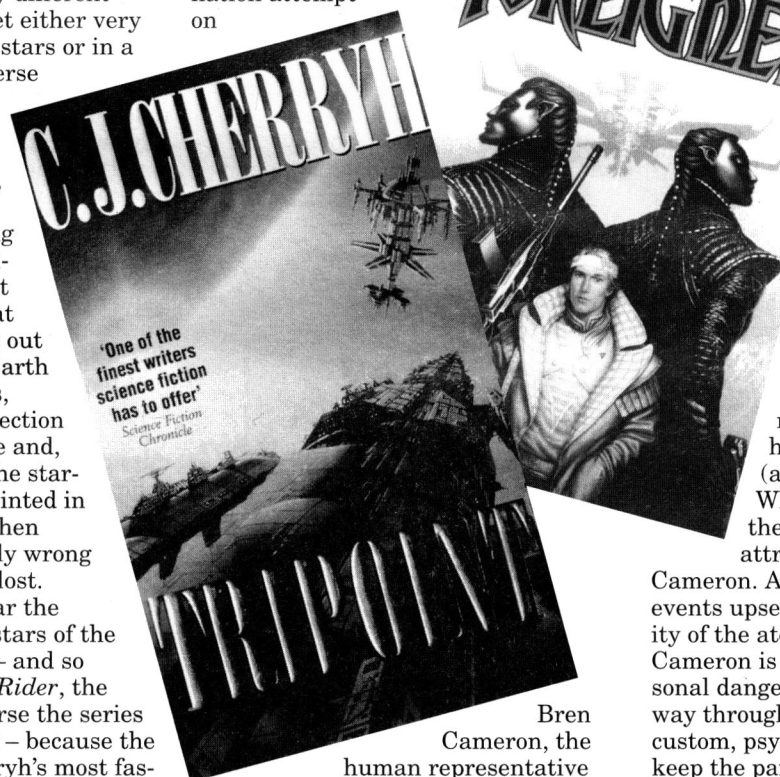
this a society whose technological development has been artificially accelerated to the point where social strains are becoming ever more apparent.

Cameron's main atevi associates are with Tabini, current leader of the Western Association, and Tabini's two body-guard/assassins, Banichi and Jago. Just to further complicate things, Jago is female, and because the atevi are, despite their alien mindset, disturbingly humanoid in appearance (as two excellent Michael Whelan covers testify), there is a nascent mutual attraction between her and

Cameron. As a dramatic turn of events upsets the hard-earned stability of the atevi-human relationship, Cameron is put in considerable personal danger, and is forced to feel his way through the minefield of atevi custom, psychology and society to keep the partnership alive. *Foreigner* leaves Cameron and us with the illusion of his having successfully resolved the situation but *Invader* takes up the story almost without a break and he's in just as much trouble as he was before.

In all four books – in fact in all Cherryh books – although the protagonist is (Cameron) or will shortly become (Tom Bowe-Hawkins and Danny Fisher) pivotal to determining

C.J. CHERRYH
A NOVEL OF FIRST CONTACT
FOREIGNER



Bren Cameron, the human representative to the atevi state known as the Western Association. Cameron is the paidhi, the sole human permitted off Mospheira, the island reserved for humans. Fluent in the intricate atevi language, although much less certain of their alien psychology, he is both interpreter and technological liaison, because according to the terms of the peace treaty all human technological knowledge must be transferred to the aliens as and when their society



the story's outcome, each of them have only the haziest notion of what is going on since their every associate has all sorts of infuriating reasons for telling them (and us, because we know only what the protagonist knows) next-to-nothing about it: Cherryh makes her protagonists – and her readers – sweat. So, as usual her books are demanding reading, much more so than most of her competition, but the extra effort is generally worth it because she delivers thoughtful and well-crafted stories and, usually, a stirring climax.

As for the atevi, Cherryh has worked hard at making them genuinely alien and psychologically different from Earth-evolved life in profound ways, something not all that common in sf. She has been writing aliens from the beginning of her career and getting both better at it as well as steadily more ambitious – a good example would be how she took the kif from above-average cloaked baddies in the first Chanur book to well-realized and convincingly different aliens in the later books of the series. While her very early aliens, such as the mri of the *Faded Sun* trilogy, came over as more human than humanoid, sociobiology later supplied templates for the leonine hani (of the five Chanur books) and the wolf-derived shonunin (of *Cuckoo's Egg* – one of her books that has long deserved a sequel). But the atevi have no obvious animal derivation, no shorthand way for readers to grasp the way they think, and so they mark a quantum leap in Cherryh's xenological repertoire.

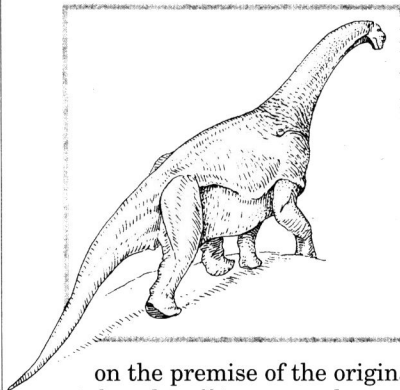
The question is, does their alien psychology convince? The honest answer is almost, but not quite. A basic problem is that since the viewpoint character, Cameron, comes to feel comfortable around atevi, so do the readers – and being human, we ascribe familiar feelings to characters we get to like, such as Jago and Banichi, no matter how often Cameron reminds himself (and us) they don't possess them. Beyond that there is the question of how and whether the atevi mindset would have evolved in the first place – and I was left unconvinced: their psychology felt rather too much like an ingenious construct. So in the end the atevi come over as about as alien as the Japanese in James Clavell's *Shogun* – which is actually very high praise indeed since Clavell produced a more fully-realized sense of a completely alien mind at work, with wholly different perceptions and priorities, than the majority of sf writers ever do. The atevi are intriguing, and Cherryh has worked hard enough at realizing them, their world and its society to allow her readers to at least suspend their disbelief which is a fine achievement in itself. In short, she's on good form.

Neil Jones

Dyouthinkhe-saurus Coming?

James Lovegrove

It's hard to feel sorry for Michael Crichton – phenomenally successful author, film-maker and TV producer, with an annual income reported to be in the region of \$40 million – but the pressures he was under while writing the sequel to *Jurassic Park* must have been awful. Thanks to Spielberg and some breathtaking computer animation and animatronic model-work, *Jurassic Park* is no longer Crichton's baby; it has grown and mutated into a multi-million-dollar monster, a Frankenstein franchise. So any chance that the sequel might expand



on the premise of the original, might take off in new and unexpected directions, was doomed from the outset. Crichton has had to keep one eye on the fact that the book is inevitably going to be adapted into a movie, and movie sequels as a rule chew up, swallow and digest the elements that made the first movie successful then vomit them up in a less appetizing mixture. In *The Lost World* (Century, £15.99) the constraints Crichton was under show. Unless he is a man truly unafraid of compromise, even he must have felt, as he pounded the book out, that he was selling himself, and admirers of the first novel, short.

For a start there's that title. The *Lost World* theory is, apparently, a

well-known hypothesis in palaeontological circles, referring to the possibility that somewhere on the planet there is a self-contained environment so isolated from human civilization that dinosaurs still exist there, as postulated by Conan Doyle in his novel of that name. Back when Doyle was writing, that such a pocket of the past could have survived would have seemed plausible. Nowadays, in a world that has been charted by satellite to the smallest pixel, it's more of an intellectual conceit than anything. The theory has some relevance to Crichton's novel, in as much as most of the action takes place on a remote island where dinosaurs left over from the Jurassic Park breeding programme have been allowed to roam free, and the word "lost" carries echoes of the book's subtextual concern, which is the problem of extinction, but still, to use the title of one of the first and best-known dinosaur novels for your own dinosaur novel shows either perversity, hubris or a terrible lack of imagination.

As to the plot, it is virtually indistinguishable from that of *Jurassic Park*. Six years on, the park on Isla Nublar has been closed down and all the dinosaurs there destroyed. But it is rumoured that large lizard-like creatures are turning up on the coast of Costa Rica, dead from some inexplicable disease. Richard Levine, an independently wealthy and intellectually arrogant young palaeontologist, is putting together an expedition to investigate the rumours, and enlists the aid of chaos mathematician Ian Malcolm (the only character from the previous book to reappear in the sequel). Malcolm, who as we all know was badly injured on a similar expedition six years ago, is at first reluctant to go, but his scientific curiosity gradually gets the better of him, and when Levine disappears on a scouting mission to a second island where he believes the dinosaurs are located, Malcolm is obliged to mount a rescue mission. He is accompanied by his friend and not-quite-lover Sarah Harding, a ballsy biologist, and by two engineers, Throne and Carr, who have built vehicles and weapons to Levine's specifications that should be able to cope with the sort of creatures they expect to encounter. Oh, and there are two kids, Kelly and Arby, who tag along for the ride as stow-aways.

And it's the inclusion of the kids that clues us in to what's going on here. The two children in *Jurassic Park*, the novel, were peripheral characters. In the movie, thanks to Spielberg, the action centred around them. In *The Lost World*, only by the most artificial of plot devices can Crichton get Kelly and Arby to the island, and it seems even he cannot believe he

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has been quite so cynical, because he is thereafter unable to justify their presence in the novel or make either of them credible as characters. Kelly and Arby are not ordinary children. They are geeky geniuses who are both, of course, fiendishly handy with computers. They talk like adults, but at the same time their sole function is to ask basic but pertinent questions whenever anything complicated needs explaining in terms simple enough that a genius kid, or the average adult, can understand.

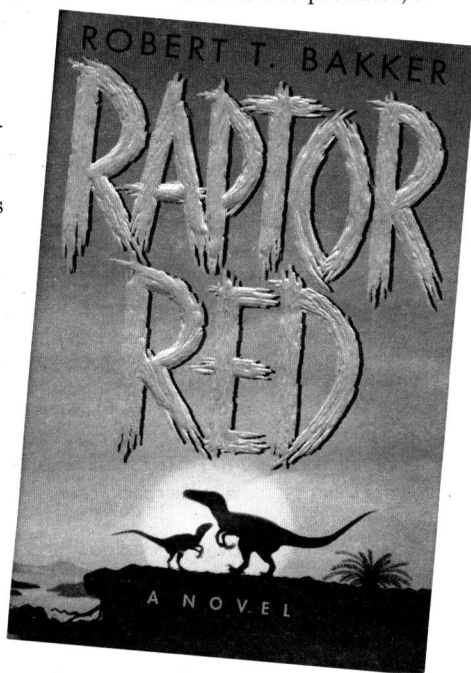
Kelly and Arby are the shrillest harmonics in the strained note of contrivance that resounds through *The Lost World*. To manoeuvre his characters, with all their expensive, specially-designed equipment, into situations where they are in danger of being eaten, Crichton has to twist plot and motivation into pretzel shapes, and although there is the occasional palm-sweat moment, for the most part the *T. rex* chases and raptor attacks and all-terrain vehicle-crashes are lacklustre and perfunctory, there not because they belong but because they are expected. It goes without saying that the dinosaurs act, as they did in the original book, as a kind of moral nemesis: all the "bad" characters end up as dino-dinner, all the "good" characters survive.

One of the "bad" characters goes by the name of Lewis Dodgson, and if Crichton wants us to make the association with the author of *Alice in Wonderland*, we can only do so disparagingly. *Jurassic Park* was, indeed, a Wonderland, but *The Lost World* fails to take us through the looking-glass, merely holds up a dull, distorted mirror to its predecessor.

Palaeontologist Robert T. Bakker claims to have been an "unofficial consultant" to the special-effects artists involved in the making of the movie of *Jurassic Park*, by which one assumes he means they asked him for a lot of advice on dinosaurs but didn't pay him for it. Now he has decided, quite rightly, to grab a piece of the pie for himself with *Raptor Red* (Bantam, \$21.95; Bantam Press, £9.99), the story of a female Utahraptor (the palaeontologically correct name for the velociraptor) and her struggle to survive in prehistoric America, find a mate and raise a family of little baby Utahraptors.

As plots go, it's hardly a bone fragment, but then Bakker has deliberately avoided anthropomorphization, and without human-like dialogue and interaction there's not a lot that can be achieved in the way of dramatic tension or character arcs when your cast consists entirely of big lizards and small mammals. Evolutionary necessity and natural selection are

the prime motivating factors in *Raptor Red*. The novel is a single strand in the vast ongoing story of Life, and yet in spite of the fact that she embodies all that is brutal, cunning and selfish in Nature, Raptor Red herself comes across as an admirable and indomitable figure. Reading the book, you find yourself growing fond of a vicious predator, a



dinosaur no less.

Bakker writes in a chatty, informal style. Sometimes his datadumps are a little too long on detail, and he has a penchant for bizarre, ungainly sound effects – TTTTWWUNK!, Whooph-whooph, Zip-blb-blb-blb, Bffffffft – but his gift for getting you inside the head of, say, a turtle and seeing and hearing and smelling everything from a turtle's point of view is remarkable, and the whole lost world of 120 million years ago is wonderfully realized. How much of what Bakker is offering us is fact and how much supposition is open to debate, but then the processes of palaeontology are not unlike those of fiction – the extrapolation of what you know into the larger context of what you don't know but feel to be true.

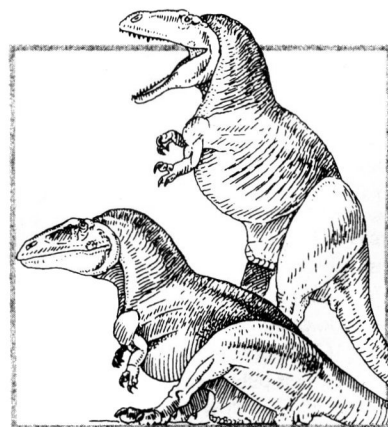
In short, *Raptor Red* is more than just an expanded footnote to *Jurassic Park*. It's a unique and thought-provoking work that takes a scaffold of science and builds imaginatively on it. Well worth a look.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the original *The Lost World* (1912), appears as the hero of Mark Frost's *The 6 Messiahs* (Hutchinson), as he did in its predecessor *The List of 7*. In that novel the young Doyle, still a struggling author, enjoyed a breathless adventure in the company of Jack Sparks, secret agent to Her Majesty the Queen, in which they fought reanimated mummies, giant slugs and a conspiracy to topple the throne masterminded by an evil genius who happened to be Sparks's older brother. *The 6 Messiahs* takes place a decade on, during which time Doyle's best-known literary creation has brought him unprecedented success and international fame. Already Doyle is beginning to tire of the adulation, and his mood of frustration and jaded enthusiasm sets the tone for the whole novel.

Doyle is on a publicity trip to the United States, accompanied by his younger brother Innes. While crossing the Atlantic, they stumble on a plot to steal the great texts of the world's main religions. Joined by a mysterious priest, they follow the trail through New York and Chicago to a place called the New City in the Arizona desert, where a weird cult have their headquarters. Several other people have been drawn to the New City by dream-visions of an ominous dark tower, and with their aid Doyle confronts a madman who has plans to unleash a momentous, apocalyptic evil on the world. You can guess the rest.

The identities of the mysterious priest and the madman are pretty obvious from the word go, and for some reason turn-of-the-century America offers a less amenable setting for this sort of Victorian hokum than dear old Blighty, but Frost has at least tried to make his sequel different from the original. *The 6 Messiahs* puts a dark, world-weary spin on the joyous absurdities of *The List of 7*, resulting in a leaner, gloomier and ultimately less riveting read, but it's fun all the same.

James Lovegrove



The dinosaur illustrations in this review are by Robert T. Bakker and are decorations from his novel *Raptor Red* (Bantam 1995 \$21.95)

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Alldiss, Brian. **Somewhere East of Life: Another European Fantasia.** Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-654763-X, 392pp, B-format paperback, cover by Gary Embury, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1994; the fourth volume in the "Squire" Quartet, of which the previous titles were the non-sf novels *Life in the West*, *Forgotten Life* and *Remembrance Day*; reviewed by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 90.) 13th November 1995.

Anderson, Poul. **All One Universe.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85873-6, 304pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; as well as stories — mainly reprinted from original anthologies of the 1970s, 80s and 90s — it contains a number of essays.) February 1996.

Ashley, Mike, ed. **The Merlin Chronicles.** Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-0275-3, xvii+446pp, B-format paperback, cover by Julek Heller, \$12.95. (Arthurian fantasy anthology, first published in the UK, 1995; the third volume of a series — its predecessors were *The Pendragon Chronicles*, 1990, and *The Camelot Chronicles*, 1992 — in which Ashley brings together a wide range of latter-day Arthurian fiction; among the contributors of previously-unpublished stories are Vera Chapman, Robert Holdstock, Phyllis Ann Karr, Tanith Lee, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Darrell Schweitzer, Peter Valentine Timlett and Peter Tremayne.) November 1995.

Attanasio, A. A. **Arthor.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-61776-4, 389pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £5.99. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995; a follow-up to *The Dragon and the Unicorn*.) 16th November 1995.

Baker, Nancy. **Blood and Chrysanthemums: A Vampire Novel.** Signet/Creed, ISBN 0-45-118397-5, 282pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in Canada, 1994.) 13th November 1995.

Barnes, John. **One for the Morning Glory.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86106-0, 319pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; Barnes is best known for hard sf such as *Orbital Resonance* [1991] and *Mother of Storms* [1994]; this is his first fantasy, and the publishers compare it to Goldman's *The Princess Bride* and Thurber's *The Thirteen Clocks*.) April 1996.

Beath, Warren Newton. **Who Killed James Dean?** Tor, ISBN 0-812-53873-0, 370pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Horror novel, first edition; another "Hollywood novel" by the author of the vampire tale *Bloodletter* [1994]; although it obviously draws on the same research, it should not be confused with his earlier non-fiction book *The Death of James Dean* [1986]; this one is published to coincide with the 40th anniversary of Dean's fatal car-smash.) Late entry: September publication, received in October 1995.

Berens, Jessica. **Queen of the Witches.** Arrow, ISBN 0-09-925411-5, 185pp, B-format paperback, cover by Claire Mackie, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy [?] novel about latter-day witches; first published in 1993; a debut novel by a British journalist; we never saw the hardcover first edition, but it seems to have elicited praise from Jilly Cooper, Stephen Fry and Alison Lurie, among others.) 2nd November 1995.

Bonansinga, Jay R. **Sick.** Orion, ISBN 1-85797-631-2, 327pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1995; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; this is a second novel by an American screenwriter and maker of short films whose first book, *The Black Mariah*, seems to have been a

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thriller.) 13th November 1995.

Boyle, Joe. **Year of the Phial.** Point SF, ISBN 0-590-55492-1, 204pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £3.99. (Young-adult sf novel, first edition.) October 1995.

Broderick, Damien.

Reading by Starlight: Post-modern Science Fiction. "Popular Fictions." Routledge, ISBN 0-415-09789-4, xvii+197pp, C-format paperback, cover by Alan Craddock, £12.99. (Critical study of sf; first edition; Broderick is a well-known Australian writer of sf and non-fiction; this study is quite heavily academic, with an emphasis on the fiction and theory of Samuel R. Delany; nevertheless his novelist's sense of fun keep breaking through, with chapter titles like "The Stars My Dissertation" and footnotes such as the one in which he tells us his pussycat was named after Darko Suvin.) Late entry: January [?] publication, received in October 1995.

Brown, Mary. **Master of Many Treasures.** Baen, ISBN 0-671-87693-7, 376pp, A-format paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *Pigs Don't Fly*.) November 1995.

Bujold, Lois McMaster. **Cetaganda.** "A Vorkosigan Adventure." Baen, ISBN 0-671-87701-1, 296pp, hardcover, \$21. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) January 1996.

Callinan, David. **Fortress Manhattan.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06058-1, 314pp, hardcover, cover by Fred Gambino, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous A-format paperback edition [not seen]; a sort of Americanized sub-cyberpunk futuristic action-adventure, this is a debut novel by a new British author described as "a TV and film screenwriter"; we seem to be encountering more and more authors of his kind recently [see for example Jay Bonansinga, above]: if they can get TV and movie work, why do they bother with such a

non-lucrative sideline as the writing of genre novels? — the answer, probably, is that scriptwriters, like actors, have "fallow" periods, and a novel or two will always enhance any rising screenwriter's curriculum vitae.) 30th November 1995.

Card, Orson Scott. **Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85058-1, 351pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous 200-copy limited edition priced at \$200 [not seen]; this interesting new tale by Card involves time-travel to 1492, and a recasting of the discovery of the New World.) February 1996.

Clark, Stephen R. L. **How to Live Forever: Science Fiction and Philosophy.** Routledge, ISBN 0-415-12626-6, vii+223pp, hardcover, cover by Francis Leroy, £40. (Study of the ideas in science fiction, first edition; this looks to be an admirably clear exposition, with examples taken from the full range of modern sf [including some fantasy, from E. R. Edlison to Terry Pratchett]; the author, clearly a "fan," is professor of philosophy at the University of Liverpool, and has drawn on the resources of the SF Foundation Library now housed there; recommended.) 26th October 1995.

Compton, D. G. **Justice City.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05840-4, 288pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf/crime novel, first published in 1994; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 93.) 9th November 1995.

Cox, Greg, and T. K. F. Weiskopf, eds. **Tomorrow Bites.** Baen, ISBN 0-671-87691-0, 364pp, A-format paperback, cover by Barclay Shaw, \$5.99. (Sf/horror anthology, first edition; a gathering of mainly reprint science-fictional werewolf tales, it's a follow-up to the same editors' vampire anthology *Tomorrow Sucks* [1994]; this one contains stories by Poul Anderson, James Blish, A. Bertram Chandler, Michael Flynn, Larry Niven, Clark Ashton Smith, Michael Swanwick and Gene Wolfe, among others.) October 1995.

Curry, Chris. **Thunder Road.** New English Library, ISBN 0-

340-62298-9, 439pp, A-format paperback, cover by Melvyn Grant, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 16th November 1995.

Dalby, Richard, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Victorian and Edwardian Ghost Stories.** Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-0279-6, xiii+573pp, B-format paperback, \$9.95. (Horror anthology, first published in the UK, 1995; it contains a scattering of well-known stories, such as Dickens's "The Signalman" and M. R. James's "The Ash-Tree," mixed in with many more obscure tales; authors include Grant Allen, A. C. Benson, Ambrose Bierce, Robert W. Chambers, William Hope Hodgson, Lafacdio Hearn, Henry James, Sheridan Le Fanu, Dinah Maria Mulock, E. Nesbit, Fitz-James O'Brien, Bram Stoker and Harriet Beecher Stowe.) November 1995.

Daniels, Les. **DC Comics: Sixty Years of the World's Favorite Comic Book Heroes.** Introduction by Jenette Khan. Virgin, ISBN 1-85227-546-4, 256pp, hardcover, £30. (History of the D.C. Comics company and its creations; first published in the USA, 1995; copiously illustrated in full colour, it's a large plush volume with a substantial text; recommended.) 16th November 1995.

Datlow, Ellen, ed. **Off Limits: Tales of Alien Sex.** Foreword by Robert Silverberg. Tor, ISBN 0-312-14019-3, xvii+316pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to the same editor's *Alien Sex* [1990], it contains mainly-new stories and some reprints by Scott Bradford, Sherry Goldsmith, Samuel R. Delany, Elizabeth Hand, Simon Ings, Gwyneth Jones, Bruce McAllister, Mike O'Driscoll, Robert Silverberg, Martha Soukup, Brian Stableford and Lisa Tuttle, among others.) February 1996.

Datlow, Ellen, and Terri Windling, eds. **Snow White, Blood Red.** Signet/Creed, ISBN 0-45-118443-2, xi+412pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 1993; it contains all-original "dark" fairy tales by Jack Dann, Charles de Lint, Esther M.

Friesner, Neil Gaiman, Lisa Goldstein, Harvey Jacobs, Kathe Koja, Nancy Kress, Tanith Lee, Elizabeth A. Lynn, Patricia A. McKillip, Melanie Tem and Jane Yolen, among others.) 13th November 1995.

Douglas, John. **Cursed.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-63472-8, 358pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1995; the second novel by a new, pseudonymous, British writer; this mass-market paperback follows only two months after the hardcover first edition.) 16th November 1995.

Eddings, David. **The Hidden City: Book Three of The Tamuli.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-39040-7, 504pp, A-format paperback, cover by Keith Parkinson, \$6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) Late entry: 1st September publication, received in October 1995.

Gemmell, David. **The Hawk Eternal.** "Second Book of the Hawk Queen." Legend, ISBN 0-09-935511-6, 313pp, hardcover, cover by Dominic Lavery, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 19th October 1995.

Gemmell, David. **Ironhand's Daughter.** "First Book of the Hawk Queen." Legend, ISBN 0-09-989290-1, 283pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ciruelo Cabral, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1995.) 19th October 1995.

Goodkind, Terry. **Stone of Tears: Book Two of The Sword of Truth.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-283-5, 703pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 6th November 1995.

Gray, Alasdair. **A History Maker.** Illustrated by the author. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-024803-X, xv+224pp, B-format paperback, cover by the author, £5.99. (Quasi-sf novel, first published in 1994; this edition is slightly revised; this oddity, which was not sent to us

BOOKS RECEIVED



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last year by the hardback publishers, has been described by reviewers as "Sir Walter Scott meets *Rollerball*," combining "Swiftian satire and Kenny Everett zaniness"; it's dedicated to the Scottish sf writer Chris Boyce, who is credited with suggesting "nearly all the science and some of the fiction.") 26th October 1995.

Gray, Chris Hables, ed. **The Cyborg Handbook.** Foreword by Donna J. Haraway. Routledge, ISBN 0-415-90849-3, xx+540pp, C-format paperback, £16.99. (Collection of essays and stories on the "cyborg" theme in fiction, film and reality; first edition [?] — there is a US edition, also from Routledge, which may precede; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; Donna Haraway, a critic who has soared to immense fame in Postmodernist Theoretical circles [yes, she's up there with Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson], has made the subject of cyborgs [cybernetic organisms] newly fashionable in recent years, and this massive illustrated book presumably has been inspired by her ideas; contributors include George Annas, Manfred Clynes, the late Philip K. Dick [his story "I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon"], Cynthia A. Fuchs, Katherine Hayles, Sandy Stone and David Tomas; there's an annotated fiction and non-fiction bibliography, and a chronological filmography which runs from *Frankenstein* to *Johnny Mnemonic*.) 5th November 1995.

Hogan, James P. **Paths to Oth-erwhere.** Baen, ISBN 0-671-87710-0, 405pp, hardcover, cover by Gary Ruddell, \$22. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) February 1996.

Holder, Nancy. **Dead in the Water.** Raven, ISBN 1-85487-419-5, 413pp, A-format paperback, cover by J. K. Potter, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994; winner of the 1995 Bram Stoker Award for best novel.) 7th November 1995.

James Peter. **Alchemist.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05726-2,

569pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 18th January 1996.

Jones, Gwyneth. **Kairos.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-00607-2, 262pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1988; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 29; this edition is slightly revised.) 9th November 1995.

Jones, Gwyneth. **North Wind.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85926-0, 288pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1994; proof copy received; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 86.) January 1996.

Kearney, Paul. **Hawkwood's Voyage: Book I of The Monarchies of God.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06054-9, 382pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 7th December 1995.

Kelly, Gary. **Lore.** Minerva Press [10 Cromwell Place, London SW7 2JN], ISBN 1-85863-184-X, 181pp, small-press paperback, £7.99. (Horror collection, first edition; we're told almost nothing about the author, but this is probably a debut book by a new British writer.) No date shown: received in October 1995.

Kessel, John, Mark L. Van Name and Richard Butner, eds. **Intersections: The Sycamore Hill Anthology.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86090-0, 384pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; "Sycamore Hill" is the name of a writers' conference at which all these stories were first workshopped; contributors include Carol Emshwiller, Karen Joy Fowler, Gregory Frost, Alexander Jablakov, Nancy Kress, James Patrick Kelly, Jonathan Lethem, Maureen F. McHugh and Bruce Sterling, among others; it's a high-powered literary line-up, in terms of today's American sf; each story is followed, workshop-style, by comments from all the other contributors.) January 1996.

Kidd, Chico. **The Printer's Devil.** Baen, ISBN 0-671-87668-6, 280pp, A-format

paperback, cover by Newell Convers and Courtney Skinner, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; although fairly light in tone, this appears to be a "learned" fantasy of magic, with long sections written in pastiche 17th-century English, frequent footnotes and literary allusions aplenty [from Virgil to M. R. James]; we are told the author is British.) *Late entry: June publication, received in October 1995.*

Koontz, Dean. **Dark Rivers of the Heart.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4449-9, 728pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) *2nd November 1995.*

Koontz, Dean. **Intensity.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1334-8, 343pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995.) *9th November 1995.*

Kress, Nancy. **Oaths and Miracles.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-85961-9, 288pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Bio-tech thriller, first edition; proof copy received; it's described as "a strong break-out book from a writer who is already known for skills that transcend category.") *January 1996.*

Kurtz, Katherine. **Two Crowns for America.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-07562-4, 375pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; it looks as though Kurtz has abandoned her pseudo-Welsh "Deryni" series ["more than three million copies in print"] at long last; here she turns to colonial America for inspiration.) *October 1995.*

Lackey, Mercedes, and Larry Dixon. **The White Gryphon: Book Two of The Mage Wars.** Illustrated by Larry Dixon. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-431-5, 305pp, hardcover, cover by John Barber, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) *20th November 1995.*

Lovecraft, H. P. **The Dream Cycle of H. P. Lovecraft: Dreams of Terror and Death.** Introduction by Neil Gaiman. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38421-0, xi+387pp, B-format paperback, cover by John Jude Palencar, \$10. (Horror/fantasy collection, first edition; this

handsome volume is part of an ongoing "de luxe" repackaging of all Lovecraft's fiction; it contains the short novels *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath* and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, plus over 20 related short stories and fragments.) *1st October 1995.*

Maginn, Simon. **A Sickness of the Soul.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14250-6, 332pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £4.99. (Horror novel, first edition; a third novel by this new British writer.) *9th November 1995.*

Mann, Phillip. **The Dragon Wakes: A Land Fit for Heroes, Book 3.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06009-3, 263pp, hardcover, cover by Adrian Chesterman, £16.99. (Alternative-history sf novel, first edition.) *2nd November 1995.*

Moorcock, Michael. **Blood: A Southern Fantasy.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-236-3, 273pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gustav Moreau, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1995; reviewed by Dave Kendall in *Interzone* 92.) *6th November 1995.*

Pratchett, Terry. **Interesting Times.** "A Discworld novel." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14235-2, 352pp, A-format paperback, cover by Josh Kirby, £4.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1994; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 92; this is the book that caused poet and critic Tom Paulin [who had never read Pratchett before] to opine: "A complete amateur ... doesn't even write in chapters ... hasn't a clue" — and that review is cited proudly on this paperback; Corgi have also sent us "audio book" versions of Pratchett's *Pyramids*, *Guards! Guards!* and *Moving Pictures*, each read by Tony Robinson, each consisting of two cassettes and priced at £7.99.) *9th November 1995.*

Reed, Robert. **An Exaltation of Larks.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85888-4, 251pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) *December 1995.*

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Reichert, Mickey Zucker. **Child of Thunder.** "Book 3 of *The Last of the Renshai*." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-234-7, 497pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) *6th November 1995.*

Rusch, Kristine Kathryn. **The Sacrifice: The First Book of The Fey.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-56894-9, 660pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK as *The Fey: The Sacrifice*, 1995; the British edition [Millennium] did not specify it as the first of a trilogy or series, which apparently it is.) *7th December 1995.*

Russell, Jay. **Celestial Dogs.** Raven, ISBN 1-85487-429-2, 436pp, A-format paperback, cover by J. K. Potter, £5.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; set in Los Angeles, that traditional "beat" of private eyes, it involves Japanese mythology, and is the debut novel of a British-resident American writer, born 1961.) *15th January 1996.*

Sheffield, Charles. **Proteus in the Underworld.** Baen, ISBN 0-671-87659-7, 304pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gary Ruddell, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a follow-up to the author's earlier "Proteus" novels.) *Late entry: May publication, received in October 1995.*

Somtow, S. P. **Vanitas: Escape from Vampire Junction.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85513-3, 352pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1995; proof copy received; for some reason, it says "copyright 1988" inside: we don't know why that should be.) *December 1995.*

Stableford, Brian. **The Angel of Pain.** Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-0286-9, 396pp, A-format paperback, \$5.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1991; sequel to *The Werewolves of London*; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 53.) *December 1995.*

Stasheff, Christopher. **Her Majesty's Wizard.** "Book 1 of *A Wizard in Rhyme*." Legend, ISBN 0-09-955681-2, 342pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1986.) *16th November 1995.*

Stasheff, Christopher. **The Shaman: The Star Stone, Book One.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-39242-6, 361pp, hardcover, cover by Stephen Youll, \$22. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) *Late entry: 1st September publication, received in October 1995.*

Tohill, Cathal, and Pete Tombs. **Immoral Tales: European Sex and Horror Movies, 1956-1984.** St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-13519-X, 272pp, very large-format paperback, \$17.95. (Illustrated guide to European erotic horror films, first published in the UK, 1994; it focuses on "key directors Rollin, Franco, Borowczyk, Benazeraf, Larraz and Robbe-Grillet.") *20th October 1995.*

Trewinnard, Philip. **The Burning.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06057-3, 352pp, A-format paperback, cover by James Goodridge, £5.99. (Horror novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [previously listed here from an advance proof copy]; the British author, born 1946, has written three earlier novels, "a thriller and two comedies.") *9th November 1995.*

Valentine, Mark. **Arthur Machen.** "Border Lines." Seren [2 Wyndham St., Bridgend, Mid-Glamorgan CF31 1EF], ISBN 1-85411-126-4, 147pp, small-press paperback, £6.95. (Critical biography of the great Welsh horror writer, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; this is one of a series of books devoted to writers of the Welsh border region: other volumes include studies of Bruce Chatwin, A. E. Housman, Wilfred Owen, Edith Pargeter, Dennis Potter, Mary Webb and Raymond Williams; incidentally, Machen's novel *The Three Impostors* was shortlisted for the retrospective 1895 "Booker Prize" at the recent Cheltenham Literary Festival, along

with Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* and Wells's *The Time Machine* — Thomas Hardy was adjudged the winner.) *November 1995*.

Watson, Ian. **The Fallen Moon: The Second Book of Mana.** Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-06098-0, 546pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1994.) *2nd November 1995*.

Weis, Margaret, and Tracy Hickman. **The Seventh Gate: A Death Gate Novel.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40379-6, 356pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Youll, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994; seventh in the series.) *9th November 1995*.

Watt-Evans, Lawrence. **In the Empire of Shadow: Book Two of the Three Worlds Trilogy.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-39786-X, 273pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Peebles, \$5.99. (Science-fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) *Late entry: 1st*

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 sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.

Allen, Roger MacBride. **Isaac Asimov's Inferno.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-403-X, 244pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ralph McQuarrie, £4.99. (Sf sharecrop novel, first published in the USA, 1994; follow-up to *Isaac Asimov's Caliban*; it's copyright "Byron Preiss Visual Publications Inc.") *6th November 1995*.

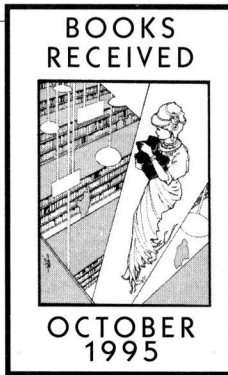
Anderson, Kevin J. **Dark-saber.** "Star Wars." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03767-7, 399pp, hardcover, cover by Drew Struzan, £10.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) *9th November 1995*.

Johnson, Shane. **Star Wars Technical Journal.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40182-4, 190pp, hardcover, \$35. (Illustrated

September publication, received in October 1995.

Wells, Angus. **Exile's Children.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-37486-9, 582pp, trade paperback, \$12.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) *7th December 1995*.

Wells, H. G. **The Invisible Man: A Grotesque Romance.** Edited by Macdonald Daly. Everyman, ISBN 0-460-87628-7, xli+181pp, B-format paperback, cover by René Magritte, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1897; this is the first of the recent Dent/Everyman editions of Wells that we have been sent for review; early volumes in the series [e.g. *The War of the Worlds* and *The First Men in the Moon*] were criticized for their skimpy introductions and apparatus — but it seems the editors have been heeding the



dedicated Well-sians, as this book is quite impressively decked out with an interesting academic introduction and notes, plus extensive quotes from critics of the novel together with other matter.) *6th November 1995*.

Williamson, Philip G. **Citadel.** "A Chronicle of Firstworld." Legend, ISBN 0-09-931061-9, 289pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Van Houten, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a follow-up to *Moonblood* and *Heart of Shadows*, it's described as a "fantasy/mystery," in which "Philip Williamson proves himself a master of both genres.") *16th November 1995*.

Williamson, Philip G. **Heart of Shadows.** "A Chronicle of Firstworld." Legend, ISBN 0-09-931051-1, 312pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van

Houten, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1994.) *16th November 1995*.

Wolverton, Dave, ed. **L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future, Volume IX.** New Era, ISBN 1-870451-85-6, 413pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 1993; it contains stories by 17 new writers, plus "how-to" articles by Kevin J. Anderson, Octavia Butler and others; New Era are very hit-and-miss about sending us their books — the last volume in this series we received was number five, and goodness knows how long this ninth volume has been out in the UK.) *No date shown: received in October 1995*.

Zindell, David. **The Wild: Book Two of A Requiem for Homo Sapiens.** Harper-Collins, ISBN 0-246-13776-2, 477pp, hardcover, cover by Michael Van Houten, £15.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]) *23rd November 1995*.

SPINOFFERY

pseudo-technical guide to weapons, spacecraft, etc., featured in the *Star Wars* sf films; first published in the UK, 1995; originally published in the USA in magazine format in three parts, 1994; the material originates with *Starlog* magazine.) *1st October 1995*.

McIntyre, Vonda N. **The Crystal Star.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40878-X, 352pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) *9th November 1995*.

Nimoy, Leonard. **I am Spock.** Century, ISBN 0-7126-7691-0, viii+342pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Autobiography of the *Star Trek* actor, first published in the USA, 1995; the author's brief acknowledgments conclude with the words "to Jeanne (J. M.) Dillard, for her extraordinary talent, tact, and taste" — which is almost certainly an indication that she had a hand in ghosting this book; the blurb describes *Star Trek* as "the

most famous TV series of all time": what? — more famous than *I Love Lucy* or *Sgt. Bilko*, more famous than *The Man from UNCLE* or *The Avengers*, more famous than *Coronation Street* or *Steptoe and Son* [not to mention anything more recent]; well, yes, in global terms it probably is by now; it's rather odd when you consider that the best-known TV series of them all is sf, and that the top two box-office movies, *E.T.* and *Jurassic Park*, are also sf, and yet the field as a whole remains in low repute with the general public.) *16th November 1995*.

Perry, Steve. **Aliens: Earth Hive, Nightmare Asylum.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-451-X, 278pp+278pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf movie spinoff omnibus, first edition; the two novels it contains were originally published in the USA, 1992 and 1993; they're based on graphic novels published by

Dark Horse Comics, which in turn were based on the Twentieth Century Fox *Aliens* films, and on the designs for the first of the latter by artist H. R. Giger; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; the review slip says "Aliens Omnibus: Volume 1," but no volume number is mentioned on title page or cover.) *20th November 1995*.

Turner, Jim, ed. **Cthulhu 2000: A Lovecraftian Anthology.** Illustrated by Bob Eggleton. Arkham House, ISBN 0-87054-169-2, xvi+413pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf/fantasy/horror anthology, inspired by the works of H. P. Lovecraft [though sometimes only slightly]; first edition; it contains reprint stories by James P. Blaylock, Poppy Z. Brite, Ramsey Campbell, Harlan Ellison, Thomas Ligotti, Joanna Russ, Michael Shea, Bruce Sterling, Gene Wolfe, Roger Zelazny and others; Kim Newman's "The Big Fish" first appeared in *Interzone*; like all Arkham House books it's beautifully produced.) *11th December 1995*

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HARM'S WAY – "What if Charles Dickens had written a space opera?" (*Locus*) – large paperback, £3.50. *The Hour of the Thin Ox* and *Other Voices*, paperbacks, £1.50 each. Prices include postage. Colin Greenland, 2a Ortygia House, 6 Lower Road, Harrow, Middx. HA2 0DA.

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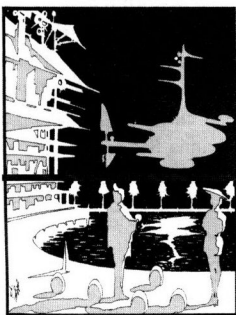
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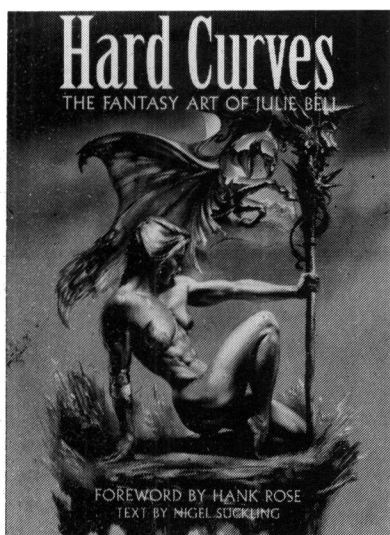
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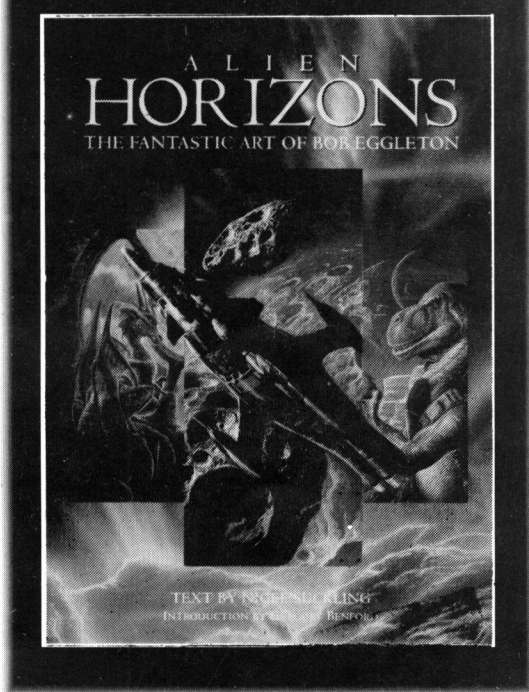
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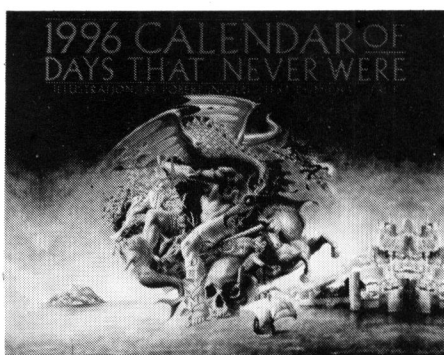
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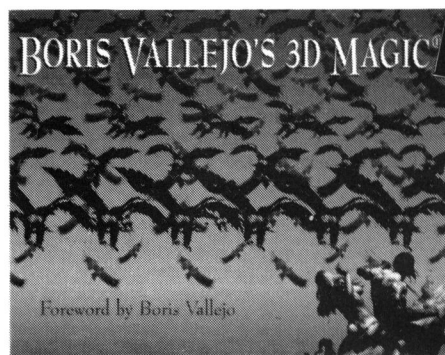
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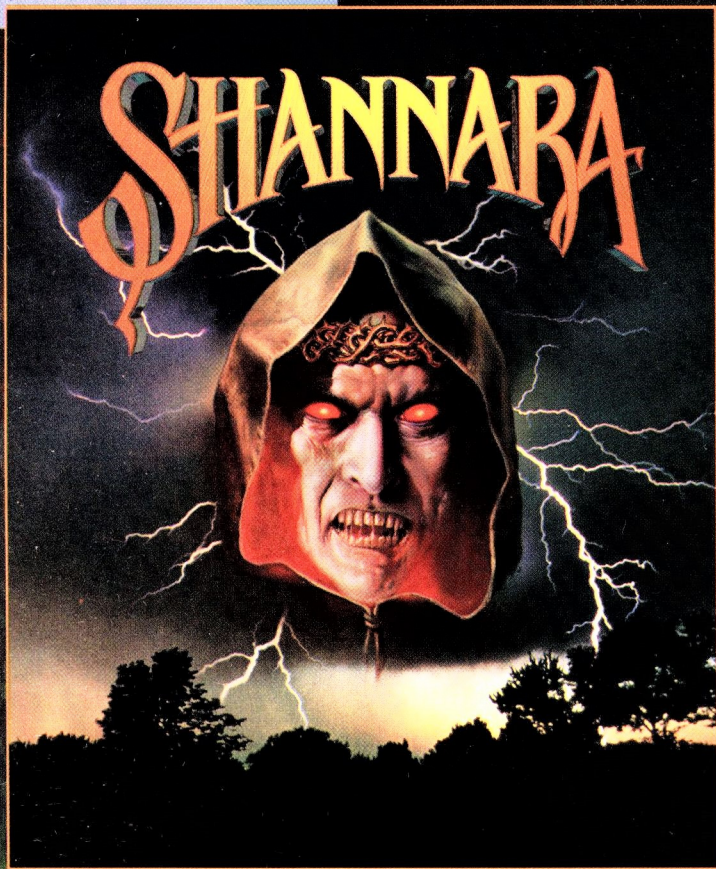
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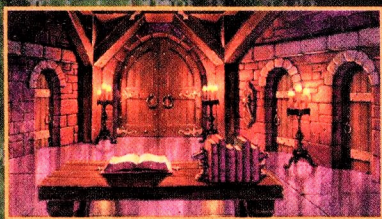
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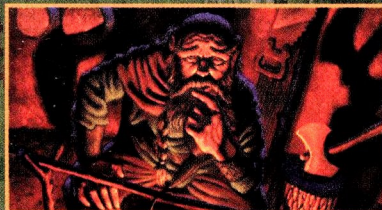
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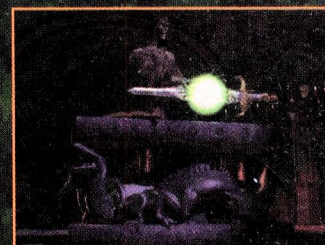
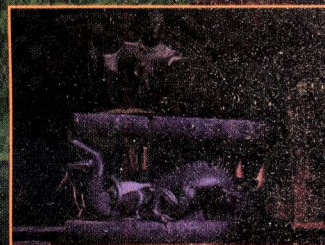


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