

OCTOBER 1996



# interZone

112

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# interZone

October 1996

112

science fiction & fantasy

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Cover by SMS for "Doing the Circuit"

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# Interaction

Dear Editors:  
As a footnote to Steve Holland's letter in *Interzone* 109, I share his local library (Colchester) and can report that its management is, amazingly, aware of the fact that publishers are increasingly reluctant to welcome new authors. Even more amazingly, the library is doing something about it: they have a scheme called *Write Angles*, whereby you take your oft-rejected manuscript along to them, they decide which of their little stickers ("science fiction," "romance," "thriller," etc) to put on it, and they place it on their *Write Angles* shelf for people to take out as if it were a regular book. Most amazingly of all, not everyone thinks "anything on this shelf must be crap," but some take it out, read it, and fill in a little form anonymously which is sent back to the author. I've had my own novel (consensus from publishers: "this deserves to be published, but not by us") on the shelf for the past six months or so, since the scheme began, and have had half a dozen responses, all of which were either favourable or encouraging. It's very useful to know that my unshakeable belief in the merit of my own work is not entirely misplaced...

Of course, I have to agree with the thrust of Steve's letter, in that what independently-minded library readers like and what profit-oriented book publishers will publish are two unrelated concepts. If I waited for, say, 20 or 30 enthusiastic responses from library readers of my novel, and took all these to a publisher, would they change their minds and decide to publish it after all? Ha ha ha!

**Richard A. Bartle**  
Colchester, Essex

Dear Editors:  
After being out of the country for a while, I finally get caught up with reading *Interzone* and what do I find? A letter from Dave Stone (*IZ* 107) that I have to reply to several months late. A quick look in the other issues to see if anyone else has replied... hmm, a couple in #109 but not covering what I would want to say.

OK, hands up: I'm a librarian. From a library point of view the situation is a little more complicated than Dave realizes. There are two issues. First, libraries purchase books from library suppliers. Publishers have always enforced a standard 10% discount from library suppliers to libraries. If anyone tried to step out of line publishers would threaten to stop supplying the suppliers. This guaranteed them relatively higher sales from libraries compared to the 30% discounts that some wholesalers get.

Dave argues that publishers should use library statistics to determine the second print run. I confess that I am an academic librarian, not a public

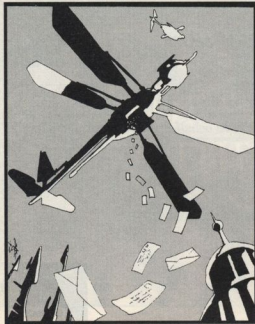
librarian, but if that were true then why do people have to reserve new "popular" books (Stephen King, Danielle Steel, etc) weeks, even months, in advance? If you are that keen and that way inclined wouldn't you buy the book anyway? I suggest that people use libraries for the books that they wouldn't buy themselves, which is why libraries can't get higher discounts.

Yes, but Dave wants publishers to give higher discounts. So do we, we'd love it, but the fact remains that most libraries have to get their books from a library supplier. Why? Processing. Most libraries do not do their own processing any more: the suppliers do it and achieve economies of scale. Our suppliers stamp the books with the institution name, bar-code them, stick on the date label, put protective covers on the paperbacks. It is cheaper for them to do it than us, and publishers won't do it so we have to go through a middle-man. Wholesalers will offer higher discounts but also charge more for processing, so nothing is gained there.

Even with the collapse of the Net Book Agreement, which fixed book prices, larger discounts are difficult. Westminster City Libraries co-ordinated a consortium of London Borough public libraries to increase their buying power, but the fact remained that local libraries have local needs and different requirements, and without a unified set of requirements significant increases in discounts were not possible. Also, there are already signs that in a world where discounting may become the norm cover prices will go up by 20% to allow books to be discounted and make the punters think they are getting a bargain. Some already have, and this also has a knock-on effect on libraries.

Publishers at the end of the day are there to make money, and the fact that they don't offer libraries whopping discounts does suggest that there is little relation between library use and increased sales. Even if there were a relationship the publishers probably would have to "damn well give 'em away." Given the ongoing cuts in library funding, libraries of course have to buy fewer books. As Steve Holland says (*IZ* 109), most people do want the latest Stephen King so that is what is bought, but surely so is Iain Banks in both his incarnations (I found 18 libraries very quickly who already have Banks's most recent novel, *Excession*).

I have no answers, I wish I did, but the whole picture is too complicated. I can only agree with Dave that "you can lay it squarely at the door of the Tories." I might have complained that spinoffery in the bookshop in my hometown is given more shelf space than "original" sf and fantasy, and this trend has been commented on before. Dave did, however, give me a different viewpoint and maybe now I will go out



and buy my first spinoff novel and see if he is right. Maybe I'll buy one of his – we are on the same side after all.

**Clive Wilson**

Northolt, Middlesex

P.S. Does *Interzone* still have an e-mail address?

**Editor:** Yes, we have an e-mail address (it's the same as Dave Langford's Ansible address, except substitute "interzone" for "ansible") – [interzone@cix.compulink.co.uk](mailto:interzone@cix.compulink.co.uk) – and people are welcome to use this to send us letters of comment. Please do not use it for story submissions, however: there's no way we can handle unsolicited manuscripts electronically (one of our assistant editors doesn't even possess a computer, much less have e-mail!).

**Dear Editors:**

You're one of the few magazines around that takes novelizations and spinofferies at least semi-seriously. Over here, such things are treated like the lowly bastards of publishing. Now, that may seem a rude, harsh and unaccountably ugly thing to say, but, unfortunately, it's the truth. At best, they are usually ignored, at worst they are held up as examples of just how bad sf/fantasy/horror has gotten over the years. On the other hand, I've always felt that unless we (readers, critics, fans) take such things seriously, then the quality of them will never get better. Sadly, novelizing seems to be like masturbation; every writer seems to have done it sometime during their careers, but none seems to want to owe up to having done it after the fact.

So the main suggestions are these. *Locus* just lists such things as spinoffs and novelizations as filler and no more. In your "Books Received" column you're slightly better, but you could do better still. Is there any way that you could give some kind of thumbnail plot description to the *Star Treks* and *Doctor Whos* that are listed? I might buy and read one or two, but I'm not a religious reader of such things; what I am is more interested in the subject matter that each one might touch on.

An example would be that past *Doctor Who* novels have touched on H. P. Lovecraft and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, both of whom are of interest to me. I don't want to read every *Doctor Who* spinoff book, but I would like to read these books and see how the authors handled these subjects in the context of the Dr Who myths. Also, please keep up the reviews of such books. Even though they appear on an irregular basis they are far more than what usually appears in magazines here Stateside.

A couple of examples before I leave this subject. Some time ago I read a review of a Vonda N. McIntyre novel, and the reviewer (Spider Robinson?) raved about how good it was. However, in the end, he just couldn't recommend



it; too bad, it was a *Star Trek* novel.

The second thing is a quote I remember hearing from author S. E. Hinton. If you remember, there was a spate of movies made from her books (*Tex*, *The Outsiders*) some years ago. Well, when that was happening she was persuaded to write a novelization of some movie, and she was quoted in an interview as saying that she was glad the chore was over and now she could go back to writing *real* books. Her contempt was probably evident in the book she wrote too, I'm sure.

This is too bad. Novelizations and spinofferies take as much time to read, cost as much to buy, and use up as much of the Earth's resources as so-called serious books; so I guess they should be treated as such.

**Mark Louis Baumgart**  
Ortonville, Michigan

**Editor:** Thanks for your comments. We do occasionally describe points of interest about the Doctor Who novels we list – e.g. if they feature Sherlock Holmes, or Oscar Wilde, or whoever, as characters – and in this month's column we've noted that one of them is set in 1930s Shanghai (one of the world's great cities during its brief "mythical" phase, and a setting of some interest to J. G. Ballard fans). We'll continue to point out such features when we spot them – and to give fuller reviews to at least some of the more worthwhile spinoffery from time to time.

**Dear Editors:**

I bought Kazuo Ishiguro's latest novel, *The Unconsoled*, on the strength of his previous novels. However, just as James Lovegrove did (*JZ* 108), I found it impenetrable and that I could not keep my attention on the misty plot. I pondered the matter, and I believe that there is a simple reason why Mr Lovegrove and myself had this problem – the reason being that we are both voracious readers of science fiction.

As a genre, the sf novel has only one law as regards plot devices: lay down your rules of the peculiarities of life on planet A, or the customs of alien race B, and then *stick to them*. We sf readers do not like *dei ex machinae* or any form of unexpected device; writers who use these find themselves cast out into second-hand-shop bargain bins, where there is much wailing and gnashing of teeth.

So we come to *The Unconsoled* with our sf senses untuned, expecting a moving saga of some sort, a beautiful tale of emotion and crafted prose. It soon becomes apparent, however, that all is not right in the world of the concert pianist with a strange task to perform. Our sf senses buzz and squirm as we see that the rules of the novel are not those of ordinary life. We greet with glee another illustrious convert to our ever-more-exclusive sf club.

But we read on. Our mysterious sixth sense is puzzled. Ishiguro just will not unveil his new set of rules: wives appear in the city of whose existence we know nothing, the main character seems at times to be disembodied, and as James Lovegrove says "*The Unconsoled*... is essentially one long shaggy-dog story." Is it possible that my love of sf is blighting Ishiguro's fiction?

**Alex Lloyd**  
Sissinghurst, Kent

**Dear Editors:**

What a hornet's nest I have poked! (Pete Crowther's letter in *Interzone* 111, re my review of Garry Kilworth's *Cybercats*, etc.) While I have little taste for comics myself, I don't generalize about them; I condemn one particular imprint (DC) which I regard as mawkish and mealy-mouthed to an extent not matched by those of the others he names, some of which I have encountered. The titles I find most distasteful are those relating to Superman, his family, friends and pets. I freely admit that I see them rarely, and my information may on that account be a little out of date – though I'd be surprised to find it much out of date, the medium being intensely conservative.

As for the bits about students, rock 'n' roll, elderly Germans, political activists, etc., Pete can dream up whatever opinions he likes on my behalf, but he should in fairness run them past me before condemning me for holding them.

**Chris Gilmore**  
Bedford

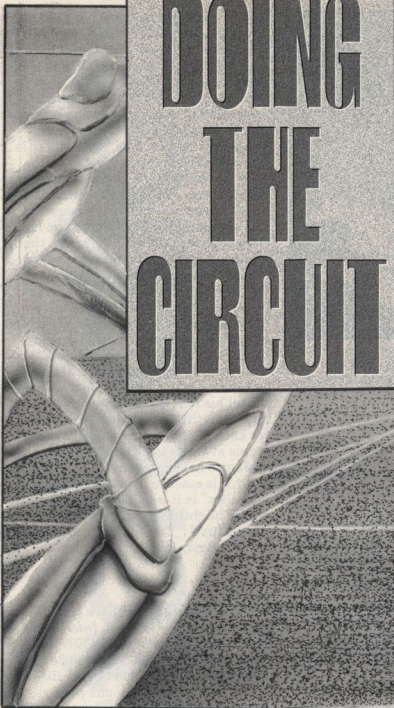
**Dear Editors:**

Why are the letters published in "Interaction" always so long and boring? Couldn't you publish a few short ones for a change?

**Paul Barnett**  
Exeter, Devon

**Editor:** Maybe next time!

# DOING THE CIRCUIT



**S**o tell me, Fiona, what do you want this exercise program to achieve?"

"I'm sorry?"

"What's your goal? I'm your trainer. I have to know what you're after."

"I want, you know, a flatter stomach?"

I make a note on my sheet. "Okay."

"And, like, a tighter butt?"

"Fine."

"And I want to be able to brachiate."

"Brachiate? Swing through the trees like a gibbon?"

"A siamang, actually. Yeah. And I want to climb. It's in this year: radar antennas, buildings under construction, power-plant cooling towers..."

"Good, great."

"But it's not just fitness for me. You see, I've got this girlfriend?"

I don't want to hear it. "We'll work biceps, lats, all that. Some surgical modification of the rotator cuff may prove necessary... Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"It can be done as an outpatient procedure. And your arms need to be lengthened. That's a little more complicated. We'll insert lengths of titanium alloy into your

humerus, ulna and radius. We've found that gives us the best balance of flexibility versus strength."

"Great! My girlfriend will love that."

I'm not really in any mood to discuss girlfriends. "Those fashion 'ceps of yours... very impressive, Fiona. Climbing a long-time ambition for you?"

Her biceps are massive, craggy massifs, and loom from holes cut in her denim sleeves.

"You know what's funny? I didn't have any idea when I had these installed. I just liked that tectonic look, you know? These are my two favourites. The right one's the Eiger, the left is K2."

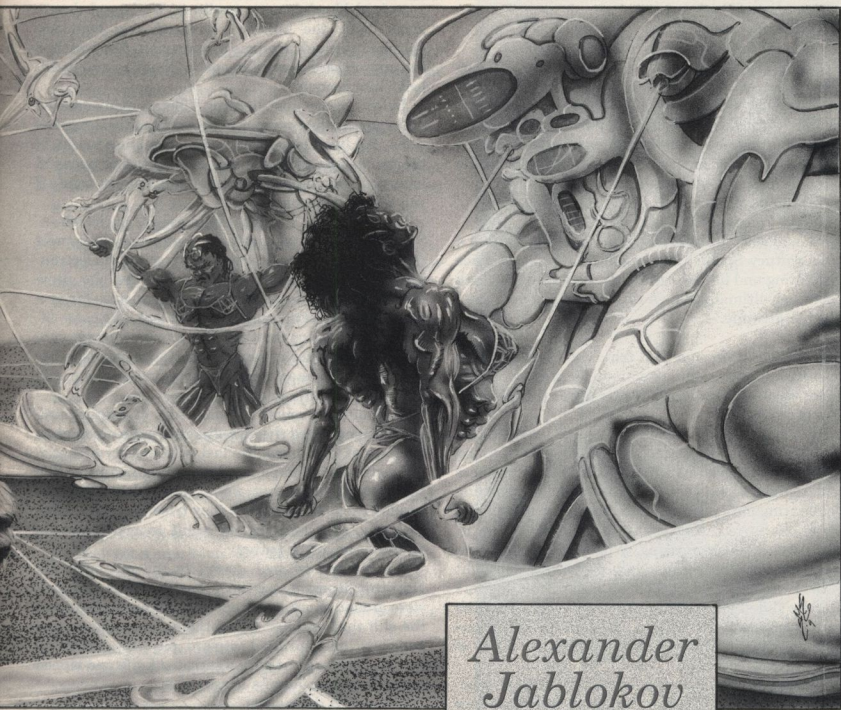
The Eiger's infamous North Face, just a trace of snow clinging in the cracks, is particularly striking, a death waiting to happen.

"But if you want the hylobatidae mods..." I begin.

"I know, I know. I'll have to give up on geographical features. I'm ready."

Fiona, like many of my clients, is desperate to adhere to society's arbitrary standards of beauty. And she is gorgeous, I must admit. There are times when the arbitrary is universal, eternal. I'm glad this is the time I live in.

She's completely covered with matted reddish hair,



Illustrations by SMS

## Alexander Jablovkov

so that her green eyes look like jade earrings lost on a shag carpet. Her fingers and toes are webbed, nothing excessive, nice and subtle. She's scrimshawed her surgically implanted walrus tusks with *faux-naïf* images representing the passage of a bill through Congress. I can smell the bitter musk of her anal glands.

I would be head over heels, except I'm in love with someone else. Someone I can no longer reach.

"Can I... touch your skull?" I say to Fiona. "Oh, go right ahead. Lots of people like to."

Her cranial bones flex under my fingers. Through hormonal regression she's regained the open sutures and the fontanelle of a newborn infant. She wears a slant board strapped tight to her forehead. In a few months it will give her that popular Mayan deformation of the skull, with the sloping forehead and the egg-shaped head.

"Mayan mothers used to dangle a bead in front of their child's eyes," I say. "It crossed their eyes. That was considered extremely fashionable."

"Oh, really?" I can tell she thinks I'm really lame, out of it.

I recover by getting businesslike. "All right. We'll start right off with preacher-bench curls, nothing

heavy —"

"Did I tell you how I met her?"

"Who?"

"My girlfriend."

It doesn't look like there's any way to avoid it.

"No, you didn't."

"She hit me with a long-distance Taser shot while I was hanging out with some friends in an abandoned swimming pool. Isn't that silly? Nothing was in it but some rotting lime Jello from some old party. When I recovered from my convulsions I looked up and fell in love. You might have heard of her? Janine Pingree?"

"Janine Pingree? *Glasstooth* Pingree?"

She smirks. "That's right. That's her."

Glass is a terrible substance for teeth. That's what my nine-fingered dentist told me, anyway. Pingree has the shattered pieces of a rose window from the west front of some defunct medieval cathedral in her mouth. I understand she's getting slow lead poisoning from it: peripheral neuropathy, saturnine gout, renal failure, the works. Her fans imitate her pained gouty shuffle, her dropped wrists, her inane, slurred speech. But when she clicks on that halogen bulb that has

replaced her uvula, all is forgiven. Her mouth glows like the Age of Faith.

"Wonderful," I say, not meaning it.

I look out into the Club and see her. Laurie.

She's racking the lat pulldown machine. An overhead spot picks out her nostrils. Laurie's nares have been heavily modified, into an arrangement that resembles a bat wing, reinforced with ribs of cartilage. When she runs they flare out into an oxygen-packing ramjet, filling her lungs with compressed air. Laurie is a lightning bolt made flesh.

"Do you have someone?" Fiona asks.

"I did," I answer.

I abandon Fiona to a museum-quality replica of a 16th-century Spanish interrogation rack to practice disjuncting and limb lengthening. She needs to think about her ultimate goals a little more. I'm not sure I like her attitude.

I first met Laurie on a field trip. The Club sends its trainers out once a year, to maintain a presence in the wider world of exercise. That year it was the high valleys of the Pamirs.

I remember being crammed into the fuselage of a C-130 Hercules. They kept us sedated for the long flight up from Delhi: hyped and steroidal trainers tend to fight furiously in such close quarters, causing debilitating injury. Last trip we had been transported by an old Soviet Alfa-class submarine to the Arctic. That was a rough crossing. When we finally clambered out onto the ice cap, we were a mess. One sight of the twitching, shattered limbs of their star trainers as they slid stickily across the ice, easy prey for the polar bears that were their intended wrestling targets, and the Club owners had made a new policy of strict drip sedation.

Through my headachy haze I could hear the turbo-props labouring in the thin air. An air-crew member ran down the narrow aisle between the rows of trainers and slapped an epinephrine/methedrine ampoule on each neck as he passed. We came to life, howling and growling. He made it into the welded shark cage at the back with only a few superficial wounds, slammed the hatch, and cowered inside. A buzzer and a red light, and we mounted our carbon-fibre-framed mountain bikes.

That was the first glimpse I caught of Laurie. She was new to the team, though we'd heard good things about her. She was a single-muscle specialist. She'd work intently with a client, building and sculpting one head of a quad or a specific back erector muscle. It's patient, intense work. I saw one particular pair of sternocleidomastoids she'd coached, so pumped and huge they stuck out from the sides of the neck like wings and made the client's head look like a cherry on a sundae. Very impressive.

The bomb-bay doors opened and we fell out, whooping. We floated down, front wheels up, and slammed to the mountain tundra, carving holes in the delicate centuries-old growth, our dual oil suspensions absorbing the impact. We were, I can say, stunning, dramatic: logo-covered Gore-Tex laminated directly on our skin, Camel-Bak bags automatically pouring

water through oesophageal piping in response to computerized blood-density readings. We bounded savagely down the hillsides, bounced over boulders, splashed through streams of snowmelt. I've watched the unprocessed camera images of that day and it still looks like heaven.

Below, greasy goat-herding Tibetan monks stared up in gap-toothed wonder at the sight of these apparitions. We bounded through the crumbling bricks of the monastery and score-tapped meditating lamas in lotus position on their shaven heads. You lost points if you knocked one over.

That was when I caught a glimpse of Laurie's chest. She'd had the costal cartilages that normally connect the ribs to the sternum replaced by a line of electronically actuated expansion cylinders. As she drew breath, her ribs flexed dramatically, twice as far as a normal person's, making her chest look like some filtering underwater creature. The auxiliary power supplies for the cylinders replaced the lactic glands in her jutting, ice-breaker-prow breasts. One anatomically impossible breath, and I fell in love.

We found ourselves in some sort of wildlife preserve. I recognized the shaggy, erect-maned ponies as Przewalsky's Horses, the last wild variety of equid. They stampeded in panic. Responding instantly, like the trained team that we were, we herded them, headed them off whenever they tried for safety, until they toppled, screaming, off a cliff, to smash and die on the rocks at the bottom.

That's the true goal, to get to the root of it all: Neolithic fitness. Once the last wild horses on Earth were ground chuck, we dropped contemptuously down the cliff that had just killed them, bounced our suspensions, and sprinted onward past the twitching corpses. I leaned out with a serrated knife and ripped a bleeding liver out of a horse's side.

"Vitamin A deficiency?"

Laurie smiled challengingly at me. The others were already far ahead of us. We were losing points even as we talked.

I wiped the blood from my chin. "Can't depend on electrolyte-replacement fluid alone, after all."

I held the liver out to her. After a moment's hesitation, she reached out and took a languorous bite.

"Think we can catch them?" she asked.

I wanted to tell her that we didn't need to, that the two of us could cut our own path, but she was already sprinting up the slope. Laughing, cheering, urging each other on, we climbed up the treacherous surface of a melting glacier. We caught our colleagues, passed them. Laurie was in the front, and I was close behind her. But never, no matter how hard I tried, could I catch her.

"I'm sorry, man."

It's my friend Manolo. He sits on a bench in LAX, the White Zone, the post-pump recovery area. It's decorated like the LA Airport, all iridescent oil-soaked asphalt and peeled tyre tread. The rumble of departing 747s relaxes those who have just finished their workouts.

"Laurie wouldn't talk?" I say.



"I don't know if she talks at all any more. She's gone, Gustav. Face it. The body's all that's left."

"No!"

"You have to be in there with her to understand it."

"I've been in there, Manolo. Once. That's enough for me. For anyone, other than Laurie."

"Hey, tell me about it."

Manolo went into the Club Fitness Virtual Reality device for me, to carry a message to Laurie. A real friend. Stripes of drying blood show through the back of Manolo's T shirt. The skin has been rubbed raw on his ankles, and his flesh smells like it's decaying.

"So what happened?" I ask.

Manolo puts his arms around himself.

"It was a galley, like out of one of those old gladiator movies. Pulling oars, pulling oars, in the hot sun. Hours. I've never worked harder."

His skin does look sunburned. That Fit VR is some machine.

"She was there, pulling with the best of them. She had her own oar. It was like part of her *body*. She wouldn't talk to me. Nothing. Just the exercise. Give it up, Gustav."

"Lats, delts," I say. "Fine. What's it do for your pecs?"

"What's that, man?"

"Your pecs, Manolo. What's pulling a goddam oar do for your pecs?"

"Okay. I get a break, get up to get a sandwich."

"They got a snack bar? On the galley."

"Hell yes. Good one too, even if it's only virtual: Power Bars, Cytomax, branched-chain aminos, chromium picolinate, electrolytes, the works. Overseer unlocks you, you go get a snack."

"So you got a sandwich."

"Yeah, I got a sandwich, you got a problem with that? I hate all that fake-fruit shit, you know? So I got a sandwich. Bread, mayo, lettuce. You know. A sandwich."

"What kind?"

"Tuna. Tuna sandwich. On rye."

"Pecs, Manolo. You were going to tell me about your pecs."

"I'm telling you! You listen, you learn about my goddam pecs. I got the sandwich, peeled the top to make sure I got what I ordered. And it wasn't tuna. It was fish, but it wasn't no goddam tuna."

"What was it?"

"Placoderm."

"Devonian? They gave you a Devonian fish?"

"You heard me."

"Those things have been extinct for, what, 250 million years?"

"Look, did I say it was fresh? You ever see one? The damn things was armoured all over. Even the eyeballs had bony plates over them. Fucking nuclear submarines. Thirty feet long! It ripped out through the lettuce, went for my throat. Teeth like daggers. I pushed on its face, kept the teeth away from my throat. Wrestled for an hour. Shoved it right back under the rye, slammed it shut." He's sobbing. "That was my pecs, okay, wiseass? I've never had a workout like that. Never."



"Fine, fine." I am shaken, but I don't want to show it. "I've always admired your pecs, Manolo."

"Yeah, right. Just don't make me go in there again."

"I won't." I take a breath, keep from demanding more information about Laurie. "You want to relax, Manolo?"

"Yeah. I want to relax."

Massages, rubdowns, shiatsu, rolfing – all tedious superseded forms of relaxation, mere pale approximations of what we now have available. I jab Manolo in the side of the neck with a hypo of curare. It's made especially for the Club by Yanomano Indians at the headwaters of the Orinoco: plant toxins, red and black ants, snake fangs. Club Blend.

The curare paralyses his cholinergic neuromuscular junctions. Without neural impulses, the muscles go completely and utterly limp.

Manolo breathes a last sigh of satisfaction and crumples to the floor. I grab him, slide him into an iron lung. I've given him a big dose, his diaphragm is pure goo, he can't take a breath on his own. That's how the Yanomano hunt, by suffocating their prey. There is no relaxation more complete.

Manolo is done with his workout. I envy him.

"You still... want... to touch her?" His voice comes in sync with the gasping of the iron lung.

"Yes, Manolo. I do."

"Good... luck..."

"Thanks."

The skin on Laurie's biceps has been replaced by transparent plastic sheeting. I see her flexing it in the overhead mirror. The back-lab guys have spliced firefly genes into the mitochondria of her muscle cells, and as the ATP flows in her biceps glows, every striation vividly outlined. I stand mesmerized.

Now I don't want you to think that we Club trainers have some sort of hostility to the natural world, or something. I mean, fun's fun, and even without Przhevalsky's Horse there are plenty of other equid varieties, but when it gets down to it, we're a pretty soft-hearted bunch.

That's why I jumped at the Port Macquarie koala job: I've always loved those little eucalyptus chewers. Well, that and the fact that Laurie was going to be the other operative. I made a lot of enemies by my attempts to fiddle the roster.

I finally had to get vicious and turn my fellow trainer, Rempfer, over to the police, just to get the slot.

Rempfer was selling dianabol to kids at the Shady Tree Day School who were too young to carry weapons. He'd get to them just before cookies-and-nap. Cheesy, really. D-ball is such an old steroid it's like ipecac or cod-liver oil, something your forehead-pulsing old granddaddy reminisces about while adjusting the black-lace bra that holds in his gynecomastic breasts.

There was something primitive and terrifying about those tiny muscle-bound four-year-olds. They tore the principal's Saab apart with their bare hands and ate the upholstery. We still use the film of them being pressure-hosed by a terrified SWAT team as promo footage for our line of introductory anabolics.

Our local Australian contact, Adelaide Snokkie, wore a black bombazine dress and a koala-shaped button that said "Cute, Cuddly, and Endangered!"

Laurie and I were there to completely change that lame approach.

"The poor dears," Snokkie said. "They get so frightened. All those condos, those cars, those dogs..." Koalas, despite their impressive claws, are easy meat. Their population had dropped dramatically with real-estate development in isolated eucalyptus groves. The very idea made me boil.

"It's the adrenal glands." I tried not to be harsh over the koalas' physiological shortcomings. "They have adrenals the size of gnat's testicles, pardon the expression, ma'am. How much epinephrine do you think you can squeeze out of those things? Anything more stressful than choosing between one eucalyptus leaf and another sends them into shock."

Laurie patted a foam carrier with cold mist pouring from it: lab-grown transplanted adrenals derived from the Pleistocene marsupial lion-analogue, *Thylacoleo carnifex*, an extinct predator from the Australian plains. The DNA was recovered from an Aboriginal site in a deep cave where creatures from earlier eras were mummified and used in Aborigine rituals.

"My surgery is set up," Laurie said comfortably. "After a little practice, we'll be able to process ten of them an hour."

We went in. Kung fu and Aikido *sensei*, old friends of Laurie's, were gathered around acupuncture wall charts from Ming dynasty China that had been computer remapped at the Club to conform to koala anatomy. They were arguing furiously in Japanese, Okinawan and a dozen Chinese dialects about how to train koalas in incapacitating and crippling holds and blows. At issue was the precise path of koala *qi*, the vital force. When Laurie walked in, they bowed low.

I left them together as the bows and handshakes turned into body blows and vicious kicks. It had been a while since they'd seen each other.

"I want you to meet Arnie," Mrs Snokkie said. A koala clung to the collar of her dress. One of his forelimbs was bandaged. She set him on the floor. He twisted his head around in terror, and she bent over to pick him up again.

"Leave me alone with him," I ordered.

"But –"

"No. Let me do this my way."

She shut the door. I squatted down next to Arnie.

"I hear they bulldozed your eucalyptus grove for a golf course and 98 units of luxury condominiums," I said.

He blinked.

"I hear your mate was run over by a snack truck and your children paved under for the access road."

Was that a tear?

"You hid in the reeds near the water hazard and were attacked by a Doberman and ripped apart. You didn't defend yourself. You just curled up in a little ball. A couple of teenagers played soccer with you with steel-toed Doc Martens, then left you there to die."

He tried to look away. I grabbed his head.

"You have six-inch claws!" I screamed. "You have incredible teeth. You can move, you can climb. What the hell is wrong with you?"

Arnie whimpered and moaned. I shook him.

"You could rule this fucking continent!"

He waived. He was ready to give up. I could see it.

"I can help you." My voice was soft now. "I can give you the power. New hormones, training, implanted weaponry, the works. But you have to want it. None of it will do a damn bit of good if you don't have the fire in the belly to use it. Do you want it, Arnie? Do you want to get those bastards?"

For a long time, maybe five minutes, he was just a furry lump in my hands. I thought I had lost him, failed. Then, slowly, so slowly you could barely see it move, his head emerged. He looked at me. His eyes were clear and dark. Then, knowing what it meant, he nodded.

"It'll be hard," I said. "Brutal. You'll grow to hate me. You'll want me dead. Hell, you'll probably even try to kill me, and good luck to you if you do. I don't take prisoners. But at the end of it, you and your friends will be the sort of koala no one on this planet has been able to imagine even in his worst nightmares."

Laurie and I grew to love those crazy little guys. They stayed cute and cuddly even as they grew into implacable killers. They were like our own children. So it was natural that we should fall in love with each other.

I still remember those days as the most precious of my life. Every moment we could spare from surgery, from demolition training, from dealing with the occasional berserk koala who couldn't stand the tense preparation and tried to grease Mrs Snokkie or one of the other loyal workers at the Port Macquarie Koala Hospital, was spent making love. In free fall during practice drops, scuba diving under the grim eyes of moray eels, in the bear cage at the Sidney zoo, waiting for them to become enraged by the pheromonal scent: my darling loved life on the edge. She was always looking for more of it.

Now she's moved beyond it. I have to get her back somehow.

Six months later, our faithful C-130 Hercules laboured low over the Dividing Range on the coast of New South Wales. Hundreds of koalas parachuted from it, spilled their chutes expertly, and hit the ground. Koalas with fist-sized adrenal glands that pumped them up into a permanent blazing fury. Koalas who could hang, small and virtually undetectable, on a tree branch for days, until it was just the right moment to drop and slash. Koalas that could kill a barbecuing Aussie with a single sweep of their chrome-steel-edged claws, then plant plastic explosive under the fuel tank of his Range Rover for his heirs to discover when they turned the key. Killer Koalas. Koalas of Death.

It was beautiful.

In the Club, a guy walks by me. His arm sweeps repeatedly over his head in a complex, semaphoring gesture. It never stops. The endless workout has swollen the biceps and triceps to immense size, so that he resembles a fiddler crab.

I stop him. "Where did you have that done?"

He looks suspicious. "Have what done?" I have to stand away from him to avoid getting brained by the swinging arm. He sputters and drools and is barely comprehensible.

"Look, I'm not reporting you to anyone. It's just that..." Honesty is always best. "It's that there's someone I want to impress. And I thought..."

"Okay." He looks around, makes sure no one's listening. This kind of thing, tic-tattooing it's called, is illegal in this country. You have to pretend it's a natural defect. A lot of under-employed doctors will give you a certificate of uterine drug exposure to account for it. "This particular one I got done in Burma, way up the Salween, almost in China. Hell of a trip. I recommend it."

"Thanks."

Tic-tattooing embosses not your skin, that hopelessly obsolete organ, but the nerve connections between your thalamus and your basal ganglia, so that you can get artistically defining tics and behaviour patterns. This guy's arm swing was nice, real distinctive. Lovers exchange characteristic gestures as a sign of fidelity, though it's bad form to carry that heart-breakingly sweet yawn-and-hand-curl into the next relationship, and *immensely* bad form to then trade it to your next lover as one of your own.

"Don't mention it, friend."

Burma. I'm staying away from Burma. The guy's skull has been resealed crudely and has plates on it like a turtle shell. His face is slack. I haven't rendered his words phonetically: that last sentence sounded more like "do me'ye fre." Those basal ganglia are way down in there, you don't go after the damn things with a weed whacker.

I have this gesture I'd love to have embossed. It's based on some of Nijinsky's eurythmic-influenced choreography from *Sacré du Printemps*, mixed with the insectlike movements from an old time-motion study movie of women putting bobbing heads on Atlantic City souvenirs, and perhaps just a bit of Harpo from the mirror scene in *Duck Soup*, for a classical pop-culture element. I think Laurie would like it.

I can see Laurie now, bent over a sweat-shiny brochure, the kind they use for advertising exercise gear.

She looks at me. Her eyes are full of tears.

Laurie is not entered in any lacrimal events that I know of. I start toward her, but she turns and runs. No one can move as fast as she does.

Laurie and I were already having problems when the Club sent us together to check out a new piece of exercise equipment. I'd been getting lazy, not putting in the Club hours, wanting to stay in bed and make love.

Screwing was a lousy way to try to stay in shape, Laurie said. We started having a lot of arguments.

Our contact was in a mall video arcade in suburban Chicago.

"Look, Gustav!" Laurie flicked the levers on a dusty game machine stuck in a corner of the arcade.

On the CRT, bicycle-riding figures spilled out of the belly of an aircraft. It was us, the Club trainers, our modelled movements. I thought I could even recognize Laurie's energy, and remembered what it was about her that I first had loved. "Spank the Lama," the

game was called. It was clear that no one had played it in months. I don't know why I found that so sad.

"You here for Jorg?" A voice said at my elbow.

The voice belonged to a sleepy-eyed teenager with the fashionable larval look: pale, shiny skin, vestigial segmentation. This one had a spider-leg walker linked into his sacrum. Originally developed as a transport method for paraplegics, they had been seized upon by the mall maggots as a relaxing way of getting around.

"Yes," Laurie said. "Can you take us to him?"

"Sure. If you think you're ready." He leered obesely at us. Other teenagers gathered around, each with his idiosyncratic transport replacement: lunar spring wheel, ground-effects skirt, even snail biosim, leaving a trail of incredibly low-friction goo that caused constant accidents.

"We're ready. Let's go."

"My Mom has to give us a ride," spiderboy said. "I don't have my licence yet."

A minivan pulled up out of the heat waves of the mall parking lot, and a platform lowered itself from the rear to lift the kids in.

I peered in through the driver's side window. "Thank you, Mrs..."

I stopped, startled by the flopping head and pale face of the driver. I pulled the door open, to be met by a blast of freezing air and the smell of preservative.

"Better get in. She gets mad if you wait too long."

I turned to him. "She's -"

"Yeah, I know." His eyes were blank. "Suggestion of my maturity counsellor. Said that losing my mother at this age would leave me with a permanent feeling of abandonment. So we took the processors and RAMs out of some old Pentiums, rigged up some optical disks with movement repertoires on them, and stuck her all over with myoelectric connections. She really doesn't seem that much different, tell you the truth..."

The computer-controlled dead woman leaned on the horn, then put the car into gear.

"See? She'll leave you if you don't get to it. She was always impatient."

His spider legs carried him around to the van's rear. I swung up next to Mom.

She couldn't see anything with dead retinas, no way to reinvigorate the rhodopsin, but she drove expertly. A bank of microwave radar dishes all around the van gave her a great 360 view.

Every time she made a major muscular movement, like shifting into a higher gear, the van's engine slowed. The Mom-hackers had run the myoelectric power points off the battery, and as the muscles got depleted of stored glucose more and more power was required for activation. Her movements were increasingly spastic. The coolant condenser, blazing hot under my feet, was already stressing the van's alternator to the limit.

We drove past endless housing developments, from highway to highway, until we finally pulled off and stopped in front of a Tudor split-entry no different than any other in continental North America.

"Jorg's," spiderboy said. "He's got what you want."

Laurie and I got out. Spiderboy leaned over the

front seat, hit a button on the dash.

"Want me to take you and your friends for pizza?" a brightly voiced spoke from the radio.

He sighed. "Sure Mom. Sounds great."

The van peeled rubber and left us there on the silent street.

Laurie walked up to the front door and pushed it. It swung open on a dark interior. All the windows on the outside of the wall were fake, attached to the blank walls to make it match the neighbourhood.

The smell was foul. Collapse and decay. We made our way through the darkness. The carpets were thick and damp under our feet. Walls were covered with mildew and fungus. A dim glow from upstairs gave us a goal. Rot had weakened the steps, which creaked ominously under our weight.

"Jorg?" Laurie said.

"In here." The voice was surprisingly full and energetic. "You've reached your goal."

Jorg sat in the middle of the room, presumably in a chair, though that was invisible under him. Despite myself, I was fascinated.

"You use saline injection, neutral silicon stretcher?" I asked.

Jorg looked offended. "No way. This is all natural. No weird dermal hormone stimulation, either."

The room was filled with skin, fold upon fold. Jorg's head sat on his body like a scoop of butter on a stack of flapjacks. The surface area was incredible. I could see the complex spray nozzles overhead that kept it clean and hydrated. It was that moisture that had permeated the house. It had probably been years since Jorg had visited any part of it other than this room.

"Just weight gain and loss, then."

"Well..." Jorg looked a little embarrassed. "I did have to use liposuction. Take too long to lose it, the skin shrinks..."

"No, no, of course." I hastened to reassure him. "That's considered a natural procedure, for showing. Have you ever thought about it?"

He dimpled, pleased by the attention. "Display? No. This is my own private hobby. Something I share with only a few friends."

The skin was incredible. Never exposed to the drying effects of the sun, it was pale and supple, without stretch marks or scarring. It was a tough discipline. Gain 300 pounds to stretch your skin out. Liposuction the fat out, then clamp the skin to make parts of it tight again. Regain the weight, stretching the clamped areas out. Lose again, reclamp... It took patience, dedication, complete lack of interest in other human beings. If Jorg had been willing, he could have been a champion. I imagined him rotating on a display stand like a dessert in a deli, spotlight, a cheering crowd all around him. Maybe I could persuade him, become his manager...

"This it?" Laurie said, pointing at two tangles of brain-access wires hanging over a couple of cracked vinyl office chairs.

"Yes," Jorg said. "The future of fitness. Fit VR. Sit down."

We sat down, and felt the wires clamp down on our skulls.

Nuclear war had fused the surface of the Earth into shining black glass. It gleamed in the sun. Nothing grew in it. Laurie and I skated across it on gigantic in-line skates. Ahead of us, the ground rose up to a range of mountains. The Rockies? It was hard to tell. They too had melted.

"Hey, Laurie," I said. "I don't like this."

She was just ahead of me. Her ass was beautiful as she worked her way up the slope. She looked back at me, smiled. "What's wrong, Gustav? Isn't this great?"

"I want to stop." The slope was already making me gasp for breath.

"I don't think you should. Take a look behind you."

I did. Climbing up the slope behind us, gaining on us, was what looked like a gang of skeletons. Their fishlike eyes were fixed on us, and I could see drool streaming from their spike teeth.

This was all a simulation, nothing real. But I was terrified. I climbed after Laurie. Mile after mile we skated. The air blazed in my lungs. My legs, butt, and lower back cramped in agony. And still the skeleton guys pursued.

There were things in the thick glass. The remains of houses, bones sometimes. Once I recognized a Jeep Wagoneer, its tires melted, the radial belts flopping loose. Some was still inside of it...

Our pursuers fired tiny razor-edged nunchuks at us. Most of them went wild and tinkled across the glass, but one sliced into my shoulder-blade and sent blood streaming down my back. Another caught Laurie's ear. Within a few minutes her shoulder was soaked with blood. She didn't seem to care.

Then we were over the pass, sliding down an endless expanse of smooth glass. We moved faster and faster, with no way to stop or slow down.

Laurie, ahead of me the whole way, was yelping with the joy of it. We must have been going 50 miles an hour, maybe faster. There were no features in the landscape to give it scale. Just the vast melted mountains behind us, and the endless plain of glass that stretched out ahead of us. The skeletons swept silently down behind us.

I fell on the floor, retching. Laurie pulled the wires from her scalp and stood over me. Blood still dripped from her ear.

"That's it," she said. "That's the future."

"Hey," I said. "I didn't like the way that *felt*."

She looked down at me, contempt growing in her eyes. She never touched me again.

I get ahead of Laurie by taking a shortcut, over Puffball's leg. The vast deformed kneecap shifts under me and sends me over the side, to smash face down on the sweat-slick wrestling mats. Fortunately, the sweat's just a glycerine-electrolyte solution sprayed on for verisimilitude. I wipe it from my cheek.

The mats are recycled from high-school gyms in Iowa and Indiana, squashed flat from generations of corned midwestern muscleheads trying to pin each other. The Club needs that connection with the old fitness, the waxy-yellow-salt-tablet, wind-sprint, fart-and-scratch, hurdler's-stretch, Ex-Lax-purged-weigh-in, flat-topped, towel-snapped-butt fitness, now long gone.



I lean against the sagging flesh of the inner thigh and look up at Puffball's face. His massive head is supported by a forest of recycled Keiser machine air cylinders, programmed to massage his cranial muscles to prevent unsightly sores. As the cylinders hiss, his expression changes, from anger, to despair, to idiotic glee.

Puffball went for Big. We all want Big, of course, but he thought he had a way around the natural limitations of biology. He got the guys in the lab back behind the whirlpool to pump him full of hormones, then infect him with some turbocharged version of Paget's Disease, a bone regeneration defect. They said they could control it, give him some mass, an imposing inertial frame.

As usual, those biohackers fucked up, big time. Boosted by the weird hormonal brew, his bones bubbled up like over-yeasted bread. His head weighs a couple of hundred pounds, and resembles a stack of concrete sacks left out in the rain by union construction workers reaching the end of their shift. One of his legs swelled up too, and is ten yards long, big as a fallen sequoia, with a knee like an inverted bathtub. The other one stayed close to normal size, and flails helplessly from his gigantic hip.

He lives in the Club now. He can't leave. They'd have to take the building apart. They made him an employee, and hooked his arm up to an IV drip from the syrup canister in the Coke machine. Someone has notched up his tibia, and we use it to stack chrome-plated dumbbells. He earns his caffeinated corn syrup, you can be sure.

I freeze. It's Laurie, lying out on the mat. Not doing anything. Not exercising. Just lying there, as beautiful as ever.

I take a plastic cup, scrape it along the inside of Puffball's thigh.

The Club lab boys developed an artificial dermis for hot-weather competition. You know, when it's hot, humidity sky-high, the sweat can't evaporate. Sweat glands pump out the water, core body temperature soars anyway, you feel over, uselessly soaked. Bad. Alcohol, however, evaporates freely, and even though its heat of vaporization doesn't match that of water, it makes a pretty good cooler out there on the track. So, they designed sweat glands that secreted pure ethanol. Get the matching liver fermentation booster and synthetic subcutaneous capillary net, you can down a pound of sugar the night before a big race, let your liver make ethanol while you sleep, then run your race, cool as a cucumber, while everyone else is rolling up eyeballs and dropping.

Problem came up just before the last Olympics. Big, high-profile proof of concept, name of the lab stencilled on the torchbearer's chiton as he headed out from Olympus. You've seen it. Everybody's seen it. Runner crossing the plain of Argos, flaming torch high, hot sun, starts to sweat... floom! Screen flares, comes back to show an cloud of oily smoke, an inky logo of death.

The lab guys hid what was left of the dermis by grafting it onto the inside of Puffball's thigh. He sucks in his Coke, his liver converts it to clean ethanol, the skin secretes it.

He's now the Club bar.

"Laurie." I offer her the cup. She takes it. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, Gustav. I thought I had it. I thought I had the ultimate exercise experience."

I shudder. She's fit, all right. And not just skeletally. Neovascularization has covered her body with giant pulsing arterioles. Her arrector pili muscles are so buff that when she gets goosebumps, they're the size of tennis balls. She's worked the sphincter pupillae and the dilator pupillae muscles of her iris until her eyeball looks like a lemon reamer. She has all the desired stigmata of fitness.

"So what happened?"

"You know what Jorg's VR machine really is? It's a piece of goddam flabbiest propaganda! He was laughing at us the whole time."

She pulls out the crumpled brochure. It shows a terrified-looking fat man with Fit VR wires coming out of his head. "Experience the Horrors of Fitness!", read the caption. The next page shows him happily flopped in a deck chair, eating an ice cream cone. "Then have a lie-down." The brochure was from something called the Exercise Education Association.

The EEA had a slogan: "Narcissism, tissue oxidation, joint degeneration. If exercise was a disease, it would have a telethon."

"It's like all that drug-education stuff," I tell her. "It just makes you want to try it."

"Well, Gustav," she says, resting her head in my lap. "Maybe it just takes a while for me to get the point."

The Club's flex-display cam puts the back of Laurie's head up on the screens behind her, maybe to show the muscles of her neck. But the gain is screwed up. The display pulses, then suddenly focuses in on one hair, which swells until it fills the screen. The view cruises along the scalp, the epidermis like slabs of shattered rock, until it finds a skin mite digging busily at the base of a follicle, looking like a buffalo scratching itself against a Ponderosa pine.

I find this intimate revelation exciting. These women never show you anything that matters. Their skin is porcelain, their navels perfect footballs, even their elbows are unwrinkled and show no trace of wear. I want to see the real stuff, float in the ventricles of her brain, lick the synovial fluid off her iliofemoral ligament, feel the slow emptying and filling of her gall bladder, take a bubble bath in her alveoli...

She smiles slowly. "Does my body excite you, Gustav?"

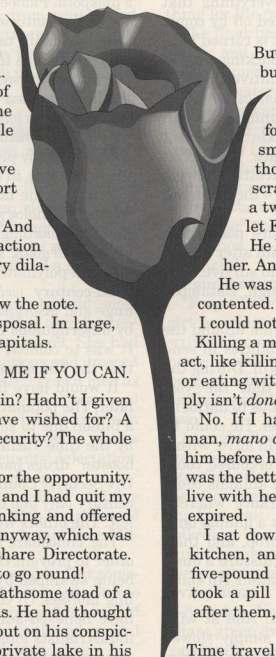
"Yes," I say. "Yes, it does."

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**Alexander Jabokov**, born 1956, is the author of four novels, beginning with *Carve the Sky* (1991). His short-story collection *The Breath of Suspension* (1994) was published by the prestigious Arkham House and is due out in paperback about now. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and we are pleased to welcome him to *Interzone* for the first time.

# Evertrue Carnadine

Dominic Green



I came downstairs into the kitchen from the sleeping area. Rosa was gone. She was there, of course, sitting propped up at the kitchen table with a malicious smile on her face, yes, but she was gone.

"Rosie, you're pretending. You've shut your eyes, wicked thing. I'll sort you out —"

And I went to open her eyes. And saw... nothing. No pupillary contraction as the eye was opened. No pupillary dilation either. Not for me.

I recoiled, horrified. And then I saw the note. Lying propped up on the waste disposal. In large, easily readable, spelled-out block capitals.

GONE TO YEAR MILLION. CATCH ME IF YOU CAN.

How could she do this to me? Again? Hadn't I given her everything a woman could have wished for? A house in the country, a happy life, security? The whole world, literally, to herself?

It had taken me years to save up for the opportunity. The house had come on the market, and I had quit my job in 31st-century investment banking and offered her the earth. Well, 35 years of it, anyway, which was the portion allotted by the Timeshare Directorate. After all, there was plenty of time to go round!

You should have seen *his* face, loathsome toad of a multi-talented polymath that he was. He had thought to have her to *himself* for all time, out on his conspicuously consumptive yacht on his private lake in his small, private Third World country. Ha! I'd shown him what all time meant!

Then the thought hit me like a wet dishcloth slapped between the eyes.

What if she was with him? What if she had gone back to him? (Or, more chronologically correct, *forward* to him...)

I ran outside the house. An old man dozed on the porch. I nearly knocked him over in my frenzy.

*His* car was outside.

There were many cars outside, obviously; a whole row of them, neatly parked outside the house in see-through polymer bubbles, safe against the elements, waiting for the times their owners would come back to collect them.

But one car was not inside any plastic bubble.

Age-worn. Dented. Scratched. A rusted hulk, eaten at by the elements for a hundred thousand years. Windows smashed, tyres deflated, graffiti in a thousand phoneme-shifted languages scrawled all down the sides. I noted with a twinge of envy that it had been a scarlet Ferrari.

He had come all this way. All this way, for her. And he could never go back.

He was sitting in the front seat, tranquil and contented.

I could not kill him.

Killing a man in the Trance is an unconscionable act, like killing a child, or not belching after a meal, or eating with the left hand. It is a thing that simply isn't *done*.

No. If I had to kill him, I would do it man to man, *mano a mano*, so to speak. I would confront him before her, and she would be forced to see who was the better, have no choice but to succumb and live with her grim and terrible lover till her life expired.

I sat down in a safe and durable chair in the kitchen, and took a hammer into my hands, a five-pound lump hammer of polished steel, and took a pill into my mouth, and set on my way after them, sitting perfectly still.

Time travel is easy. Easy like bobsleighbing. You just sit in the sleigh and hurtle downtime at break-neck speed. The only difficulty comes when you try to travel back uphill.

I'm being facetious, of course. Let me explain.

It was some time in the late 22nd century — unimaginable ages ago — that doctors began to experiment with the nature of unconsciousness. Doctors, of course, had been experimenting with the nature of unconsciousness using the contents of their own medicinal alcohol cabinets for years before then, haha, but never in quite so dedicated and altruistic a manner.

The question was not, "What is unconsciousness?" but "How many states of unconsciousness are there, and what is the difference between them?" The more

they looked, as men in a dark room, the more they began to see different shades of oblivion. There was sedation, "conscious" unconsciousness, more like a light sleep than a blackout, and anaesthesia, where the outside world could not be sensed at all. There were states in which the brainwaves of the subject changed pattern in a singular manner, such as catalepsy. And then, finally, there was the flat EEG of brain death at the dark inevitable end of the scale.

The difference between a human brain and that of a thinking machine, at least in those first days of thinking machines, was one of memory. A computer lost its memory once it had been turned off; not so a human being. A human being remembers everything that happened to it prior to its being turned off by coma, anaesthesia or catalepsy, as soon as it is turned back on again, *without* having to write to backing storage for the intervening period. Some primitive thinking machines of the time possessed similar capabilities, due to a constant trickle of current running through their circuits. As long as the trickle of current remained, the memories stayed in place. When electrical activity ceases in the brain or circuits, following death – the process known as flatlining – the memories fade like the flames of a dying fire.

What if, the doctors argued, it were possible to maintain a "trickle current" in the brain after death? The body might die, but the brain would survive. This was their first conceptual breakthrough. Catalepsy was their second.

Yogis and assorted medicine men from around the globe had long demonstrated their abilities to send themselves into deathlike trances at will. During the trance, it could be demonstrated that the yogi appeared, in some ways, to be impervious to harm; he needed neither food, nor air, nor water. He could be buried alive for months and dug up still alive, with a smile on his face. The same behaviour, of course, could be observed in laboratory mice; these animals could send themselves into a cataleptic trance whereby their heart would beat slowly, one beat a minute only, and their body temperature would drop, and their breathing rate slow until it would not disturb a dust-mite crawling up their nostril. Hibernation. All small earthly mammals did it every winter.

But what if all humans could do it? And at will? And what if the heart could be not simply slowed down, but for all practical purposes stopped from beating altogether? A human being involved in an accident could simply trance himself. He would no longer be able to feel the pain of his body. He would no longer need to breathe through his shattered lungs. His mangled heart need no longer pump blood around his burst and bleeding arteries and veins. Where the heart would not beat, the man could not bleed...

And men need not die. People could "trance" themselves at what they felt to be the point of death, and live on a billion years. It would be living in oblivion, but some could see the attraction of it. There might come a point, they reasoned, when beings evolved who had an answer to death, and could revive them to a life eternal.

They are still waiting.

There were others, however, who were more practical. For they realized in watching the dull non-corpses of the Immortals-in-Waiting, that if a man could shut his eyes in the 22nd century and wake up in the 23rd, why, that was time travel.

Of course, the causal certainty that one could never return to one's own time prevented the method being used to research future or past ages.

The only attraction was to the adventurer, to the man who thrilled at the thought of striking out into the wild unheard-of. And that, eventually, became time travel's greatest industry. Tourism.

It was more than tourism, in fact; if anything, it was a diaspora. Pioneer spirit, wagon trains stretching out across the centuries. All a man had to do was sit in his favourite chair, take a few pills, and trance. I'm not *happy* with this time! I want to make my *own* world! The attractions were many, and all things to all people: "in the future, sex-change technology will have advanced, and I'll no longer be a man trapped in a woman's body"; "In the future, I'll be able to stimulate my pleasure centres by plugging my head into the mains." In the future this, in the future that. No one ever stopped to consider the fact that life in the future might be worse. Technology was on a roll. The downside could wait until morning. Except that the morning was where we were all going. Disenchanted bank clerks and multi-talented polymaths from all walks of life, afflicted by 22nd-century *weltschmerz*, moved downtime in a huge and disorganized rabble, sold new leases of life by unscrupulous traders in the new futures markets. It was to combat this chrono-environmental hazard that the Timeshare Directorate was formed.

It would have had to have been formed sooner or later. The population of the world had shrunk to half a billion due to zealous population control (OK, war) by the time Tachronal, Trillemium, and other "time-booster" drugs had bounced onto the market, but the UN Security Council estimated that by the end of the century only one hundredth of that number would be left. The others would have gone somewhere better.

The Timeshare Directorate was allegedly formed in order to prevent the inhabitants of future times from being swamped by hordes of rampaging time-travelling morons. Of course, no sane human being would have believed such rubbish. Every industrial age's industrialists long for a hole into which the troublesome waste products of its age can safely be shovelled, with no danger that they'll ever come out again. The disenchanted of the 22nd century were industrial waste product, surplus to requirements. And the future was a hole out of which, due to the very nature of causality, there was no danger anybody would crawl. The Timeshare Directorate merely wanted to prevent *everyone* piling off into the 47th millennium, whilst making sure that society's more undesirable elements stayed put beyond the year 2300.

Every Man Can Have the World to Himself, was their first slogan. Then they looked at the available years of Earth's life as a habitable planet, and were forced to rethink. Only five thousand million years at the outside. Five hundred million people. That meant the world to yourself, for ten years only. If only mar-



ried couples went into time, their tenancy of the entire earth increased to 20 years.

It was unlikely, therefore, that anyone could have the whole earth to themselves for threescore years and ten. But it would seem to be just so, since there would be little likelihood of, say, four or five couples encountering one another on a whole world that they were sharing.

The Timeshare Villas were invented for just such a purpose. Dotted around the world, made with the most hard-wearing materials 22nd-century science had to offer; house-sized time capsules, served by self-maintaining machines and solid-state systems that would never wear out, machines that would last a billion years. A choice of a million villas, from pent-roofed chalets in the Vosges to lakeside retreats in Finland.

The one drawback to the system was that at any one time you shared your home with up to a thousand sleeping corpses.

When I awoke, she had been there before me. (Well, of course she had been there before me; what I mean to say is, she had *woken* before me.)

I rose from my chair. The corpses in the kitchen had moved. The old man who had been sleeping in the porch was now dozing by the sink. Someone, probably, had moved him. As I walked out into the porch, I discovered the reason; someone had wanted a giant potted aspidistra in his place.

Some people liked having the corpses around; some sat them in the dormitory to wait their turn for tenancy. *She* liked having the corpses around. She had arranged them into nonsensical positions and dressed and undressed them like dolls. Dressed grown men as babies in giant nappies, arranged grown men and women and women and women and men and men into somnolent leatherclad orgies, then taken photos and left them for the subsequent tenants' delectation. It was not a pleasant part of her personality.

I looked at the clock on the west wall. It said five minutes after midnight, December 25th. I was late. I looked at the clock on the east wall. It said Year Million. I was on time.

It was dark, and there was snow outside. But someone had left the porch door open. As I stepped out into the night, my head brushed something soft. I recoiled instantly and looked up, and the something bounced inoffensively in the breeze from my body.

A balloon. A party balloon. Now my eyes were becoming accustomed to the gloom I could see thousands of them, hung round the outside of the house. My house.

It would appear that the house, originally in a high valley in the Australian Alps, was now passing into the temperate zones of the planet. There was a pine tree outside the door. Someone had hung lights on it. On top of the tree shone a star, a tiny supernova reflecting the cold light of the genuine articles hanging twinkling in the midnight sky.

I was vaguely aware that such trees had had some cultural significance once.

And then I heard the singing, from the garden. My own meticulously ordered Elizabethan knot garden,

small but of a most exquisite shape, now barbarously cut and landscaped into a huge and rolling Lord Haw-Haw panorama of hedges and statues and suchlike palladian pomp and bluster. Voices, singing, from an ornamental pergola:

"Happy Birthday to yoooo - Happy Birthday to yooooo -"

I hastened closer, hearing their giggles and their laughter, sure - as one always is in such circumstances - that it was directed at myself, and promising myself that I would kill if it proved to be the case.

"Happy birthday, dear Jesuuuuuuuu - Happy Birthday to Yooooooo!"

Of course. A million-year birthday party. Just the thing for the post-avant-garde jet-set.

The final line rose and fell like a chorus of caterwauls, and exploded into a mess of giggles. In my sturdy workmanlike house trousers and sensible Arran sweater - which she had instructed the house knitting machine to knit for me herself - I was out of place amid their dinner jackets and Little Black Dresses as I hurtled across the robot-rolled lawn.

"Rose! Rose!" I yelled as I saw her, beautiful as a gilded serpent, trying to push her way away from me through the back of the crowd. Still giggling.

"O Rose!" they yelled back, seeming to find it amusing. "Thou art sick! The invisible worm that flies in the night!"

I punched one of them. He crumpled.

"Forget Rose! I'm Evelyn!" said one of them, a black girl wearing a little *white* dress, and attempted to writhe sinuously into my arms. "A Rose by any other name would smell as sweet." I threw her from the pergola, and the company laughed at her misfortune, as they would have laughed at anyone's, save their own.

I caught Rose's eye as she ran across the lawn. She was stopping, and looking back every now and again. Stopping the despicably tall, well-built, ruggedly handsome monster who was pulling her along. Making him wait. Looking back to make sure I was still following. Beautiful as a soft-haired spider. They were running toward a huge, dimly green structure, geometrically exact, made to human measure and yet a living thing.

A hedge. No, more than a hedge. A garden maze. Giant green avenues open and empty under the thousand-millennial moon. As I looked up I saw what must be a supernova burning in the heavens near stars that looked like *Ursa Major*, but were not. It was fitting. Tonight, God was a million years old.

I could not see them running, but I could hear them giggling. I ran softly, so that they would not hear me coming, and so that my frustration would not provide them with reason for amusement. After all, they probably knew the maze, and I did not.

As I ran, I finally came upon a dinner-jacketed apparition wearing a conical party hat and carrying an obscenely complex cocktail. It blew a party streamer at me.

The audacity of the man! At last, vengeance! I raised my hammer to strike!

- And then realized he was not my enemy at all, but

merely another baboon in evening dress.

"Well met in the millionth!" he cried. "What ho old dude! Dire rave, not, what? Dave is the Grand Wizard of Get-Together, nix?" And he shook his champers glass at me till the bubbles boiled.

Having difficulty understanding the pipsqueak's hip speak, I addressed him in English, fingering the handle of my hammer behind my back.

"It was Dave and Rose I was looking for, actually. Can you tell me where to find them?"

He guffawed, and a corpuscle of food sailed out of his molars and splashed down in his 'poo glass.

"Rave and Doze? I think at present that a third crowd member is not what they would welcome, if you read between my lines."

"It is urgent. I need to talk to them desperately. A man is coming out of time intending to crush Dave's skull and tear out his liver with his teeth, and I have to warn them."

He eyed the food particle in his glass. "I fathom the underlying leitmotif in what you're saying, dude. But don't say I didn't warn you."

My hand tightened on the hammer in joy. "You know where they are?"

"I can tell you *where* they are. I can't say *when*. They're in the maze centre."

"Where is that?"

"In the centre of the maze."

Resisting the impulse to bash his brains in as he stood, I remained calm. "How do I get there?"

He looked around him at the identical green walls. I had obviously asked a seriously challenging question. "You can't get there from here," he concluded.

I pushed him aside and ran into the maze.

Fifteen minutes later, I found them. Dead to the world in each other's arms. Poppers of Trillenium in their hands. Blissful smiles on their faces. Uncaring of the potential dangers of going into Trance out here in the cold open.

I bit my own hammer-haft in frustration.

I would find them. I would find them, whenever they were, and I would make them pay. Looking at things logically for the first time, I realized that the decision to abandon me had been as much hers as it had his. She, too, was responsible for my misfortune, and she, too, should die, and then I would turn the hammer on myself, contented.

In the house, on all of the sleeping people, in all of the cupboards, I found a quantity of perhaps a thousand Trillenium pills of varying dosages. Knowing full well that this was theft and left the pills' unfortunate owners stranded in time, I placed these all in an airtight steel container, and walked out beyond the boundaries of the house and garden, and buried my cache in the dirt.

Now, no matter when they had jumped to in time, I would be able to find them. I would carry out a centimetric search down the years, crushed-up pill by crushed-up pill, decade by decade, until I found them.

I carried the two of them back to the house (of course, that was why she'd gone into Trance outside the house; she'd known I'd carry them back inside).

I carried them into the dormitory, laid them down. Him like a sack of potatoes, her like a glass sculpture. Around us, the rows of comfy chairs filled the dormitory, and were filled in their turn with rows of lolling, dribbling Timesharers, like an audience at an extremely boring matinee. The room looked odd. A cinema with no screen.

I brought in my chair from the kitchen, and sat it before the pair of them as they slept. By the time I returned, she had slid and fallen against his shoulder as she dozed, and I could swear there was a smile on her lips.

I cursed, and my hands shook as I took out the first pill and put it in my mouth.

Perhaps the hundred thousandth time I had awoken, I awoke not to her sleeping face, but to my own. A mirror. I was alarmed to see that I had aged visibly.

It was, of course, no real surprise. I had been stopping and starting my system so many times in the past month, with so little sleep. I looked like a man perhaps ten years older. Or perhaps ten million.

She was not here. I sighed. Someone had moved her again as she slept.

I would have to get up, move round the entire house, search every room, until I found his and her sleeping bodies. Only then could I be content, and dig up my canister of pills, and turn in for a thousand and one nights again.

Then I looked at my reflection in the mirror once again.

I was dressed up as a clown. Huge, fluffy pom-poms punctuated the front of my white bouffant romper suit, and my face was made up in garish colours. A conical cap sat on my head, adorned with a large capital letter "D."

It was her. I knew it was her. No one else would subject me to such an iniquity. I sat bolt upright in the chair.

She was not in the room. The room was not the dormitory, but a bedroom. *Our* bedroom. I had been sitting, for anything up to a hundred years, blindly witnessing my own cuckoldry!

I staggered over to the basin and retched. Then I turned on the water and splashed the clown's white foundation from my face.

I looked up in the mirror above the basin. The makeup had streaked, leaving a grotesque madman's grin, and eyes slit like a cat's, or a demon's.

And then I heard the voice. The most awful voice I ever heard, calling out soft and shrill and fragile from a neighbouring bedroom. The voice said, "Daddy?"

I seized the hammer and went next door. The child was small and fair-haired, and had her eyes and mouth, his nose and ears. It was perhaps six years old. It was frightened as I came into the bedroom. After all, only two live adult human beings existed in its world.

"You're not my Daddy," it observed intelligently.

I lowered myself down to its level, so that it would not scream. "No," I said. "I'm Mr Clown. I'm here to see your Mummy and your Daddy."

I tried to tell myself that the child was a logical

result of my betrayal and their union, that I should have expected it. But I had not expected it. Not so quickly. After all, it could only have been a month since...

"I'm here to see your Daddy in particular," I said.

I could not kill the child. It had too much of her in it. Otherwise, it had enough of him in it for me to have cheerfully cracked its skull like an egg. The child pointed downstairs, down the access ramp, out into the garden.

They were there, digging, hoeing, sowing. She looked as old without makeup as I had felt inside it. Perhaps even older. But still the most beautiful woman in the world. In the best of all possible worlds...

I approached him first as he stood hoeing. I stood there for a time, and he did not notice me. Intruders were not a thing he had had to worry about for many millennia.

The house was quite beautiful now. They had made it beautiful, together. Painted it virginal white, and twined it round with ivy. Built a little, low rock wall, trained climbers and creepers, created a layered herbeaceous border...

The child stood watching me from the house. Almost as if it already knew what I was going to do, and was bracing itself against the impact.

When he did see me, he jumped and nearly impaled himself with the hoe-handle. Then he recovered his polymathic grace and poise.

"Why, Louis," he said, a huge, disposable plastic smile growing across his features. "How nice to see you after all these years. Rose will be pleased to see you, too. Tell you what - what say you and I jaunt on into the house and I brew us up a hot toddy, eh?"

Perhaps he really was so lonely, living there in that big house with just the two of them and the child and the corpses, that he was genuinely pleased to see me. Perhaps he genuinely thought that, after ten years, the business of my betrayal was all water under the bridge and spilt milk not fit to be cried over.

What he didn't realize was that, for me, it had not been ten years, but a month.

"Your rose garden is famous these days, you know," he said, casting a hand over his garden, my garden, as if he'd found some common ground between us instead of no man's land. "Did you know these are the only roses left in Time now? They seem to grow quite well here. Never give up, despite all the natural selection going on around them."

The house was back in the tropics now, I saw. Or perhaps the sun was growing larger. It did indeed seem redder and heavier than it had previously. All these last thousand or so times I had arisen, I had assumed the world to be coincidentally at sunset and sunrise every time my eyes had opened. But it was not the case. The sun had begun to creak arthritically into the Alpha Process. Icarus, Mercury, Venus and eventually the Earth were finished.

"To tell you the truth, old man," he said, looking at the hammer in my hand, "we didn't really think you'd follow us this far."

"You have stolen the one thing that gave me meaning," I said. "The one small ewe-lamb in my flock, the

damask rose of my desire, the fifth secret chamber of my heart. For this, I will not retire to your house, or drink your hot toddy, for I would rather drink your blood."

His face twisted into the expression of a man foxed by a problem he cannot understand. While his mind was failing to understand, his body was doing nothing, and I moved in with the hammer. He jerked the hoe up ineffectually to stop me at the last minute, but my arm came round it and I felt the blood spatter on my clown suit.

He fell, and I felt oddly sickened. I had never seen a broken human being before. But, I reasoned, the house held so many unreal corpses that the addition of a single real one would hardly be noticed. Besides, where were the police? Where was the judge, jury and executioner? *Here*, I said to myself, gripping the hammer-handle with triumphant relish.

I looked across the garden. She had not seen. The flesh of her flesh had perished, and she had not felt a pinprick. So much for her everlasting love. She had moved behind the vines, and I could see her taking cuttings.

The roses I had grown were all about me now, though many close to the house had been beheaded. Doubtless the scoundrel picked a rose every day for his beloved. My roses. My beloved.

I hoped that they had put up a good fight and scratched him with their thorns.

They were competing with the native vegetation of the time, I was glad to see. Huge, dull black blossoms swayed up toward the bloody heavens, being attended to by giant insects that were not insects, but something perhaps descended from spiders. The blossoms probably were beautiful in the infra-red that was all these insectoid arachnids could see. The roses were still successful due to their red coloration. Red like lipstick on a woman dressed in scarlet.

I was close in behind her now. I had raised the hammer.

"Rose...?"

"David?"

I could not let the hammer fall.

Time flowed as glass flows down the centuries. She screamed, the scream seeming to go on for ever. She dropped the basket of cuttings. She turned, slow as a galaxy. She ran. I followed, slow as a meandering glacier.

She won her way to the car, the rusting hulk, seeming to fall into it.

I dropped the hammer, imagining that she had hurt herself, that I could help, realizing only too late that she had sprawled into the car on purpose, that her hands were fumbling inside the glove compartment, bringing out a tiny box of pills - I had not searched the car! I saw her break the seal on the box - 25-miligram doses they were, ten millennia a shot - and pour the contents of the entire bottle down her throat.

I seized her. Her throat convulsed. She was trying to gag. Please, I told myself, no, please don't, and she was making the appropriate noises for coughing out the pills she couldn't swallow...

I placed my hand over her mouth, and held it.

"Come on, my love. Swallow. You've got to swallow *all* of them." The gagging stopped, and she fell limp back onto the car seat springs. Her mouth opened. It was red with centuries.

I carried her indoors again carefully, and put her to bed, then stood back looking at her. How much Trillemium could the human frame withstand? If it had not killed her, she had eaten a million years of future time. I had inspected the container's label, and knew it to have held exactly one hundred pills.

I had one hundred pills, and more. I hurried out to the garden. As I passed through the kitchen, I saw that a pane of glass on one of the kitchen windows had shattered. In the kitchen sat the fool I had met in the maze. At first it seemed to me that he was wearing a furry hat. At length, I saw that the furry hat was in fact a furry creature, not unlike a spider, and that its two thumb-thick fangs were plunged through his skull into the rich fluids that bathed his brain. It had obviously been feeding on him for some time, and his skin was beginning to shrivel.

Perhaps this creature has evolved specifically to prey on us, I thought. Perhaps we are a convenient easy food-source that can be simply exploited. After all, there are half a billion of us, piled round the world in warm, tasty, totally defenceless heaps.

I made no attempt to save him, but merely closed the kitchen door and hastened out toward the garden, and my canister, and a spade. The child was still hiding frightened near the buildings, watching me. I ignored it.

When I awoke, the world was red.

I pushed open the doors of the robot storage compartment – I had disabled its robot inhabitant and taken the place for myself, it was safer than the house now – to see the house in ruins.

The sun was immense now, a gigantic blushing ball of fusing hydrogen hot as poured iron. The night-black flowers had evolved into exotic shapes and forms lost on the human retina and dominated the rose garden. Not a rose remained in sight, and the spiderlike things that were the last apex of earth's food pyramid scuttled in the shadows.

I pushed shut the door to the cupboard and walked toward the house.

There were corpses – real corpses – all through the kitchen, drained and dry of blood, now only miniature habitats for spider-things to crawl on, like human shipwrecks sunk under the sea becoming housing developments for corals and crustacea. The night-black flowers wound around their faces like Art Nouveau picture frames. I passed the body of a woman, not yet decayed, flesh corpse-pale, lips red as blood pumped straight from a living lung. The effect she had achieved through dying was ten times the effect her cosmetic skill could have achieved in life. A centipedal creature was feeding on her eye.

I pushed on into the dormitory, and there obtained the shock of my life.

The dormitory was empty.

Of course. I should have suspected this. This, after all, was the theoretical End of Time, at least as far as

this much-overestimated mudball was concerned. And for a few others. The majority of main-sequence stars in this galaxy were of an age similar to the sun. When night fell, it would doubtless reveal a galaxy of blood-red beachballs. For a time, the Milky Way might be the brightest bloody object in the night sky of a thousand worlds. Astronomers would study our red shift and judge us to be one of the further objects in the universe, and marvel at how we could be so bright. The Red Giant phase of the star had not reached out as far as the astronomers and doomsayers had hoped, and Life on Earth had been preserved, as Timeshare propaganda had promised the Loyal Consumer, by the addition of self-moderating reflective bacteria to the upper atmosphere to match the steadily increasing heat, but the coming supernova would finish us off.

The dormitory was empty because its inhabitants had all woken, lived and died in previous ages.

And yet, it all seemed so very *sudden*...

Only a million years ago, the dormitory had been full. And full of old people. Almost as if they had been waiting, stupid smiles of happy expectation on their faces, like crones on a coach excursion. Waiting for the end of time. Holding hands. Holding hands, man and wife, aged queen and aged queen, bulldyke and bulldyke. Come to prove their love to one another by going for a stroll in the rose garden at the end of all things earthly.

Smirping simpletons! In order to love to the end of time, one must live and love and labour *through* eternity, not merely take a day trip to the Apocalypse! In order to love to the end of time – even in order to *want* to Love to the End of Time – one must be mad.

The man I met outside the house was mad. He was thickset, with a body that had been shaped by many years' exertion, standing holding a spade. Not leaning on it.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello," he said. "I am Potok, and this is my garden."

"It used to be my garden once," I said.

He nodded. It had been everyone's garden, like an old camp where they passed on down the ages. "It is her garden now," he said.

He meant his own her, of course. Not mine. Her face was carved in every bush and sculpture.

"She died," he said simply. "I had to find a way to pass the time."

The same eyes stared at me out of every level surface. Not outstandingly beautiful eyes, but I knew full well from the expectant glint in Potok's eyes that he would kill me were I to suggest otherwise. The manner in which he was hefting the spade, as a yeoman might hold a polearm, was no coincidence. He was the gatekeeper to his garden, and he did not admit troublemakers.

"She is very beautiful," I said. "Outstandingly so, in fact." And I meant it. Outstandingly beautiful she must have been, indeed, to have been loved by such a man as Potok.

"Pass then, friend," he said, and raised his spade. "They are down by the Tumulus Tomb. You may take

your seat for the supernova, which will begin in two minutes' time. Please do not walk on the grass, or I will be forced to kill you."

Yes, I thought. *Truly insane*. I saw in his eyes the same look that I see in mirrors.

"You made a house together at the world's end?"

"We made a house together when the world was young. She died. I came forward to this time to build her a memorial."

"Did the house's current inhabitants not complain?"

"Most vehemently, until I beheaded them and buried them in compost."

*She would have betrayed you in time, Potok. But I would not infect your head with such a thought. It was well she quit while you were winning.*

Tumulus Tomb, indeed! But it was there, huge and dark and sombre in the red womb-light. And there were figures on it, some old, some young, scrambling up its grass-covered sides, regardless of Potok's warnings, scratching at each other's insane eyes, the last leavings of mankind, clawing and scrabbling their way up to be King of the Castle. At the top of the tumulus stood an urn in a triumphal arch, illuminated by the last electric lights on earth. In the urn was dirt, and in the dirt was the last rose in the world, red as a helium-bleeding star, the same now as it had always been. I had bedded the first of its kind, five billion years ago; now, vermin were fighting over its final example, to pluck the final rose and give it to their personal ghastly beloveds, to prove their petty shadows of my own one and only sole true love.

My One and Only Sole True Love stood back from the urn beneath the arch, confused and frightened, and, being loveless, not participating in the mad melee.

Consumed by rage, I dashed toward the tumulus and laid about me with the hammer. Their pruning shears and secateurs were no match for my heavy metal. Like Thor rescuing Sif from the giants, I swung about me and won my way to the top of the ant-heap. She stared at me, stared at the hammer, as if I and it were one, and perhaps by now we were.

"My darling, you and I have been together for an eternity."

She shrank into the marble corners of the arch, and whimpered: "But we were only together for six months, and that so very long ago!"

I reached into the urn with my bare hands, and my fingers closed around the thorned stem of my rose, the new rose I had bred and dedicated to her, all those million months ago. The Evertrue Carnadine. As I pulled my hand out of the urn with the rose still in it, the roots pulling tenaciously at the black earth, the blood making it slipper in my fingers, the star overhead began to dim, and shrink, and brighten...

I held the rose up to her, and said:

"But it seems like an eternity."

**Dominic Green** wrote the well-received "Moving Mysteriously" (*Interzone* 108), and the above is only his second story to be published. He lives in Northamptonshire.

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## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

People without World Wide Web access are rightly irritated to find those poxy little URL addresses strewn all over printed material. Can you stand reading just one? I've started to assemble web addresses for British sf conventions, local groups, etc., on a page at:

<http://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/SF-Archives/Ansible/ansilink.html>

Next... the *Interzone* web site?

### THE TRANSMITTED HUMAGRAM

**Brian Aldiss** reports a case of sf being sneered at in Latin, the occasion being Oxford University's presentation of an honorary degree to Doris Lessing. The Public Orator duly said nice things about her respectable books, but couldn't resist adding, "*mehercle immensum totius mundi fingendi onus suscepit, genus scribendi in qui plerumque nihil grave, nihil expectamus quod ad vitae cotidiana veritatem accedat...*" Aldiss translation: "She even took on the immense task of inventing a whole world, a genre of writing in which we expect to find nothing serious, which hardly accedes to the truths of ordinary life..." Aldiss in-depth commentary: "Bloody university!"

**Iain M. Banks** mysteriously confirmed that although there was "some truth" in the rumour that he was dropping the "M" stigma for his sf books, this will not in fact be happening.

**Stephen Baxter** gloated uncontrollably over his John W. Campbell Memorial Award, presented in July for *The Time Ships* (second and third places went to Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* and Ian McDonald's *Chaga*)... but returned from the University of Kansas presentation venue with severe dehydration, since the entire campus was dry and so was the awards dinner. "If I'd gone to a dry campus I'd have died for lack of calories."

**Pat Cadigan** underwent a gall bladder operation in the US – but was reported as recovering fast and hopping, by the time you read this, to move to London. We somehow cannot imagine Pat without limitless supplies of gall... (*PC, feebly, from hospital bed: "You dog."*)

**Arthur C. Clarke** still hopes to complete *3001: The Final Odyssey* this year, "for publication at HAL's birthday celebrations" in 1997. Experienced Clarke-watchers wonder whether the title's "*Final*" will by then have become, say, "*Antepenultimate*".

**Simon R. Green** also remembers the late Richard Evans of Gollancz: "I'm in the lift at Fantasycon after a long train journey. Someone gets in with me. The face is familiar. 'I should know you, shouldn't I?' 'Yes, Simon, I'm your editor.' It was Richard. I put it down to jet lag, and that in a previous incarnation my brain was used as a door stop."

**Humphrey Price**, a popular editor who has been around (most recently at Boxtree and Severn House) is moving into Richard Evans's old position at Gollancz.

**Brian Stableford**, having been told by a frosty receptionist to take his late MS around to the back of the building, complains that "Random House have revived that fine old English tradition the Tradesmen's Entrance... This does create something of a mystery: exactly what does Random House reception now receive?" Only visitors, says harassed Legend editor John Jarrold, explaining that the receptionists' refusal to accept parcels is because of "a rash of thefts a year or so ago". One's heart goes out to those brave women, cruelly deprived of a lockable drawer into which to shove parcels, and beset by masked thugs who have heard from the underworld's grapevine that Brian Stableford is delivering the priceless volume 3 of his "560,000-word magnum opus *Genesys*." (Advt.)

**Gene Wolfe**, to confirm a recurrent net rumour, was indeed one of the Procter & Gamble engineers who designed the machinery used for making Pringles. (The editor of *Interzone* has failed to comment.) Critics are re-scrutinizing *The Book of the New Sun* in hope of identifying one of the torture machines as originally intended to produce small, curly potato nibbles...

### INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Orbital Hell.** The *Times Literary Supplement* noted that the UK hardback bestseller for mid-July, Robert Jordan's *A Crown of Swords* (book 7 of something or other) went virtually unreviewed in the national press. "It's perfectly understandable," explains

*TLS* columnist "D.S.": "The book is strictly unreviewable, being bilge from beginning to far away end. Merely to handle the book is to have one's compassion excited for the editors who must at some point have been forced to read it. Being sent into Orbit, the fantasy department of Little, Brown, must be a punishment reserved only for the most perseveringly wicked." Oh!

**A Dark & Stormy Night.** The annual US Bulwer-Lytton fiction contest for awful opening sentences gave a coveted Dishonourable Mention to Anthony Buckland's sf submission: 'Baron Frankenstein looked up from his sewing, smiled benignly across the laboratory at his similarly engaged creation and protégé, and called, "Yes, yes! Put on a happy face; tonight will be your first date with the rest of your wife!'"

**Beyond Belief.** David Riley of *Beyond* sf magazine writes in great anguish to announce that issue 4 is still delayed but will indeed appear. He attributes *Beyond's* difficulties to: (a) misleading sales/returns reports from distributors, resulting in over-large printings; (b) W. H. Smiths' exciting move to centralize their warehousing system by closing many warehouses – but, allegedly, still ordering quantities of magazines for these closed warehouses ... magazines that were therefore destroyed on receipt; (c) some creative accountability whereby more copies were reported returned (that is, thrown away) than were actually sent, leading to negative sales figures. "At the end of the day the only result we could get was for them to be adjusted to a zero sales figure, as it is now claimed that it isn't possible to find out the true sales figures because of accounting errors on the part of Smiths." Who'd be a magazine editor?

**Sturgeon Award.** ... this prize for best short fiction went to John McDavid for his first and (so far) only story, "Jigoku no Mokishiroku" in *Asimov's*.

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Nose & Throat Dept.*: "... on Meld XVII he had bought himself a new face that did not bear the tell-tale features of the Zonnigog aristocracy. Gone were the sharp, almost razorlike cheekbones, the pale skin, the wide-set black eyes, the nose jutting from the forehead." (Webber Martin, "Spacerogue") "Something jumped in the back of Morgon's throat. It was huge, broad as a farmhorse, with a deer's delicate, triangular face." (Patricia McKillip, *The Riddle-Master of Hed*) "Despite the message, she would have giggled had she possessed a throat." (Robert Jordan, *A Crown of Swords*)

Stephen Lawhead has changed publishers – from Lion to HarperCollins – and subject matter: he's abandoned (at least for the moment) his Celtic fantasies to dive into the complexities of late-ninth century history, with his huge new novel *Byzantium*. We'll return to that one later, after looking at what Lawhead is mainly known for, his Celtic fantasies.

The second thing you notice about Stephen Lawhead's fantasy novels, from Evangelical publisher Lion, is the heavy Christian emphasis; we'll come to that shortly. But the first thing you notice is how well written they are, how much they seem to capture the genuine feel of Dark Age Britain (so far as we can guess what it was like). Without wishing to sound chauvinistic, this is especially impressive in view of the fact that Lawhead is American; we've all read so many *bad* American-written Celtic fantasies (and a fair number of British-written ones as well), that Lawhead's books do stand out for the quality of their historical voice. He's quite rightly junked all the medieval courtly stuff; his Celts live in wooden houses in small tribal communities; travel across the country isn't easy, even with the remaining Roman roads, and neither is it safe; while sailing between Britain and Ireland takes an indeterminate time and isn't always a pleasant experience. Also, if you turn up somewhere with an army of a hundred or more people, they'll need to be fed, and that's a lot of mouths for a small community to have to feed suddenly – a point which many Celtic fantasy authors seem to forget. Lawhead doesn't. The locals expect the visiting army to have brought their own food; the army expect to be fed by the people they've come to defend. It tends to spark off arguments. The warrior-king Arthur also has to be a diplomat-king.

Stephen Lawhead wrote his first book, *In the Hall of the Dragon King* (1982), when between jobs, as "an experiment to see if it could be done, by me; could I sit in the chair long enough to produce something worthy of print? I didn't think I would be a fantasy writer; I didn't have any idea."

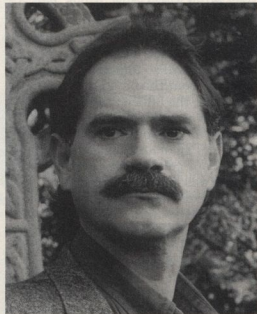
His first four books – a fantasy trilogy and a stand-alone science-fiction novel – were written in the early 1980s. "The Dragon King books are a very simple but quintessential fantasy set-up in which various heroes go on a quest," he says. The sf novel, *Dream Thief* (1983), came from Lawhead reading that "if you interfere with people's dreams enough, wake them up when they're dreaming, then they will go quietly crazy – so what would happen if this were done on a mass scale?"

# Bloody History

His two "Empyrian" novels, *The Search for Fierra* (1985) and *The Siege of Dome* (1986), now published in one volume, are straightforward and in many ways clichéd sf adventure stories. Visitors to a new colony many light-years from Earth discover that the supposedly five-year-old colony has now been there for thousands of years. It's split into two separate communities, one totalitarian, the other technologically and spiritually advanced, and our heroes have to mediate between the two. "They're an uneasy hybrid of fantasy and science fiction – futuristic fantasy," says Lawhead. "I suppose in the main those sorts of books tend to fall between two stools; there's not enough science in them for the hardcore science-fiction reader and not enough fantasy for the others. But yes, they were a lot of fun."

There's also a large religious element to these two books. To some extent they prefigure something which is much more apparent in Lawhead's later "Song of Albion" books, and especially in the "Pendragon Cycle" books: a clearly polarized conflict between good and evil. In the "Pendragon" books the good guys – Arthur, Merlin, Merlin's parents Charis and

**Stephen Lawhead**  
interviewed by  
**David V. Barrett**



Taliesin, even Gwenhwyvar ("especially Gwenhwyvar!" Lawhead interrupts, anticipating the point) – are all good, kind, Christian, *nice* people, while Morgian is evil, wicked and treacherous, and the Irish king Conaire is selfish, stupid and treacherous. Real people are a mixture of good and bad, of intelligent and stupid, of kind and cruel, I say to Lawhead; why are his characters so polarized, either white or black? What about shades of grey?

"One of the prime virtues of fantasy, it seems to me, is the way characters and conflict can be idealized, rarefied, stripped to the essence, if you will. Fantasy, like no other form of literature, allows this heightened sensibility – maybe even demands it. Where else can you examine characters and issues in such sharp relief?

"Also, the universe in which the books work I tend to see in that sort of light; the world these people lived in was set up like that more often, at least in the way their own chronicles tell about it. What I would like to show in these books is probably nothing that anybody would ever want to read about, really: that the universe that we inhabit is a moral universe, and that our choices do matter immensely, and they have real consequences, not only for ourselves but for everyone else. The books harken back to what most readers feel was a simpler time, when choices *were* black and white, and there wasn't so much grey. I think most people feel that they have quite enough grey in their lives right now, thank you very much, they don't need any more ambiguity!"

Does he really think things were more black and white in Arthur's time?

"I don't necessarily think they were, but I think for these people, and for the space and time it takes to read a book, you can present that: these choices at least are clear. You can root for the good guys and tremble when the bad guys come on, because those things are clear."

I put to Lawhead my own belief about the entire Arthurian mythos: that the whole point of it, the reason it grew with such fecundity, and the reason it's still so important today, is that it's about the blending, the co-operation, the (albeit uneasy) marriage between the old and the new, between Celtic and Romano-British, between Pagan and Christian, rather than about polarization; and that Arthur was in the middle of all these disparate elements, holding them together in himself. And yet the good guys in the four "Pendragon" books to date – Arthur, Gwenhwyvar, Merlin, Taliesin and the rest – are all born-again Christians (at a time when such a concept barely existed), with no element at all of Paganism surviv-

ing. That worries me; it doesn't seem to ring true.

"That's the very strange thing about the decision to set aside all the medieval trappings – no clanking armour, no stone castles, they didn't exist – to struggle and really dig into that historical period, and the voice. The material that existed for that time, that talks about the world that Arthur would have known, also talks about Arthur as the first Christian king; the very early material is that way. I'm talking about the *Mabinogion*, and about little scraps of history that exist, written by different people. It is only the later material, this French romantic stuff which Malory borrows and uses, and that everyone knows about, that's all concerned about the betrayal at the Court, and seductions, and treachery, and all this sort of thing. I thought, rather than going down that well-travelled path, let's take this seriously: what did it mean to be a Christian king in those days? It meant something. It meant a very specific thing to be a king; to be a Christian meant a very specific thing. What I'm trying to do is to return an element to the story that others have neglected and ignored, or actually just taken out, for their own reasons. It's not that I'm adding anything in, but I'm trying to recapture what is often left out. If that makes it too black and white, I can only say that the early material reads like that; there seems to be enough evidence in the main to support that sort of Christian zeal. Also, being a Christian myself, I'm quite friendly toward that notion, and intrigued by the fact that Arthur was looked upon as such a towering, heroic figure, who is also linked with Christianity in this very, very elemental way. It must have meant certain things; so I'm boldly putting him in that position, a position that would have been recognized closer to his time."

What about Gwenhwyvar? In addition to making her good and pure and wonderful, Lawhead makes her an Irish princess. Why is that?

"On philological evidence the name Gwenhwyvar is Celtic, but it's not Welsh, and it may well be Irish. The other thing is, trying to figure out where the great animosity toward her came from. It seems not to have come from her own time; there are scraps here and there which speak of her, with no hint of any duplicity or anything." The whole story about Gwenhwyvar and Lancelot was added much later, and fitted in, Lawhead says, "with the idea of courtly love, that the French court was so in love with. I figured that the animosity toward her had come from somewhere, and the people most hated at the time were the Irish; so by linking that with the suggestion of where her

name came from, what if she was Irish? Who would be in a position to marry the High King of Britain? Only other royalty. I've since heard others pick up the idea; it's not unique to me."

And that's also why Lawhead's Gwenhwyvar is black-haired – because she's Irish.

"Also, I was sick of this insipid Gwenhwyvar who swans around, a weak-willed female Judas, plotting treachery; in my reading of the history, that sort of character just wouldn't last very long."

His theory helps explain other things as well, such as why the north-Irish went across to Scotland at that time, and why they were given land there. "There's a whole colony all of a sudden just shows up; this whole kingdom arises. Why did that happen? It must have been allowed to happen. I found myself trying to explain these little quirks of history; maybe it's not right, but at least it holds a certain amount of water."

The fourth book in the series, *Pendragon* (1994), spends 80 pages on Arthur's childhood, then leaps ahead to his first year or so as king, his bringing together of various warbands, and the battles he had to fight in Ireland and Britain. These seem to be a mixture of historical battles, as detailed in the *Mabinogion*, and Lawhead's own imaginative reconstruction. The *Mabinogion* tale, for example, of Arthur and his knights dealing with the giant wild boar and its nine piglets, first ravaging in Ireland, then tearing up the countryside in Britain, Lawhead turns into the invasions of the Vandals with their boar's head standard.

Lawhead makes a few other changes to the usual Arthurian story in these books. Merlin is the son of the Celtic bard/prince Taliesin and of Charis (an invented character), daughter of Avallach, the wounded fisher-king of destroyed Atlantis, who now rules from Glastonbury. Morgian is Avallach's daughter by Lile, his pagan nurse, and so she is the much younger step-sister of Charis, and thus Merlin's aunt. And Arthur's father is Ambrosius, rather than Uther. As with Gwenhwyvar, he has reasons for all these changes, but they get a bit complicated to explain briefly.

Lawhead returns to my problems with the polarization between good characters and bad characters in his books.

"I think that fantasy works best with ideal situations and ideal characters, in the sense that they are allowed to be what they represent; you get to do this in fantasy where you don't get to do it in real life; and I feel that if you do have ideal charac-



ters then they ought to behave ideally. So the idea that you may introduce a more human Arthur by making him weaker or giving him doubts or fears, may make him more human in one sense, more historically human, but also tends to make him less ideal. And since the whole thing is predicated on the ideal of the Kingdom of the Summer and what that might have meant, and why that ideal has persisted for so long – it speaks to something in the human spirit, I suppose, this longing for that – it seems foolish to undermine it, having gone to all the trouble to set it up in the first place."

But as well as that, he's genuinely trying to be more historically true than many other Arthur-authors.

"I'm trying to redress what I felt were inconsistencies and misapprehensions – Walt Disney, *Sword in the Stone*, that sort of stuff. Even if people don't know the stories very well, they think they know the Malory. So I'm trying to find what you call the historical voice, and being very, very aware that as an American I have no right to trample around in this stuff, so I'd better have a much better rationale."

I tell him that I'm still worried about Merlin praying to the Christian God before battles.

"Trying to write in a place where so many have written so well before," says Lawhead, "I needed a different slant on it. This thing about the wizard in the tall pointy hat was obnoxious to me; but trying to find where this fascination with the power of Merlin could have come from, I came across in the *Welsh Triads* a little squib, which goes something like this: 'Merlin was living with the proud south Welsh in those days, as king, prophet and law-giver.' Those are three very different things, which meant something very particular to the people of the time. What did it mean to be a king? What was a prophet? That had a certain godly connection; they didn't call anyone a prophet who wasn't anything to do with the Church. And law-giver; what was that? That had the old druid connection; but prophet was different, and I'd not heard of Merlin the king before. So I said, if this is the oldest source, the first mention of Merlin, and they see him this way, what does that mean? The book comes out of that."

There's intense polarization in the "Song of Albion" books as well, written between the first three "Pendragon Cycle" books

and the fourth, *Pendragon* itself. This trilogy includes *The Paradise War* (1991), *The Silver Hand* (1992) and *The Endless Knot* (1993). Two students from our time are flung into Albion, "the primal archetype of the Celtic world," and very quickly Simon becomes the wicked, untrustworthy, treacherous enemy Siawn Hy, while the American Lewis becomes the good king Llew Silver Hand, who is able to say "I am blameless... I have done no wrong, yet I have suffered evil and injustice at your hands."

In these books, Lawhead says, "I wanted to take all the great Celtic stuff that doesn't fit into Arthur, because Arthur is about a lot more than just the Celtic thing; so to take the raw stuff of their myth and create with it a new myth, but one that would have been recognized by the Celts themselves if they'd happened to run into it; so to use the mythic material and put it into a modern story, but using also the mythic structure, because the structure of the Albion books follows the same mythic cycle, the Myth of the Hero sort of thing, that you find in some of the *Mabinogion*, although there it is mostly broken, because they're not all complete. To take those elements, and run with it, and see what happens."

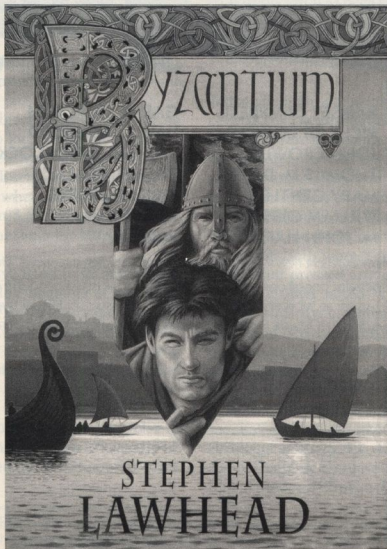
What happens, without revealing the plot, is that the Myth of the Hero is so powerful that what happens in one world affects the other; willing sacrifice brings renewal.

*Pendragon* (1994) is the first book of a second Arthurian trilogy. The first three, *Taliesin* (1987), *Merlin* (1988) and *Arthur* (1989) are personality books, he says; the second three, *Pendragon*, *Grail* and *Avalon*, are more thematic, less character-driven. But Lawhead seems to have put the Arthurian books on hold for a while – and, indeed, fantasy trilogies altogether. *Grail* won't appear in the USA until the summer of 1997, from Avon; it doesn't yet have a UK publisher. As for *Avalon*, "it's on the back burner at the moment." Lawhead's interest has been caught by weightier subjects.

His new novel, *Byzantium*, is set around 885 AD, and is historical, with very few fantasy elements. This is the story of a few years in the early life of an Irish monk, Aidan, who is chosen to be part of a small pilgrimage to take an illuminated copy of the Gospels to the Emperor at Byzantium (Constantinople). They've hardly started their journey when they're set on by Viking Sea Wolves, and Aidan is enslaved. Eventually he reaches Byzantium, and finds that his troubles, and his travels, have only just begun. In many ways this is a rip-roaring adventure story; the pace rarely flags. There's scheming, murder and betrayal aplenty, and few of the characters manage to keep their hands clean – including Aidan.

Aidan actually only spends 156 of the novel's 656 pages in Byzantium; I ask Lawhead if the title isn't a misnomer. "I like the name!" he says. "And it's a formative event, the pivotal point in his life. Also, it's a state of mind, not just a city or an empire. It also speaks to a certain time, not just the Eastern Roman Empire, but everything that's happening." I object that Lawhead paints the Viking Sea Wolves as barbarians, when in fact the Norse peoples of this time, while not having the sophisticated veneer of those further south, were every bit as civilized, and in some ways more so; they were far more democratic, and had a much fairer judicial system than anything to be found in Byzantium, Rome or Arabia. But the story is told by Aidan, Lawhead reminds me. "I agree with you about the Norse having their own civilization, but through Irish eyes they would appear in a different way, so you *will* see them as barbarian; and yes, they lack the devious subtlety and sophistication of Byzantium."

The epilogue to the novel gives the impression that





Since its inception in 1925, the most famous shared-world series in G. K. Chesterton's Science Fiction Magazine has always been the adventures of that much-loved interplanetary sleuth Father (later in the chronology, Monsignor) Brown. There is no need to list the long roll-call of those who have taken part – Hilaire Belloc, Graham Greene, Jorge Luis Borges, Kurt Scheer, Clark Darlton, R. A. Lafferty, Gene Wolfe and Robert Lionel Fanthorpe being just a few of the illustrious contributors<sup>1</sup>, not to mention the bright talents emerging from the splendid GKC Presents Catholic Writers of the Future anthologies. And we are always glad to welcome fresh participants. Here, therefore, is the first of GKSF's eagerly awaited new series "The Fractals of Father Brown," penned by SF Achievement ("Gilbert") Award-winner David Langford...

The luxury liner *H.M.S. Aquinas* sped among the stars, its great engines devouring distance and defying time. Each porthole offered a lurid glimpse of that colossal pointillist work which God Himself has painted in subtle yet searing star-points upon the black canvas of creation, too vast for any critic ever to step back and see entire. In the main lounge, however, the ship's passengers were already jaded by the splendour of the suns and had found a new distraction. For Astron, high celebrant of the newest religion, was weaving dazzling circles of rhetoric around a shabby, blinking priest of the oldest.

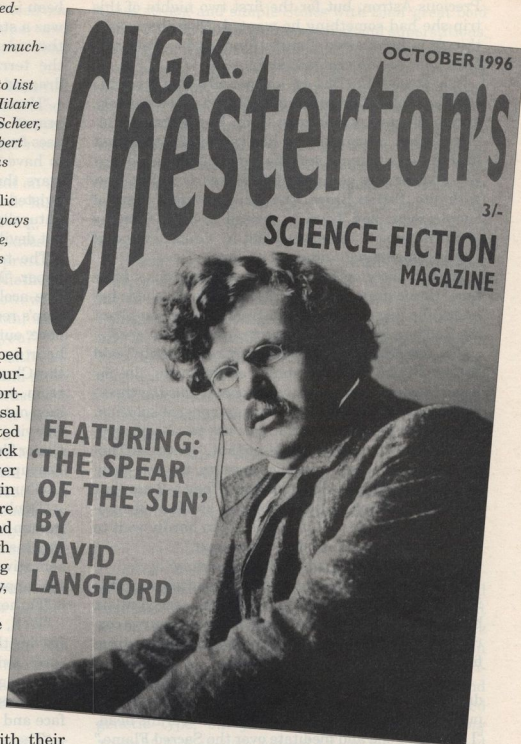
"Did not a great writer once say that the interstellar spaces are God's quarantine regulations? I think the blight He had in mind was the blight of men like this, crabbed and joyless celibates who spread their poisoned doctrines of guilt and fear from planet to planet, world after world growing grey with their breath..."

The crabbed and joyless object of these attentions sipped wine and contrived to look remarkably cheerful. Father Brown was travelling from his parish of Cobhole in England on Old Earth as an emissary to the colony world Pavnion III, where Astron planned to harvest countless converts and (it is to be assumed) decidedly countable cash donations for his Universal Temple of Fire.

"For the Church of Fire pays heed to its handmaid Science, and sheds the mouldy baggage of superstition. The living Church of Fire gives respect to the atomic blaze at the heart of every sun, to the divine laws of supersymmetry and chaos theory; the dying church of superstition had nothing to say about either at Vatican III."

The little, pudding-faced priest murmured: "We never needed chaos theory to know that the cycles of evil run ever smaller and smaller down the scales of measurement, yet always dreadfully self-similar." But it passed unheeded.

<sup>1</sup> We remind our readers that Mr Philip José Farmer's delightful but unauthorized contributions (*Father Brown vs the Insidious Dr Fu-Manchu*, *Father Brown 124C41+*, *Father Brown in Oz*, etc) are not regarded as strictly canonical.



Astron boomed on, remarking that those who obstructed the universal Light would be struck down by the spear of the sun. Indeed he looked every inch the pagan god, with his great height, craggy features and flowing flaxen hair now streaked with silver. A golden sunburst of a ring gleamed on his finger. His acolyte Simon Traill was yet more handsome though less vocal, perhaps a little embarrassed at Astron's taunting. Both wore plain robes of purest white. The group that pressed around consisted chiefly of women; Father Brown noted with interest that red-haired Elizabeth Brayne, whom he knew to be the billionaire heiress of Brayne Interplanetary, pressed closest of all and close in particular to young Traill. She wore the dangerous look of a woman who thinks she knows her own mind.

"Damn them," said a voice at Brown's ear. "Pardon me, Father. But you heard that Astron saying what he thinks of celibacy. He chews women up and spits out the pieces. See Signora Maroni back there with a face like thunder? She's a bit long in the tooth for Mr

Precious Astron, but for the first two nights of this trip she had something he wanted. Now that something's in his blasted Temple fund, and – Well, perhaps you wouldn't understand."

"Oh, stories like this do occasionally crop up in the confessional," said the dumping-faced priest vaguely, eyeing the dark young man. John Horne was a mining engineer, who until now had talked of nothing but PAVONIA III's bauxite and the cargo of advanced survey and digging equipment that was travelling out with him. Father Brown knew the generous wrath of simple men, and tried to spread a little calm by enquiring about the space-walk in which several of the passengers had indulged earlier.

Though allowing himself to be diverted for a little time, Horne presently said, "Don't you feel a shade hot under the dog-collar when Astron needles you about his Religion of Science and how outdated you are?"

"Oh yes, science progresses most remarkably," said Father Brown with bumbling enthusiasm. "In Sir Isaac Newton's mechanics, you know, it was the three-body problem that didn't have any general solution. Then came Relativity and it was the two-body problem that was troublesome. After that, Quantum Theory found all these complications in the one-body problem, a single particle; and now they tell me that relativistic quantum field theory is stuck at the no-body problem, the vacuum itself. I can hardly wait to hear what tremendous step comes next."

Horne looked at him a little uncertainly.

A silvery chime sounded. "Attention, attention. This is the captain speaking. Dinner will be served at six bells. Shortly beforehand there will be a course correction with a temporary boost of acceleration from five-eighths to fifteen-sixteenths g."

"I go," said Astron with a kind of stately anger, drawing himself up to his full, impressive height and pulling the deep white cowl of the robe over his head. "I go to be alone and meditate over the Sacred Flame." With Traill cowed likewise in his wake, he stalked giganatically from the lounge.

"That makes me madder than anything," Horne said gloomily, beginning to amble in the general direction of Elizabeth Brayne. "No pipes, no cigarettes, that's an iron rule – and *he* manages to wangle an eternal flame in his ruddy stateroom. The safety officer would like to kill him."

But it was not the safety officer who came under suspicion when the news raced through the *Aquinas* like leaves in a mad March wind: that a third lieutenant making final checks before the course change had used a master key and found that great robed figure slumped over the brazier of the Universal Flame, face charred and flowing hair gone to smoke, a scientific seeker who had solved the no-body problem at last.

By a happy chance, ship security had been contracted out to the agency of M. Hercule Flambeau, one-time master criminal<sup>2</sup> and an old friend of Father Brown, who set to in a frenzy of Gallic fervour. Knowing the pudgy little priest's power of insight, Flam-

beau invited him at once to the chamber of death. It was a stark and austere stateroom, distinguished by the wide brazier (its gas flame now extinguished) and the terrible figure that the third lieutenant had dragged from the fire.

"He seems to have bent over his wretched flame and prayed, or whatever mumbo-jumbo the cult of Fire uses for prayer," mused Father Brown. "Better for him to have looked up and not down, and savoured the stars through that porthole... Even the stars look twisted in this accursed place. Might he have died naturally and fallen? That would be ugly enough, but not devilish."

The tall Flambeau drew out a slip of computer paper. "My friend, we know to distrust coincidence. The acolyte Traill is nowhere to be found, and the ship's records say the nearest airlock has cycled just once, outwards, since Astron left the main lounge an hour ago. Some avenger has made a clean sweep of the Church of Fire's mission: one dead in a locked room, one jettisoned. And half the women and all the men out there might have had a potent motive. We're carrying members of rival cults too – the Club of Queer Trades, the Dead Men's Shoes Society, the Ten Teacups, and heaven knows what else. But how in God's name could any of them get in here?"

"Don't forget the crabbed priesthood that blights human souls," said the smaller man earnestly. "Astron was last seen attacking it with a will, and its representative has an obviously criminal face. *Ecce homo.*" He tapped himself on the chest.

"Father Brown, I cannot believe you did this thing."

"Well, in confidence, I'll admit to you that I didn't."

He bustled curiously about the room, blinking at the oversized bed and peering again through the viewport as though the stars themselves held some elusive clue. Last of all he studied the robed corpse's ruined face and pale hands, and shuddered.

"The spear of the sun," he muttered to himself. "Astron threatened his enemies with the spear of the sun. And where does a wise man hide a spear?"

"In an armoury, I suppose," said Flambeau in a low voice.

"In poor foolish William Blake's armoury. You remember, *All the stars threw down their spears?* But the angel Ithuriel also carries a spear. Excuse me, I know I'm rambling, but I can see half of it, just half..." Father Brown stood stock still with hands pressed into his screwed-up eyes. At last he said: "You thought I shuddered at that wreck of a face. I shuddered at the hands."

"But there is nothing to see – no mark on the hands."

"There is nothing. And there should be a great sunburst ring. They are younger hands than Astron's, when you look. It is the acolyte Traill who lies there."

Flambeau gaped. "But that can't be. It turns everything topsy-turvy; it makes the whole case the wrong shape."

"So was that equation," said Father Brown gently.

<sup>2</sup> Flambeau repented, made his full confession to Father Brown and joined the side of the angels on some 42 occasions, all listed in Martin Gardner's *Flambeau, Boskone and Ming the Merciless: the Annotated Father Brown Villains* (1987).

"And we survived even that equation.<sup>3</sup> But I need one further fact." He scribbled on a slip of paper and folded it. "Have one of your men show this to John Horne. A reply is expected."

Wordlessly, Flambeau pressed a stud and did what was asked. "Horne," he said when the two friends were alone again. "The one who fancies Miss Brayne and didn't like her interest in men with white robes. Is he your choice for the dock?"

"No. For the witness-box." Father Brown sat on the edge of the bed, the dinginess of his cassock highlighted by the expanse of white satin quilting, his stubby legs not quite reaching the deck plates. "I think this story begins with young Horne prattling over dinner about his cargo. So I asked whether a piece of his equipment was missing. Come now: when you think of fiery death in a locked stateroom, what does mining and surveying gear suggest to you?"

"Nothing but moonshine," said Flambeau with sarcasm. "I do assure you that each hull plate and bulkhead has been carefully inspected for any trace of a four-foot mineshaft through which a murderer might crawl."

"That's the whole sad story. Even when you look at it you can't see it: but every stateroom of this vessel contains a Judas window through which death can strike. And —" Brown's muddy eyes widened suddenly. "Of course! The spear of the sun is two-edged. My friend, I predict... I predict that you will never make an arrest."

As Flambeau arose with an oath, the communicator on his wrist crackled. "What? The answer is yes? Father, the answer is yes."

"Then let me tell you the story," said the priest. "The great Astron devoured woman after woman, but most of all he craved the women who did not crave him. For as I saw, Elizabeth Brayne was taken with Simon Trail. And Astron left the room in anger."

"I fancy it was his practice to have Trail watch over the ritual flame for him, while another cowed figure glided out upon certain assignments. But this time Astron's assignment was a darker one. He knew where to find the pressure suits: there was a space-walking party a few watches ago. He knew that in Horne's cargo he would find his spear."

"Which is —?"

"A laser."

Father Brown continued dreamily after a sort of thunderous silence. "Picture Astron floating a little way outside that porthole, a wide-open window for his frightful, insubstantial bolt. Picture his unknowing rival Trail bent over the flame, struck in the face, falling dead across the brazier which would slowly burn away every mark of how he died."

"Name of a name," cried Flambeau. "He is still out there. We shall have him yet!"

"You will never have him." Father Brown shook his head slowly. "The spear, I said, is two-edged. Oh,

these strong and simple Stoics with their great bold ideas! Astron called us impractical and superstitious, but lacked even the little smattering of quantum electrodynamics that every seminarian picks up along with his Latin and his St. Augustine. He thought the crystal of the port purely transparent, Flambeau: but there is diffraction, my friend, and there is partial reflection. And even as it slew his victim, the spear of the sun rebounded to strike the murderer blind." The little priest shivered. "Yes, the humour of God can be cruel. Astron's easy arrogance saw the motes in all men's eyes, and now at last found the beam in his own..."

"Picture him now, flinging his suit this way and that with those clever little gas-jets, with nightmare pressing in as he realizes he *cannot find the ship* in the endless dark. And then comes the course correction and he has no more chance. And now that void which he worshipped in his heart has become his vast sarcophagus."

"I think," said Flambeau slowly, "that brandy would be a good thing. Mother of God. All that from a missing ring."

"Not only that," said Father Brown, "The viewport crystal was slightly distorted by the heat of the beam's passage. I said the stars looked twisted, but you thought I was being sentimental."

*IN OUR NEXT ISSUE:* Fr. Brian Stableford continues his series on forgotten sf authors, with a spirited case for reviving the works of 19th-century fantasist H. G. Wells. Our regular *Credo Quia Impossibile* squib daringly tackles another zero-probability notion in "The Piltown Effect" — we know from *GKSFM* science columns by Hilaire Belloc, Jimmy Swaggart and other fine popularizers that mankind is a fixed genetic type, but just suppose for one terrifying moment that *it were not so!* Of course the "Should Women Authors Be Allowed In *GKSFM*?" debate rages on in the letter column: what amusingly outrageous thing *will* that "Ms" Cadigan say next? Carl Sagan contributes a devastatingly frank essay on science's inability to explain weeping images or miraculous liquefactions. And our millions of avid readers in the Americas will welcome the coming feature on brash colonial editor Gardner Dozois and his shoestrung launch of (at last!) an all-United States sf magazine, called *Interzone*: we shall have to look to our laurels...

David Langford wrote the above story for *Alternate Skiffy*, a US small-press anthology edited by Patrick Nielsen Hayden and Mike Resnick, due out at this year's World SF Convention. The book goes one better than alternative-world theme anthologies like *Alternate Presidents* by considering time-lines in which the history of sf itself was different..

<sup>3</sup> Older readers will recognize the allusion to that insight which saved the Holy Galactic Empire from the threat of secular "psychohistorians" in Isaac Asimov's classic *Foundation and Father Brown* (1951).

# Sugar & Spice

Keith Brooke & Eric Brown

Axel Webber came upon the exhibition quite by chance.

He arrived on the planet of Serenity in the early hours, slept till midday and left the hotel late in the afternoon, as the cries of the muezzins ululated across the city's packed rooftops. He was quite unprepared for the alienness of Vallore, the narrow streets and the three-storey, sand-coloured buildings. Even the citizens disturbed him, many garbed in white djellabas with only their eyes showing, watching him suspiciously. Others wore the long black frock-coats of Hasidic Jews, or the rainbow cloaks of religious cults new to him. He reminded himself that Serenity was the world where every belief system under the sun had found refuge.

He soon became lost and disoriented. He hurried down lanes and alleys, followed by a crowd of ragged children and beggars drawn to his offworld clothing and the possibility of a few tourist coins. He ignored their outstretched hands, their cries of *baksheesh*. He increased his pace, becoming more agitated by the second. He wondered how he might react if the crowd turned violent. His small handgun would be no protection against so many.

Perhaps a part of his discomfort was not so much the importuning of the hordes as the fact that his ex-lover, Nicole deGryse, had chosen this stinking hell-hole in which to spend the last years of her life. She had chosen to live *here*, rather than with him on Earth?

He had come to Serenity to retrieve her cremated remains. He had thought he'd buried his feelings for her deep in the layers of his past – indeed, he had felt little emotion at the news of her death. He was a self-contained man, a man without ties, emotional or physical. Nothing had a hold over Webber, or so he liked to believe.

And yet... he had felt compelled to come here, to see where Nicole had spent her final years.

He caught sight of the silver domes at the end of the street, their modern architecture speaking of civilization and sophistication after the squalor of the city. A sign in English, beneath the flowing Urdu script, informed him that this was the Vallore Museum of Modern Art.

He hurried towards the entrance, relieved as he passed into the air-conditioned coolness that the beggars fell away and did not follow him inside.

He moved from dome to dome, giving cursory inspection to a series of emotionless plasma graphics and neograms which formed the bulk of a visiting dis-

play. Unfamiliar with the unwritten, elitist rules which differentiated between the acceptable and the passé, and unable to formulate any such rubric of his own, Webber had never developed more than a passing appreciation for art. All he could discern was that the order and formality of these works was in stark contrast with the all-pervasive chaos of the city outside, and thus highlighted their artifice.

He found himself in a courtyard from which he could access any number of globular annexes. He strolled through the nearest entrance, enjoying the cool air and emptiness of the museum.

The display area was easily 15 metres in diameter, but it was entirely taken up by a single exhibit – the representation of a young girl rendered in exquisite detail. Something within him surged involuntarily at the extraordinary lifelike quality of the sculpture.

He looked around. Vines and creepers obscured the concave inner wall of the dome, filtering and muting the light from outside. He was pleased to see that he was alone, as if reluctant to have others witness his appreciation. He approached the exhibit with a kind of reverent circumspection, as if a sudden movement on his part might startle the statue into flight.

He stopped at the low barrier and stared at the girl, seated on a small, grassy hillock, brown legs folded beneath her. She was wearing a simple green slip and she had a sharp arrowhead of a face, with angled cheekbones, burning emerald eyes and a jet-black, feathered fringe. Her head was tilted, as if she was staring up at invisible stars, and an inert tear, a quicksilver dew-drop, hung on the curve of her cheek.

"What are little girls made of?"

He looked round, startled.

"What are little girls made of?"

The words, those of a child, filled the air.

"Sugar and spice

"And all things nice,

"That's what little girls are made of."

As the words echoed around the dome, Webber suddenly understood what it was about the exhibit that reached out to him: not so much the innocence alluded to in the rhyme, but the *sense* of innocence, the vulnerability and the inevitability of change.

Something tight in his throat, Webber moved around the perimeter of the display, staring at the lines and planes of throat and cheek, the scintillating highlights of her hair. He stopped before a plaque set into the foot of the knoll. "Sugar and Spice" by *Helbron of Xyré*, it read. Beneath the title and artist was

a note to the effect that the piece was on loan to the Aga of Rhaqalle.

Nicole had been staying in the commune of the Aga, a follower of his Cult of the Prophet. The cult was a strange brew of Islamicist and Paganist beliefs which had been fashionable five years before when Nicole had left Webber, careless of the damage she caused by so easy a disregard of the trust he had given her.

The message asking that Webber remove Nicole's ashes had come as a surprise that it was to him she had turned when she knew the illness would finish her. He had found bitter satisfaction in the thought that in the years since she had departed she had found no closer relationship than the one she had abandoned.

*"What are little girls made of?"*

He was not startled by the voice this time, but then, seconds later, he saw that he was no longer alone. A slim woman stood behind him and to one side, staring at the sculpture. She wore black flares, a tight tunic of the same shade, and a velvety purple cape. Her face was bronzed, contrasting sharply with her bleached blonde hair.

Webber returned his attention to the exhibit. He would wait a short time before leaving, so as not to make the woman feel she had driven him away.

"What do you think?" she said in a conversational tone, indicating the statue.

When he glanced in the woman's direction he saw that she was watching him, waiting. Feeling compelled to reply, he said, "I find it quite... striking."

She nodded. "Many people find it uplifting," she said, as if disappointed that he conformed to stereotype.

"You?" he asked, intrigued.

"I find it devastatingly tragic," she said softly. "A mere creation, so lifelike."

Now that he looked more closely, Webber saw that the woman wore a stylized tear on her cheek like a jewel, matching the statue's tear.

He wondered if she was a cultist – the Cult of the Prophet was positively orthodox when compared to some of the odd belief systems that prospered in Serenity's sandy retreats. Maybe this work had acquired some sort of religious significance for the woman. He had heard about sociopaths whose obsession with a work of art, or another person, could turn from adulation to the compulsive need to possess or destroy. But apart from the affectation of the teardrop, this woman betrayed no sign of mental dysfunction.

She was watching him. "You're an offworlder?"

He nodded. It was not a difficult deduction.

She moved forward and reached for his hand. He let her raise it, study his palm. "You're from Earth," she said. "Eastern Europe, I think."

He decided to humour her. "Vienna."

"You're on a mission here," she said. "Are you a spy, perhaps?"

He looked away, withdrew his hand. "I have business in Rhaqalle," he said brusquely.

"It's a difficult place to get into," she said. "They don't welcome visitors unless they've been vetted and plan to stay."

"I know," he said. "I've been invited."

She glanced at the exhibit. "Helebron is staying in

Rhaqalle," she said. "He is a guest of the Aga."

Webber started to walk slowly around the exhibit once again. He indicated the plaque set into the foot of the hillock. "There doesn't seem to be much information available."

The woman stood where he had left her. She looked at him across the shoulder of the hillock. "What do you wish to know?" she asked.

He shrugged. As the knoll came between him and the woman, he considered. When he could see her again, he said, "How did Helebron create such a realistic representation?"

"From life," she said simply. "All art comes from life." He raised his eyebrows, prompting her to add, "The technique itself is Helebron's alone. Or rather, one he learned from his Xyréan mentors. The small human community on Xyré is very close to the native race – far closer than they are to humankind."

Suddenly, Webber saw something in the alignment of the girl and the woman. "Who is she?" he asked.

The woman looked down at the floor. "My daughter," she said. "Jade was my daughter."

He noted her use of the past tense. He wanted to say something, to equate the woman's loss with his own, and so share the burden of her grief. But he could not. He was an insular man. He completed his circuit of the dome in silence.

"I came to Serenity after Jade's death," she said.

He thought of how cruel chance could be – if chance it was: that an artist from a distant planet had brought his work to where the mother of his deceased model should be staying...

He decided to go, leave the woman alone with her memories. Before he could excuse himself, the woman said, "You probably think it macabre that I come here like this. But there is something of Jade that lingers in this work, an essence. Can't you feel it?"

He nodded, wary. He could not deny that he had felt something special, a frisson of energy, on encountering this exhibit.

"I thought that it was just me," he said.

She shook her head vehemently. Then she took his hand again and before he knew what was happening she had stepped over the low barrier. Compliant, if a little alarmed, he followed. They climbed the knoll and paused only when they were level with the figure of the girl.

"There," the woman said. "Can you feel it now?"

It seemed that the very air about the sculpture was alive with an electric charge that all but hummed with vitality. Somehow – though he later told himself that he had imagined this – he could sense the girl's personality. He could feel her innocence and youth and yearning for life, and yet at the same time he was aware of a subtle, tragic undercurrent.

"Touch her," said the woman.

He did as instructed. He moved his fingers towards the girl's cheek. Instead of touching warm, yielding flesh, as he had almost expected to do, his fingertips encountered a surface as cold and hard as glass. And instantly he no longer perceived the harmony of Jade's emotions in the air. A feeling like that of death overwhelmed him, an absolute negativity.

He withdrew his fingers quickly, and instantly her vitality was restored. He wondered that something so beautiful could also be so terrifying.

"Sometimes I want to hold her, as you would a child," said the woman. "Sometimes I think there is a key I can use to reawaken her, the Disney prince's kiss."

Webber stared at her, his brain following the tracks she had laid for him. "This... this is your daughter?" he said, still disbelieving.

She nodded. "Helebron of Xyré killed Jade," she said. "He turned her into a work of art in what he termed a 'process of vitrification'. He has tormented me with her fate ever since."

Webber followed her down the hillock and over the barrier. She stopped by the exit. "I'm sorry," she said. "Even after six years the wounds have not yet healed."

"Of course," he said. "I—"

"Powers," she said, interrupting him. She offered her hand for him to shake formally. "Kandy Powers."

"Axel Webber," he said.

"I know a good restaurant," she murmured. "The best on Serenity. Join me?"

He was amazed, in retrospect, at how easily she seduced him.

They dined at an exclusive outdoor restaurant. At first they spoke little, then she asked Webber why he was on Serenity, why he was going to Rhaqalle. He found himself telling Kandy of Nicole, his relationship with her, and his pain at her departure. He had thought that he had adequately dealt with the wounds she had inflicted; he had not realized that they were still there, ready to be reopened.

"The Aga has her ashes," he said. "He offered to have them spread in the desert, but I declined. I wanted to come to Serenity, to see what it was that she left me for. Then I will take her remains back to Earth."

They ate their spiced oasis fish and carried yams in silence. Over a mid-meal honeyed wine, he asked her, "Your daughter... how could anyone do such a thing? How is he allowed to get away with it?"

"There are people capable of almost anything," Kandy said. "You shouldn't be surprised. He got away with his crime because nobody could prove a thing against him."

"But the statue!"

— is a beautiful work of art, composed entirely of an exotic crystal found on the planet of Xyré. Samples have been taken, but there is not the slightest physical trace of my daughter in the sculpture. And of course Helebron has always been careful not to incriminate himself. In his many public statements about the piece, he only ever hints at its true nature. Over the years he has sent me sensorys of the piece so that I could all but be there with it. He has sent reviews which praise his genius, interviews where he explains the symbolism of the piece. He has become very fashionable: killing my daughter was a brilliant career move on his part. And, finally, he sends me the work itself."

Webber studied Kandy's composed face. Choosing his words carefully, he said, "Are you absolutely certain that Helebron is telling the truth?"

She looked up sharply. "You touched her," she said. "I always doubted his claims — even the sensorys were ambiguous. But since the exhibit came to Serenity, I have *known*. The sculpture is my daughter."

When they had finished their meal, Kandy reached across the table and put a hand on Webber's. "Will you take me home?" she said.

She had an apartment in the cosmopolitan part of town overlooking the oasis. The living area of the penthouse suite was large, as if several rooms had been knocked into one. The floors were made of glowing desert wildwood, with low beams of the same, and exotic trailing plants everywhere.

While Kandy poured a viscous blue liqueur into two long glasses like test-tubes, Webber strolled through the vine-festooned archways. Strange plants and shrubs in demijohns and terrariums alternated with prints, crystals and neograms, all depicting Jade. They showed the girl from an early age right through to her teens: laughing, posing, riding on the backs of strange animals, cavorting in the surf on a bodyboard.

Webber paused before a free-standing neogram showing a family scene: Jade with her arms around Kandy, standing beside a thick-set man who looked to be in his 50s. The little girl was laughing, the sound activated by Webber's presence, and looking from her mother to the man. Her child's voice was recognizable as that which recited the nursery rhyme in Helebron's exhibit.

Kandy stepped through the arch and handed Webber his drink.

"Jade's father?"

Her smile was nostalgic as she stared at the 'gram. "My husband, Edourd. That was taken on Bruckner's World, the year before his death."

Webber said nothing. She had lost so much.

"He was killed by a terrorist bomb," she volunteered. "Not by the blast, but by the biological fallout."

He moved away into the centre of the room. He did not understand how the mood could swing so dramatically when he was with this woman: from light, humorous conversation to shared intimacies about tragedy and loss. Within a short time of meeting Kandy Powers he had come closer to her than to anyone since Nicole.

"You're an artist?" he asked, trying to manufacture another swing of mood. The neograms distributed around the suite looked like the work of a professional.

"I was," she said. "Commercial work, mostly — advertising, corporate iconography. I only produced my own work occasionally, when inspiration came." She hesitated, then continued. "After Edourd died I moved in new directions, and for a short time I was quite successful. But no longer. I stopped all that." Now, she looked up and Webber saw how intense she had become. "I was driven to create work I did not fully understand. And then I learnt that even the purest work of creation has its consequences. I've produced nothing for several years."

Webber was out of his depth. If he had no understanding of art itself, how could he possibly begin to understand the motivations of those who produced it?

Kandy tipped her glass and a length of blue liquid slipped down her throat.



"What do you do now?" Webber asked. "Without your art?" Or your daughter.

"*Carpe diem*," she said, and smiled at his frown. "Live for the day." She gestured at his empty glass. "Another drink? Something stronger this time?" She moved to the bar and poured a green concoction into two bulbous glasses.

He took the drink and held it up to the light. "What is it?"

"A love philtre," she said, watching him above the rim of her glass as she swallowed the liquid in one.

Her bedroom was a glass-enclosed chamber with a view over the rippling water of the oasis, illumination provided by Serenity's midnight auroral lights. Webber found himself in new territory, neither casual affair nor the kind of intense love he thought he had shared with Nicole. Kandy had no need of him, he knew. He was a refuge in a storm, a source of comfort in a life that had experienced so much loss.

When he woke the next morning, Kandy was propped up on one elbow, looking down at him. "When are you going to Rhaqalle?" she asked in a whisper.

"Tonight. Perhaps tomorrow morning."

She waited, letting the silence expand, then said, "Can I come with you?"

The surge of delight he felt was tempered by sudden caution. "Why?" he asked.

"I want to see Helebron. I will beg him to end his torment of me." Then she lowered her head, kissed Webber on the shoulder, the neck. "And you, Axel," she murmured, pushing him onto his back. "I don't want to lose you so soon after having found you..."

In his hotel room later that day he booked two air tickets to Rhaqalle, then started a trawl for information about Helebron of Xyré. He felt that he was betraying Kandy, but at the same time he felt an undeniable need to find out more about her traumatic past. How else might he help her?

After four hours he had found little. Sources on Serenity were limited – exotic art not being a priority here – and access speed for offworld links was infuriatingly slow. He fetched a drink from the bar, then sat back and watched again the three skimpy reviews he had found. Only one of them mentioned the piece entitled "Sugar and Spice," and that only in passing.

Then he noticed a projected icon pulsing to attract his attention. One of his searches had come up with something. "Okay," he assented, and instantly a projection sprang into 3D life on the wall of his hotel room.

A tall, straw-limbed man with unkempt grey hair and dark, brooding eyes was seated on a wall so low that his knees were thrust up to the level of his chest. The fact of Xyré's low gravity was clearly demonstrated by Helebron's gangling limbs. The first words he said were "sugar and spice" – the search had started the interview at the relevant point.

"Sugar and spice and all things nice, that's what little girls are made of." Helebron paused, stared into the room with a little smile on his face. "My fellow artists will understand entirely what I mean by this piece."

Had he said *artist* or *artists*? Instantly, Webber found that he was listening to the interview as if it

was directed solely at Kandy.

"The purity... the *innocence* of one so young, on the threshold of a full and adult life. Yet frozen at this point. Not allowed to live beyond it. Trapped in a realm beyond even death."

Icons pulsed. Webber selected one and the interviewer's voice asked the artist, "What bearing does your interpretation of this theme, both metaphorical and psychodirective, have on the losses suffered in your non-art-oriented life?"

Helebron barely paused. "I know what it is to have a child taken from me. The loss of my own son naturally has a great impact on what – and how – I create." Again, he stared out of the wall at Webber. "Perhaps this is my revenge," he continued. "Perhaps I am driven to trap innocence – to *crystallize* it – just as my own son's was trapped." He chuckled amiably, then concluded, "In many ways, I suppose you could say that by freeing Jade Powers' innocence in my work I have killed her!"

Webber watched the entire interview, at first jumping from question to question, then real-time, but he learnt little more.

She was waiting at her apartment, sitting on the balcony in shorts and sandals. She came to him and wrapped her arms about his neck, but then she seemed to sense something uncertain in his attitude. "What is it?"

He looked into her eyes. "I saw an interview with Helebron. I want to know what happened."

She tensed, then pulled away. She stood for some time with her back to him, then glanced over her shoulder. "You've been investigating me?"

"I want to help you," he said. "I thought it was the most painless way for me to find out – all I did was watch an interview. And now I'm confused. You lost your daughter, Helebron lost his son..." He crossed to Kandy, touched her shoulder. "What happened, Kandy? I want to help you."

Her head tipped back as he kneaded her tense neck muscles. "My husband, Edourd," she said. "It took a month for the viral agents from the fallout of the terrorists' bomb to kill him. I nursed him to the end, as he was gnawed to death by the cancers... He was an innocent man – a peace protestor petitioning on behalf of a persecuted family. The bomb was democratic, it didn't discriminate between the innocent and the guilty.

"Afterwards I abandoned my commercial contracts and tried to become a real artist. My work was bitter and cynical." She smiled. "Art as therapy, if you like. But even therapy can have unforeseen consequences.

"I started to receive some recognition, boosted by the notoriety of some of my works. There was one piece particularly. I called it, 'What are little boys made of?' Its centrepiece was a biological replica of the body of a young boy – real flesh, real organs, but it had never lived. I placed the figure on a large dissecting board and peeled back the skin, pinning out the internal organs as if it were a laboratory dissection. All apart from its face, which remained intact, smiling. Every so often, triggered by the presence of a viewer, a voice would recite the nursery rhyme:

*"What are little boys made of?*

*"What are little boys made of?*

*"Slugs and snails,*

*"And puppy dogs' tails,*

*"That's what little boys are made of.*

"I didn't find out what had happened to Helebron's son until some time after he killed Jade in revenge."

Weber led Kandy across to a sofa, where they sat, her head resting on his shoulder. "What happened?"

She looked up at him, eyes brimming with tears ready to match the false one on her cheek. "A psychopath took my work as the basis for his own perversion. He killed four young boys, pinned them out on the ground. He labelled their organs: slugs, snails, puppy dogs' tails. One of the boys was Helebron's son. He held me personally responsible."

"But... the killer would have killed anyway."

"But he would not have killed those particular boys in that manner. In the general sense my work might not have been responsible. But in the specific..."

The difference between Kandy and Helebron was clear. Where Kandy had been driven to create work which others had abused, Helebron was driven to abuse directly through his work.

She rubbed at her eyes, then turned to him with a determined expression, which he had come to recognize. "That's why I must go to Rhaqalle," she said. "I see now that all powerful works of art have their consequences, whether intended or not. I am ready to plead with Helebron to stop tormenting me."

Weber nodded. "I've made the arrangements," he said. "The flight leaves this afternoon."

The rolling desert landscape – so like the classic deserts of Araby – made it somehow apt that an Islamicist-Paganist cult should have its home here. The aircraft took them first over scrubby hills and dry, rubble-strewn wadis, then over endless kilometres of parallel dunes. Occasional escarpments broke the monotony, their leeward sides calved away in curves as precise as the blade of a scimitar. Weber could see no reason why anyone would wish to settle on such a forbidding planet. Perhaps that was why the cults had been able to flourish: leftover people living on the crumbs ignored by the Expansion.

Had Nicole been a leftover person, he mused? Had he really offered her so little that she had opted for a life in such an inhospitable place?

They spent most of the journey in uneasy silence. Kandy sat morosely at Weber's side, fingernails digging into his leg. "I'm scared," she confided at one point.

"It's okay," he said, inadequately. "It will soon be over."

They were not the only passengers on the plane. There was a group of a dozen new converts, fresh in from Tartarus, where the Cult had been recruiting heavily. These people put Weber on edge with their evangelical enthusiasm: at first they approached him, mistaking him for one of their own; his scepticism merely marked him down as raw material for them to work on. The more experienced acolytes were discreet, polite but not overbearing, dressed in jeans, long-sleeved shirts, not the affected djellabas and chadors of the converts.

Misled by the desert landscape, he half-expected Rhaqalle to be a cluster of Bedouin tents gathered around a palm-fringed oasis. The place was in fact a small town, with square, whitewashed buildings, its blocky skyline broken by the occasional dome and minaret.

A man in jeans, tinted shades and a shirt bearing a crescent moon emblem, approached Weber and Kandy as they emerged from the drab transit office. "Axel Weber?" he asked in a thick accent, glancing at Weber and then staring pointedly at Kandy.

Weber nodded. "A friend," he said, gesturing to Kandy. "She will be staying with me."

The man shrugged. "The Aga's arranged a room for you at the Lodge. When you are ready he will see you. You come with me. I show you."

They followed the man through crowded streets and across a packed market-place to a large building, the walls of which were daubed with the Aga's symbol of a crescent moon rising behind a celtic cross.

After checking in at reception, they were shown up to a simple room on the third floor. There was a single bed, a jug of water and a chipped enamel bowl. On the windowsill was what looked like a scorpion; their guide merely flicked it out of the window with the back of his hand. "You settle yourselves," he said. "Downstairs I will wait. When you are ready we go see the Aga."

When the man had gone, Weber turned to Kandy, shocked at how exhausted she looked after the journey. "Get some rest," he said. "I'll be back later."

She smiled, nodded, then lowered herself onto the bed.

Out in the street the muezzins were calling the faithful to worship the moon goddess. Each time their piercing wails echoed between the buildings Weber's guide reached down and touched the ground with his fingertips. Weber wondered if he should do the same, but decided not to; he was more likely to cause offence with feigned affiliation.

They waited outside a mosque until the worshippers began to emerge. Weber stood to one side, studying the faces of the acolytes as they filed past, wondering for the thousandth time what had drawn Nicole to this place. Why had she chosen this one amongst all the countless cults of the Expansion? Why had she needed religion at all?

His guide touched his sleeve, murmured, "Now we can enter. The Aga will see you."

They removed their shoes and stepped into the mosque, crossed a great, vaulted chamber of marble, its floor polished over the decades by the prayer mats of the faithful.

Seated casually on a stone bench was a small man in a light jacket and flared leggings. The man nodded as Weber and his guide halted before him. His hair was dark, his skin lined and bronzed with exposure to the sun. A small moustache lined his upper lip, as if applied with a pen.

"You must be Axel Weber," said the man, offering a hand.

Weber took the hand, shook.

"I am the Aga of Rhaqalle," the man said. "I must

say, you are not what I expected: a man who travels so far out of obligation to one who has departed. I had expected a romantic, or perhaps an obsessive. You are, if you will forgive my directness, an ordinary man."

"Nicole meant a lot to me," he said. "I wanted to learn why she came here."

The Aga smiled. "You are ready for enlightenment? If not, then all you will perceive is sand and poverty. I see that I am right: you see the sand and wonder why your lover should choose such a place to live and die. Nicole saw beyond the sand."

Seeing beyond the sand was as good as he had ever come up with. He saw now that his journey had been futile: if he had been equipped to understand what it was that Nicole had sought, then such a trip would never have been necessary.

The Aga gestured at Webber's guide. "Rani will fetch the ashes," he said. "He will bring them to your room. I pray that enlightenment finds you in the end. *Salaam aleikum.*"

Webber allowed himself to be led away by Rani, the guide. As they passed from the cool precincts of the mosque, and into the searing heat of the day, Webber paused. "I wonder," he said. "I learnt that someone is staying here, an acquaintance of a friend. Would you be able to show me where he is staying? His name is Helebron – the artist from Xyré."

Rani nodded. "Sure," he said. "I show you to Helebron."

Rani took him through a succession of side streets and alleyways, and across a bustling market until they came to a courtyard. Rani pointed towards a square white building, much like any other in this oasis town. "The room at the end is his," he said. "You want me to wait?"

Webber thanked him, then approached the open door arch set into the end of the building. Doors opened off a long corridor, but he ignored them until he reached the end. He knocked, and almost immediately a deep voice sounded, in a tongue unfamiliar to Webber. He pushed the door open.

The room was dim, and when his eyesight adjusted he made out tables and chairs fashioned from a dark old wood, all laden with... Webber fought his surprise. The rectangular room resembled more the work place of a taxidermist than the studio of an artist. Perhaps a hundred small animals – lizard-like creatures, birds, a vast selection of scorpions like the one Webber had seen earlier – filled the chamber. Each tiny sculpture was flawless, just as the sculpture of Jade Powers was flawless.

"Yes?"

A seated figure looked up from behind a desk. It was the man from the interview: Helebron of Xyré. He was in the process of examining a chunky beetle in the palm of his hand. His withered old features made him seem somehow less alive than the crystallized menagerie surrounding him.

"My name is Axel Webber. We have a mutual acquaintance."

The artist watched him silently.

"Kandy Powers. She says... she claims that you

killed her daughter."

"Powers, yes," said Helebron. "She killed my son. A fair exchange." Disconcertingly, he glided out from behind the desk. He was seated in a powered invalid carriage. His body beneath a grey djellaba was hideously emaciated, useless away from the paltry gravity of Xyré. "She's here?" he asked. "She sends only a messenger?"

"She doesn't know I'm here. She wants to see you. She wants an end to her torment."

Helebron turned away, his face looking suddenly skull-like in relief. "Powers has suffered only a fraction of what I suffered," he said. "Her daughter was not tortured before her death, Mr Webber. All Kandy Powers has suffered is the pain of loss, not the knowledge of what her child has endured."

Casually, Webber reached into his jacket and withdrew the handgun. "You disgust me," he said. He leveled the gun. A slight tightening of his forefinger and the artist would torment Kandy no more.

Helebron stared at him contemptuously, then brushed a hand across the controls of his chair, manoeuvring himself behind the desk again.

Webber was left aiming at empty air. He could not kill a man, even one as despicable as Helebron.

"You are right," said the artist, matter-of-factly. "It is time for the suffering to end. 'Sugar and Spice' has achieved its goal. I am not the ogre you think me."

Webber was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Helebron's eyes flicked around the room. "Choose one of my works," he said. "Pick it up. Go on."

Webber reached for one of the scorpions on a nearby shelf. As his fingers neared it, he experienced a frisson, a charge of vitality and then, as his hand closed around the object, he sensed only emptiness, death.

"Now," said Helebron. "Observe!"

The artist waved his arm in a theatrical manner – performed, Webber thought later, to hide some other movement responsible for what happened next.

Suddenly, the scorpion squirmed in his grip. He opened his hand, saw the viciously arched tail. He jerked his hand away, so that the creature dropped to the floor and scuttled away, disappearing through a crack in the wall.

He stared at Helebron. "You can do this for Jade?"

"That is why I brought the piece to Serenity," said the artist. "It is time to end this thing... as long as Powers meets my conditions."

"Which are?"

"First, that she should truly repent, admitting her responsibility for what happened to those four innocent boys. And secondly, that her confession and Jade's revival should take place in public – an item of performance art, if you will. If she is the artist she claims to be, then she will see the symmetry of this: what began as a pretence of art, should end as a pretence of art. We will, no doubt, be blessed with excellent reviews."

Webber was lost to his thoughts as Rani led him back to the Lodge. Kandy had said that she was prepared to beg, but Helebron was asking for more than that. She had said how sorry she was, but did she really

repent having created the work of art in the first place? He remembered the trace of pride in her tone when she had told him of the power of her creation: she regretted its consequences, not its conception. But surely she would go through with Helebron's scheme if she knew her daughter would be revived? Surely she would accept almost anything if it meant that Jade would be returned to life?

Kandy was asleep when he returned. He decided not to wake her. Let her rest while she could. He stripped off, wrapped a towel around his waist and went along to the shower on the next corridor. The jet of water was feeble, but enough to sluice the layers of dust and sweat-salt from his body.

When, at last, he turned the water off, he thought he smelt burning. He dismissed it, started to towel his hair. When he had finished, he tied the towel around his waist again and twisted the door-catch.

It wouldn't move. He tugged harder, but it was stuck. And the handle was hot to the touch.

He tried to force the door with his shoulder, then bracing his back against the wall he kicked at it with the sole of his foot. Wood splintered. This time when he leaned on the door it creaked open, leaving the catch in place.

Someone had welded the lock with the blast from a laser...

He hurried back along the corridor.

The room was empty. Legs weak, he staggered across the floor to his heaped clothes. His jacket pocket was empty. Kandy had taken his laser handgun.

He pulled on his trousers and shoes, buttoning his shirt as he ran down the stairs and out into the street. He tried to recall the way to Helebron's studio.

He set off in what he hoped was the right direction.

Soon he came to a crowded thoroughfare he was sure he recognized, although lit by the moons and the lights of the houses and stalls it appeared altered. He crossed the street, barging past haggling traders, forcing his way through a torrent of pedestrians.

He recognized a coffee parlour, with a line of old men sitting on the step outside. He plunged down a covered alleyway, past stalls laden with kettles, tambourines, mousetraps and soap powder. At the next junction another group of old men sat around an open fire, their pots of boiling syrup sweetening the air. He realized that he was lost.

He tried to retrace his steps, then stopped to ask a young boy if he knew where the artist Helebron was staying. The child stared up at the strange offworlder, then ran away giggling.

Seconds later the boy returned with another youth. "Helebron," Webber said urgently. From his pocket he pulled a 100-dollar bill, all the cash he had on him. The older boy's eyes bulged. He gabbled something at the other boy, took Webber's arm and led him back along the street.

When they reached the courtyard Webber thrust the note at the boy, then ran through the arched doorway and along the corridor.

The door to the artist's chamber was open. Webber made himself stop, breathe deeply.

When he entered the room he saw that he was too

late. The old man lay slumped across his desk, a slick of blood gathering around his mouth. Another victim of Kandy Power's art. All around the room, the frozen animals looked on disinterestedly.

Helebron's fingers were curled around the butt of a small laser handgun.

Robbed of all emotion, Webber backed out of the room.

As the muezzins raised their cry for evening worship, he retraced his route back to the Lodge, losing his way only once, and then not for long.

Webber halted in the doorway of their room. Kandy was leaning over her bag, packing. She looked up, said, "Axel, I'm sorry. I can't stay here. I can't..." She stopped when she saw his expression.

"You used me," he said. He wondered how many other tourists with passes to Rhaqalle she had seduced before happening upon him.

Slowly, she resumed her packing. "He was dead when I got there," she said. "It must have been suicide."

"He killed himself with my handgun?"

Her hands were trembling. She did not look at him as she said, "Are you going to turn me in?"

In the shock of the last half hour he had made no contingency plans.

He made a quick decision, based less on logic than emotion. "No," he said. "I couldn't do that to you, even now. Just go."

"Do you mean that?"

"I said go!"

She closed her bag, lifted it from the bed, and hurried past him. He wondered, as she ran down the stairs, if she felt any sense of triumph – over him, over Helebron... He wondered if she felt anything at all.

He noticed that Rani had been, as the Aga had promised. A small box sat on the dressing table, marked with Nicole's name and the dates of her birth and death. The span of her life – just 25 years – struck him as tragic and unjust. He picked up the box and weighed it in his hand. In the end there is so little, he thought.

Later, he knew, when the pain had subsided, he who had travelled so little would make another trip: to Xyré, to petition the authorities for help with reviving Jade Powers – for the girl's sake, not her mother's.

He moved to the window, the box of ashes cradled in his hand. He stared out into the darkness and watched the auroral lights begin their flickering sky dance. Something within him had turned to ice, or rather glass.

Down below, Powers ran down the steps of the Lodge and entered the busy night-time bazaar. For a few seconds her blonde hair was visible among the crowd, and then she was lost to sight.

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**Keith Brooke**, born 1966, and **Eric Brown**, born 1960, last appeared here in collaboration with "Apassionata" (issue 109). Both are keeping very busy, particularly Eric, who tells us that he has just completed two new sf novels: *Untouchable*, a children's book coming from Orion in 1997, and *Bengal Station*, an adult novel currently in search of a publisher.



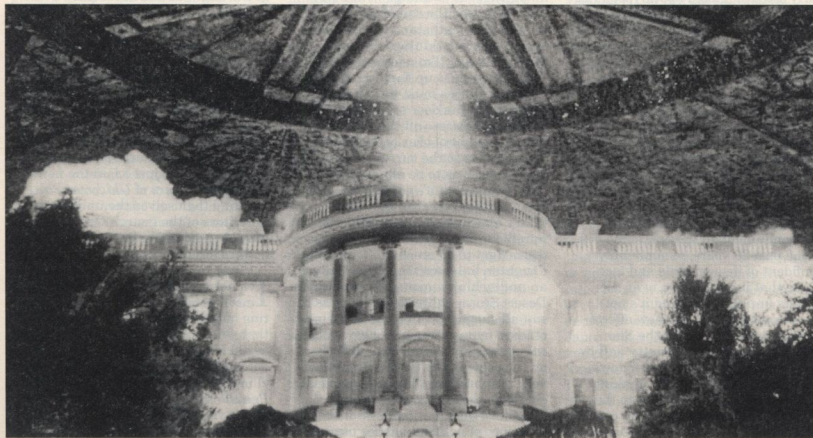
# MUTANT POPCORN



Nick Lowe

It's a paradox of the industry in the 90s that, in terms of overall profitability, the biggest film of this year and many others will end up way behind a safe middling hit like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* because it's simply not interested in being anything more than a movie. Perhaps the boldest of many daringly old-fashioned things about *Independence Day* is its refusal to offer any real platform for merchandising. You might shift a few model kits and console games, but there's nothing you could really stick on a lunchbox, let alone franchise as a range of ubiquitous character dolls (and then re-pro-

mote on the back of the video release; see the *Toy Story* file for a masterly demonstration). Instead, the higher-risk, lower-yield strategy of what we are exhorted to know chummily if meaninglessly as "ID4" is to construct an out-and-out event movie: one whose exact release date at the peak of the summer blockbuster season is built into the concept from the start in a way that even the most shameless of Christmas pictures can only approximate. The very pattern of its US previews and opening was designed to make it the fastest grosser ever, and given its datestamp the whole design would have col-



lapsed if it *hadn't* been a sensation in its week of release.

Obviously, all this requires the movie itself to be reasonably phenomenal, so it's a good thing that *Independence Day* does shoot its surf of absurdities with such graceful assurance as to disarm all defences and nuke your head to glowing smithereens, just as those incorrigible larky boys Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin have copiled their own guerrilla craft into the very heart of heartless Hollywood and let off the mother of all fireworks. Its no-stars profile, by now an Emmerich-Devlin trademark, maximizes control in the hands of its semi-maverick writing/producing/directing duo (Devlin shot second unit, which explains the scrumptious pick of global locations) in a most un-Hollywoodlike way; and the whole thing pumps with confidence and an unapologetic genre nostalgia for the things about 70s cinema that mainstream Hollywood finds faintly embarrassing, while managing to shed the Teutonic solemnity of Emmerich's four earlier films in the genre from *Making Contact* to *StarGate*. Written famously fast, their deft, draft script retains all sorts of delightful pokes at the envelope of what you can get away with that would never have made it through in a big movie with stars and studios in charge – real “what were we thinking last night when we wrote this, ah what the hell leave it in” stuff.

It's a provocatively classical film, aiming at the textbooks as well as the record books, right down to the calendar inter-titles proclaiming its Syd Field structure. Act 1, set up problem (war of the worlds is declared; America gets into its car); Plot Point 1, early setback (global apocalypse); Act 2, regroup & build relationships (everyone assembles in big bunker to do flimsy motivational scenes); Plot Point 2, central character's faith tested (“Everyone loses faith from time to time” – Judd Hirsch, seconds before deliciously-clonky “catch cold” HG/Orson homage); Act 3, triumph over adversity (zoosh into deathstar and nuke those genocidal mothershippers out of the mothershipping sky). Never one to use a new idea when an old one has proven mileage, it's an enormous and largely-exhilarating compendium of all the epic sf movies of the past 20 years, so supremely confident of its own scale and technique that it dares them to an all-comers knucklebent. And it's not false bravado. Even the new effects footage in the trailer for the *Star Wars* celebration looks pretty naff by the standards of what then follows; the armageddon sequence, making history not least in bringing to the screen for the first time an old comics fallback that hits Mega-City One at

least every three years, is a triumph for Emmerich's crack unit of what *Moon 44* unforgettably credited as “Modellmakers.” In a shrewd coup, Emmerich-Devlin have not only launched their own pre-emptive anniversary strike, while also snatching a march on the slough of upcoming first-contact releases and unilaterally reviving the real Abba of film genres, the Irwin Allen disaster movie. (Standard Emmerich-Devlin interview bite no. 3 claims that these high-schlock ensemble casts have an element of unpredictability over who's for the chop. Well, bratwurst and baloney, frankly. In this movie, anyone who acts *too much* will be for it, as will anyone quirkily-cast – a dead giveaway – in a non-familial supporting role, or anyone based on Hillary Clinton, America's most expendable. Exemption: each male lead has to haul around one embarrassing relative to “humanize” their own cheerfully flimsy and preposterous characters.)

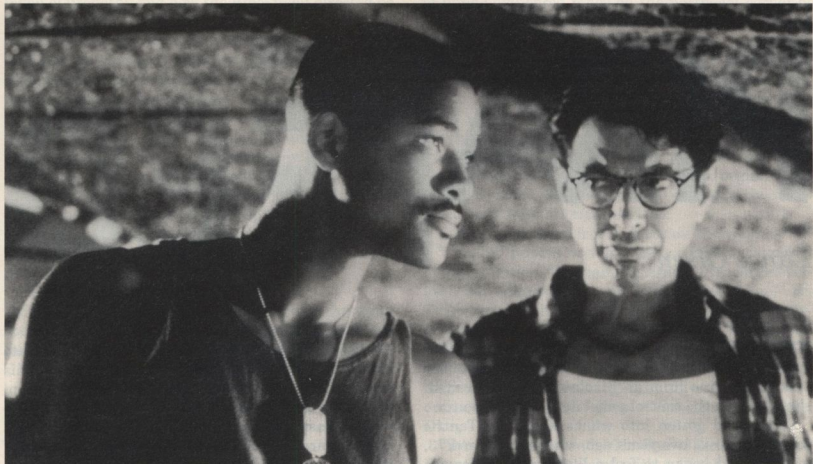
But the truly towering audacity is to make the Chief an action hero. It's only very lately that Hollywood had even begun to cotton on to the true mythic possibilities of the Clinton administration. Up until Kevin Kline and Michael Douglas, fictional movie Mr Presidents were always the *destinateur*, never the hero: they could fairy-godmother other people's stories, but never have an adventure of their own. The most the President ever got to do in a world-in-peril sf disaster movie was to frown heavily over whether or not to nuke America, which he generally decided not to, against the advice of a foam-at-the-mouth Pentagon adviser. This obligatory moment is there, but so now is an outrageous exchange with Secretary Loggia as the squadron takes off to nuke the deathstar: “I'd sure like to know what you think you're doing, Mr President.” “I'm a fighter pilot, Will. My place is up there in the sky.” (The secretaries must have had to break down the door and scrape the chortling twosome off the floor after they'd thought of that one.) For in a resemblance to the current incumbent so close as to be almost actionable, Bill Pullman's version not only has a strong, careerist first lady (Mary Macdonnell apparently cast purely for passing likeness, as she doesn't get to do much else) and only daughter, but even more uncannily is an unflinchingly-monomagous former Desert Storm fighter ace. Needless to say, all suggestion that the supreme office is in any imaginable way *political* is excised with surgical deftness: on the contrary, as we're told in the very first briefing, “the message has got lost – there's too much politics.” The film's sole guarded hint at the existence of political parties comes

when a sympathetic citizen confides “I voted for the other guy”; and when you hear Pullman's climactic rally speech you can understand why. (“Mankind – from now on that word will have a new meaning!” Audience exchange unseen looks of puzzlement.)

Ironically, despite all this artful deprecation of parties or policies as anything to do with the post, *Independence Day* is pretty consistently Republican stuff, hitting all the conservative buttons it can find. Like its stablemates, it's relentlessly blokey, heroising the military and putting the ladies firmly in their place – the more so if they're strong enough to put career before whingeing husband. (Just try imagining the Goldblums' key dialogue scenes with the sexes reversed.) The saviours of humanity are a triumvirate of the US President (but emphatically *not* the government: his own people keep him in the dark about Area 51, which any concerned citizen knows is just bulging with crashed saucers and fridged aliens), the US military (but *not* the Pentagon – they're the ones who urge pushing the button on Houston), and the enterprising solo inventor (but *not* his state-funded employers) with an advance copy of MacOS 8 and a PowerBook that apparently exchanges data with alien systems by sympathetic magic.

Above all, of course, it salutes the flag with an obviousness that in a film of lesser cheek would be suicidal, ticking off the monuments to national ideology as the shadow passes over them, and vindicating armed strength in a world of peacemaking because you may not be much bothered about saving third-world arses in Burundi but one never knows when tentacled beasts from beyond the stars will drop in to annihilate humanity. For this is the Real World, where only bleeding-heart hippies would expect Johnny Alien to be friendly, and America's place in the new world order needs to be universally affirmed (“About bloody time,” say the Brits as the news that America has saved the earth goes round the 2nd units) – just as, in the new sf order, the makers of *Universal Soldier* find themselves the unlikely inheritors of the genre's Oval Office. May they solemnly swear to use their powers for good.

It's not good news for any alien intelligence, however benign, setting out to colonize the new world that what awaits is infection with a lethal homegrown virus, leaving them defenceless against terminal remodelling. Take *James and the Giant Peach*: the tale of a fantastic children's vehicle escaping across the Atlantic to a different life in Disney's



## INDEPENDENCE DAY

Previous page: New York and Washington are visited by Martians.  
Above: Will Smith and Jeff Goldblum plan how they will save Earth.

whole new world, where the orphaned protagonist can flee thralldom to his tragically-deceased father's wicked heirs by being adopted by a new family who'll love him even more. Considering the main charm of Roald Dahl's plot is its childlike narrative logic and feel of stream-of-consciousness improvised riffing, it must seem a convenient miracle that it does fall relatively easily into three movie acts (England, ocean, America) with a big set piece at the climax of each (the peach's escape, the battle in the clouds, the arrival), even managing the obligatory vertiginous culmination on the spike of the Empire State Building. Even neater is that it's quite obviously tailor-made to be a Henry Selick film, consisting as it does almost end-to-end of a sextet of anthropomorphic insects interspersing engaging character turns with fantastic set pieces and snappy-lyriced musical numbers.

And indeed, the first two legs of the journey are a voyage into the marvelous, with the live-action first act if anything more outlandish and visually packed than the stop-motion second – where the limitations of the book's narrative (basically seven characters anticking around in a single set) make it hard to rival the show-stopping extravagance of *Nightmare Before Christmas*. The one colossal set piece, the war with the Cloud-Men, has been inexplicably replaced by a much less imaginative, if still reasonably spectacular, escapade with Jack Skellington's

underwater polar pirates; and though the characters are beautifully executed, it's questionable whether even the finest model characterization in history (which I suppose you'd have to admit this is) is quite enough to tick a film over in itself. But it's still a silencing smack in the gob for all those prophets of stop-motion doom who declared *Toby Story* the end of the world.

Where the creepies start to crawl is when the peach lands in America. Making the most of a slim narrative curve, the film version strongly thematizes the opposition between England (drab, overcast land of servitude & child labour, paletted in bruise colours) and America (land of freedom, dreams, escape, healing, &c., &c.). But the wasp in the fruit is that it's precisely with the peach's touchdown in the Apple that the real nightmare begins, as the luckless James finds that his new family lives in a very different world. The warning signposts are already there in the quieter moments of the Atlantic crossing, where James gets to therapize each of his new insect buddies in turn and follow up their new physical stature with some suitably gruesome personal growth. But far creepier is to come. In the novel (everyone remembers) the parents are casually offed by a rhino in the second paragraph. In the film, however, this hapless throwaway rhino is pressed into reluctant service as a hideous symbol of James's own demons, which he has to confront at the climax to heal his

psychic wounds and discover the new skills of self-assertion that have kept America free to dream. "You're not even a real rhino!" he bursts out, with more truth than he senses: "you're just a lot of smoke and noise!" And when the gruesome aunties (long since terminally flattened in the book) rise from the depths to claim him again and accuse him of dreaming the whole thing, the new James makes his own incoherent declaration of independence, on behalf of lonely-visionary Tim Burton characters everywhere: "Maybe it was a dream, at first – but wasn't everything? Wasn't ALL THIS" (huge gesture taking in both NYC and the movie itself) "someone's dream?" For it emerges that the aunties' ghastliest crime was not exploitation or cruelty but *lowering his self-esteem*: "You keep telling me I'm nothing! I'm not the one who's nothing – you are!" This is enough to convince his American audience that he's one of them, and James is awarded his freedom to tell his newly ideologically-compliant story over and over to his adoptive homeland. For this is the land where imported fruit is vaccinated against potentially-infectious parasites by massive doses of self-help platitudes, and from now on this is where all children like James must live: this is Disney land, and *we're* your family now, James. Extreme close-up; nightmare chords. That'll teach those bug-eyed pests to try and invade US.

Nick Lowe

# PIRATE FEED

Lance Olsen

The killings were going really well today, Esther Dugdale thought as she took another sip of her iced urine from an insulated plastic Go-Redskins mug on the control panel next to her monitor.

Esther had gotten into what's known in Tantric yoga as *amaroli* two years ago, when she turned 73, in 2015, and began to feel a little, well, under the weather. A bridge-playing friend of hers, and one-time lover, Martha Quilp, robust tiny thing 82 if a day and still spry as a dextroamphetamine mongoose, recommended a Mexiental urotherapist named Dr Los Alamos she'd been working with for more than a decade and by whom Martha swore.

Sure enough, two visits and several ounces of yellowish, slightly acidic, and not wholly unpleasant watery fluid later, Esther felt like a new woman.

"It'll be just a minute now, dear," she said into the microphone implanted beneath her tongue to the tall man with the worried eyes and slightly greying buzzcut that reminded Esther of an underfed meerkat.

His name was Abdul Firdausi and he'd already been strapped down to the cushioned divan on set two's Delivery Room. His head was propped atop Persian pillows, his hands clasped politely upon his abdomen, his feet raised just a bit with a folded cashmere shawl. Behind him on the pseudo-panelled wall, half of which was stocked with pseudo-bookshelves housing a pseudo-library, was a reproduction of a reproduction of the famous Pre-Raphaelite painting by John Everett Millais depicting Shakespeare's Ophelia floating at what seemed a fairly hefty clip down a stream toward Never-Never Land.

Abdul had chosen the Victorian motif, of which Esther approved greatly. Bach trilled and fluttered on the sound system in the background and the air was sweet with the scent of Darjeeling tea and buttery shortcake.

"I'm starting the morphine drip," she said.

"Thank you," Abdul replied to the ceiling.

"Not at all, dear. Not at all."

He'd related during his 60-second spot in God's Antechamber how the cancer, despite the painful months of chemo- and last-ditch experimental nanotherapy, had spread from his skin, result of increased

UV rays fricasseeing his basic genetic materials, into his bloodstream, turning up first in his liver, then his lungs, then his stomach, then his pancreas, then, finally, the base of his brain. Nor could he afford the organ transplants that might have extended his visit in this incarnation (Abdul was a Hindu in the Church of St Oprah) – if, that is, he could even locate all the fresh organs he'd need, on or off the Chinese baby black-market, which was an iffy proposition to begin with.

Abdul was just an average Joe. He didn't have a family, except a sister named Sam in Seattle. He didn't have many friends. He didn't have a lot of money from his job as a high-school teacher in Bangkok, and he didn't carry medical catastrophe insurance. So this, a network-paid trip to The Final Summons Show on the floating island Awfully Big Adventure in shadily international waters off the coast of Hong Kong, was, the way he figured it, the only solution left.

The audience, of course, agreed. It immediately sympathized with Abdul's plight, with his simple honesty and very human need to avoid agony during the cosmic backstretch, and thus voted unanimously for the lethal injection.

Esther Dugdale sympathized, too, and was making it her business as chief med-tech on Awfully Big Adventure to help him out of this world as gently and humanely as possible. She thought of herself, thought of all perhaps somewhat overly plump 75 years of herself, as a frumpily dressed, pink-cardiganed, baggy-hosed, aqua-haired air-controller in the Tower of Life trying to talk down pilots coming in for their terminal approaches, their final summons, without radar during heavy weather with lightning exploding all around.

In a sense, thought Esther, this was the most important job in the whole solar system... except, perhaps, for being President-and-CEO of the Semi-States of Nor-Am.

That's why she had to be in top form: clear-headed, bright-eyed, quick-reflexed. And that's why she'd gone to see Dr Los Alamos when Martha suggested him. Dr Los Alamos had turned out to be a benevolent midget in a three-piece suit, replete with gold-plated retro-watch and fob, and a gentle Mexiental accent that reminded Esther of doves and spring mornings



in Capistrano. He explained how Gandhi had partaken of urography and how the Bible itself directed us to "drink waters from thine own cistern." He didn't need to go on. Esther was hooked. Gandhi was her hero. So she sipped straight away and presently felt stronger, more mentally agile, than during any other temporal slice of her existence. She was going to live to be a hundred. She was going to live to be a hundred and ten. She knew it like she knew the taste of herself, a taste (shot through, the doctor said, with a healthy attack-dose of melatonin) that cured everything from tuberculosis to gingivitis, hormonal jumps to jet lag.

She reached over and punched up the ratings meter. The vivid red line against the tar-black background had climbed dramatically in the last 30 seconds, then plateaued.

Abdul was ready for delivery.

Static fizzed in Esther's left ear. It was the seed-speakers implanted across her tympanic membrane. Bob Bytes from up in the network boardroom spoke.

"Fire," he said.

"Roger, dear," Esther responded.

Abdul was already in a happy morphine dream. Esther could make out the thin glimmer of his eyeballs beneath his almost-shut lids.

She thumbed the violet button that told the computer to release the charge of phenobarbital sodium into the clear tube that led to the IV in Abdul's right arm.

She counted to 15, one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi, three-, and poked the pretty vacation-sky blue button that told the computer to release under a high-pressure wallop the Terminal Flood, a milky soup comprised of secobarbital sodium, amobarbital sodium, sodium thiopental, chloral hydrate, laudanum, meperidine, atropine, paraldehyde, reserpine, scopolamine, sulfonethylmethane, curare, maybe some Coca-Cola syrup, and anything else that happened to be lying around the shelves of the on-shore blackmarket pharmacy that afternoon when the copter went collecting.

Esther flipped over to Abdul's electrocardiogram on her monitor. The hills and troughs that formed an objective correlative to his being became increasingly indistinguishable. Abdul's eyes opened a few shreds more, hazed over like frosted glass, and began focusing on something far beyond the boom mikes, arc lamps, and remote-controlled lighter-than-air cameras that made up set two.

Then those hills and troughs became a vast steady plain.

"Mr Firdausi has landed," Esther announced to Bob.

"Thank you, Miss Dugdale," Bob said.

"Not at all, Mr Bytes," replied Esther.

Feeling special inside, warm, like a Hollywood actor dishing out turkey slices and mashed potatoes in a San Francisco soup kitchen on Thanksgiving, Esther took another sip from her insulated plastic Go-Redskins mug on the control panel next to her monitor, and the studio audience on the other side of the two-way mirror-wall applauded appreciatively.

Esther took a cosy breath, savouring the altruistic blush of the moment as she would the sweet taste of Darjeeling before retiring tonight upon her return to

her white cottage with blue shutters tucked in a stand of nano-engineered pines on the northeast corner of the island after the show, a small tribute to gentle Abdul.

Then she reached over and snicked a switch to check on the next, and last, contestant of the evening.

The stop-watch on her screen said seven minutes and counting.

The fellow was already sitting in the large, high-backed, ersatz-leather chair on stage in front of the studio audience in God's Antechamber, beginning to recite his story, lie-detector wire trailing fairly inconspicuously from his right earlobe.

Esther moused an icon to increase the volume.

"Um, hi," he was saying, clearly a trace bewildered by his situation. "My name is Arnold. Arnold Snellicci? My friends call - um, *called* - me Arnie?" He looked down at his white hands battling in his navy-blue lap. "I'm not quite sure how to begin. I mean, you know, all this... uh... stuff. It's quite a surprise to be on this side of the lens." He raised his chin and squinted, leaned forward almost imperceptibly, trying to make out people beyond the glare of the lights. "Let's see. Okay..."

"You have 50 seconds, Mr Snellicci," a compassionate announcer's voice with a Cambridge accent prompted. It was George Twiff.

Arnie looked into the black pasta dish of sound-equipment webbing over his head, down into the cloud of glare. His white hands lay flat on his thighs, restless.

"Oh, right. Well. Um, okay. Let's see. I was born in 1989 in St Louis, Mitsubishi-Missouri, to a, um, pretty well-off family. I attended good private schools. I went to college at Princeton and majored in economics. I went on for an MBA at the Harvard B-School. Upon graduation, I went to work as VP for Turner Bank in Portland, Turner-Oregon. I married a wonderful woman named Molly and had three children whom I love very, very much. Misha, Marty, and Mona."

Esther's heart reached out to embrace him. Arnie seemed like such a nice young man: soft-spoken, deferential, well-educated.

He was handsome, too, his dark hair cut tidily like a British businessman's, his face clean-shaven, his spine straight and mannerly. There was something *dignified* about him. That was the word. *Dignified*. He wore a navy-blue silk Armani suit that had once been top-of-the-line and was now a little shinier than it should have been in certain spots, frayed at the collar and cuffs. He wore a gold nose ring and white high-top Adidas with soles rimmed in flashing red lights. His nervousness reinforced the aura of vulnerable charm glowing around him.

"Thirty-five seconds," George reminded him.

"Okay. Right. So, um, how do I do this...? Boy. Okay. Well. Here goes." He took a breath. "I fell in with some high-risk takers in the company. They fell into some very bad deals. I tried to cover up my end of it with my - and my family's - earnings, which I also lost. At which point the FBI stepped in. Needless to say, I was fired. I did three years on reduced charges. My wife, deeply in debt herself because of what I'd

done, left during my incarceration. I haven't seen my kids in" – he looked down at the backs of his hands, calculating, then up at the camera – "in six months now, I guess." Moved, the audience moaned with understanding.

"She – um, Molly, my wife – got a restraining order against me." The weight of this fact appeared to press down on him like a pterodactyl perching on his shoulders. "My parents won't talk to me. I have no money left. I've lost my home. No one will hire me."

He let out his breath and ran his right palm back over his hair.

What impressed Esther most was Arnie's ability to be humble yet truthful, truthful yet somehow apologetic, somehow apologetic yet emotionally temperate, emotionally temperate yet somehow fervent about his situation, somehow fervent about his situation yet never theatrical, never sentimental.

"I've done this really awful thing," he seemed to be saying. "I accept the inevitable consequences. This is just how the universe works."

Esther checked the ratings meter. Up it shinned.

"So, um," he continued, "I'm not trying to blame anyone or anything. I mean, you know, there's no one to blame except myself and all. I'm just saying. And, well, I've thought and thought about it, and, um, I just don't have anywhere else to go any more. I have lots of good memories behind me, but can't imagine any new ones to look forward to.

"So, well, here I am, and, so..."

"Your time's up, I'm afraid, Mr. Snevellicci," George said empathetically, and then, modulating into his talkshow host's rhythms, rap and verve: "And so, folks, after these commercials, it's our audience's turn. Stay on or get off? You decide. Find out when we return with... *The Final Summons*..."

Esther's vision glassed with tears.

She chuckled at herself. She was such a silly old thing. And yet Arnie's story was just so *sad*. Could you imagine? Losing everything, house, money, family – poof! – like that?

His 28-year flight had been a terribly bumpy one, packed with thunderstorms, rain, shifting winds... and after such an effortless takeoff!

Esther tsked, watching the make-up people swarm around him like cockroaches around spilled cereal. He looked edgy, dismayed, by all the attention he was getting. Something among Esther's ribs hurt. She reached up and patted the bristly top of her light blue Mohawk, testing the tensile strength of her mousse.

Well, if the audience voted for a Definitive Sabbatical, Esther promised herself (as she tended to promise herself at this juncture in nearly every contestant's presentation, three a night, five nights a week, Esther believing in people's inherent goodness... except, maybe, for those who sometimes made up all manner of nonsense just to see themselves and be seen on TV, utterly missing the purpose of the medium... or those who burrowed deeply into the unpleasant grotto of nanodrugs, passing said synaptic marauders on to myriad partners through the frequent and unregulated exchange of bodily fluids, addicting hundreds of unsus-

pecting victims each year) – if the audience voted for a Definitive Sabbatical, Esther would make sure Arnie's landing would be a very, very soft one indeed.

A commercial for Marlboro unfiltered sprints across the screen. It was, like this show itself, a pirate feed, quite possibly ricocheted illegally off a couple of dozen satellites on its way to millions of homes across the globe, originating on a reconfigured oil tanker somewhere among the more than 7,000 islands involving the Philippines.

The commercial featured something in the neighbourhood of a hundred edits in 15 seconds of good-looking teens bungee-jumping, sky-diving, water-skiing, snowboarding, surfing, motorbiking, skateboarding, karateing, knife-fighting, motorboating, rollerblading, race-car driving, and bouncing in weightless abandon in the cramped smoky corridors of the Iron Curtain, the first high-orbit atrocity theme park – all followed by a testimonial from the elderly porn queen, Prima Donna, head ahoover in a carcinogenic cumulus against a crimson-and-white background featuring the Marlboro logo, asserting with grandmotherly kindness in a flashback instant aimed at capturing Baby-Buster shares: "Be a cowboy. Suck me."

Esther crunched up her pointy nose at the monitor. Things certainly weren't what they used to be, she thought. Looking at the youth these days was like... was like... was like trying to figure a differential equation with five fingers attached to the crippled arm of a comatose blind man at midnight in a desert town without electricity.

When she was young Elvis Presley swivelled his hips on stage and John, Paul, George, and Ringo let their hair tickle their ears and newspapers said it was the end of Western Civilization.

But now...

Esther didn't want to think about now. She didn't believe in ugly ideas. She thought instead about her husband Harry's head cryogenically frozen in a small canister in a warehouse off a narrow alley in Hong Kong, how Harry and she had met at one of the first free Grateful Dead concerts in the Haight, how they married in a pine forest (a real pine forest) in northern California when there still was a northern California and honeymooned through Western Europe when there still was a Western Europe with hardly a dime in their torn bluejean pockets, backpacks and sleeping bags tugging at their shoulders like hope, and, when they returned six months later, how they took their first job on an underground tabloid called *Rolling Stone* just launching in the Bay area.

When their old buddy Jann sold out, went big time, made it in an unhealthy gigantic way, they inched into public-access television, and, from there, pirate broadcasting. Which is what they'd done, private, committed, and richly in love, until seven years ago, when, the Alzheimer's settling on him like a 19-century London fog concealing Jack the Ripper in an irritable mood, Harry became one of the first contestants on *The Final Summons*, one of the most-watched and talked-about pirate feeds on the planet, people waking at three in the morning in Denver, six in Caracas, taking early coffee breaks in London, late lunches in

Moscow to see the real-time drama, the big black consequences, of the sick and the failed pleading their cases in front of a live studio audience, motorboated or coptered in from the mainland, who then voted whether or not to ameliorate the bleak circumstances of said contestants once and for all.

Esther puckered her lips like she was going to try to blow out an invisible highway flare and busied herself dusting her control panel with a stray Kleenex while commercials looped for a global Swiss hymen-replacement franchise, an exclusive organ-transplant boutique in Cape Town, and the feed following this one on most pirate Klub Med (as in Klub Medellin, the cartel having diversified after the legalization of most drugs on the world market in 2009) channels: Shock Circus, featuring (confessedly staged) genital-torture exploits by off-duty Beijing police pretending to be on-duty Beijing police.

And then something beeped in Esther's ear, the cameras were back on Arnie Snelvellici, the make-up people had vanished, and Bob Bytes was counting down in her ear, *three, two, one...*

"And we're back!" cried George Twiff with that Cambridge accent.

The studio audience broke into rehearsed applause. Esther noticed there were four minutes and 39 seconds left till the end of the show.

If everything went well, she'd have to hurry.

It took George 30 seconds to explain the voting instructions to the studio audience, and it took the studio audience 40 seconds to lift their remote controls, ponder the enormity of their decision, and poke the requisite red button for life or green button for death. The Klub Med mainframe whirred. Esther inspected her hardware, making sure all the connections were solid, then tweaked the icon that began the Terminal Flood and shot the concoction into a small clear holding tank beneath the bed in the Delivery Room of choice. The digital dust settled. Ninety-two percent of the audience (a not uncommon proportion) had given Arnie the green light. The Definitive Sabbatical was a go. Everyone in the bleachers clapped exuberantly on behalf of their own benevolent wisdom. Esther smiled, cherishing the awareness that the system had functioned elegantly once again. This is what true democracy was all about, she thought, reaching for her Go-Redskins mug.

The cameras cut to a last commercial, a 30-second spot for Safe-T, a nanospermicide, and returned to Arnie strapped down on a large comfortable-looking four-poster job on set three. He had opted for the upper-middleclass-NorAm-household-circa-2010 motif... the motif, in other words, that reminded him most of his happiest years with Molly, Misha, Marty, and Mona. He'd been tucked beneath an early-American crazy-quilt, his head sunk deep into two fake duck-feather pillows. Next to the bed stood a counterfeit mahogany nightstand cluttered with an old-time lava lamp, a broken clock radio shaped like an eightball, a telephone shaped like a walkie-talkie, several crumpled Kleenexes, several half-full bottles of sleeping pills, and a fourth-full decanter of what appeared to be

brandy. Behind him on the whitewashed wall beside the sham curtained window was a reproduction of a reproduction of the famous minimalist painting by Yves Klein depicting the colour blue on a six-foot by four-and-a-half-foot canvas. A muzak version of Viva Bonni Suicide's song "Youth in Asia" thumped on the sound system in the background, far away phoney dog-barks and bird-cheeps and children's shouts rose on lighter-than-air speakers, and the set was sweet with the scent of Weekend Morning Glade freshener.

Esther was a little disconcerted. The whole thing was rather, oh... busy. She would have bet Arnie had a better sense of decorational equilibrium than this. Still, for him, it all probably amounted to the pleasant business associated with hectic suburban domesticity, the snug secure kind embodied in the odd black sock question-marked in the middle of the beige-carpeted floor, the unread stack of old magazines avalanching from under the bed, the piquant pinch of bacon substitute and mocha java interlaced with moist dog fur in the slightly stagnant Sunday household atmosphere.

And for this Esther forgave him.

Arnie was clearly trying to swim back, back, back through the tides of his memory to a certain small ahistorical buoy that no one else except him remembered, perhaps not even Molly herself now, and yet that buoy represented in Arnie's mind the very definition of contentment, of existential satisfaction, of love.

Except, Esther had to admit, Arnie didn't look especially existentially satisfied.

No. Not at all. Fact was, she noticed with mild surprise, he continued to maintain that bewildered expression of his. He was still swimming, still freestyling away, the buoy nowhere in sight.

Nonetheless, he had to be feeling at least a *little* relieved. He just had to. The studio audience, after all, had been in a very generous frame of mind tonight. On the heels of voting for the Definitive Sabbatical, they had also voted to have Molly's debts obliterated and a full make-over for her conducted by the internationally renowned hairstylist Arriba during a special four-day-weekend Martinique retreat in a five-star tropical spa. Misha, Marty and Mona each received Kevorkian Scholarships for four years at the semi-state university of their choice, as well as a less propaedeutically-inclined weekend-getaway family-fun package that included an all-expenses-paid vacation to the Iron Curtain theme park. Arnie himself had even been offered a seven-course last supper (televised, of course) at celebrated Jacqueline's on the mainland, followed by a cushy night with courtesan in the illustrious Beijing Hilton, but, as with most contestants, he'd declined, wanting (understandably) to get on with things as soon as possible, the momentum shoving events forward at an increasingly hasty pace by this point in the cosmological script... a decision Esther could greatly respect.

So she leaned forward, elbows on the edge of her console, and said into the microphone implanted beneath her tongue: "It'll be just a minute now, dear. I'm starting the morphine drip."

Arnie, reclining beneath that heavy crazy quilt, head sunk so deep in those fake duck-feather pillows

only his apprehensive eyes and nose peeked out Kilroy-fashion, whispered something extraordinary at the ceiling. Esther couldn't at first believe her ears. She examined his features. She thought about Harry, about how he lay in set seven's Delivery Room, the northern California motif, a stand of plastic pines through the French doors, waiting, lightened that the waiting was almost over.

"Pardon me, dear," she said, "I didn't quite catch that." Arnie whispered again.

This time one of the on-set white-coated med-techs padded over to the bed, bent, hands on knees, and listened.

The med-tech's face fell.

He straightened, rested his palms on his lower back as if he were stretching, and said into his mike, trying to maintain a sense of professionalism: "Mr Snelvellicci seems to have changed his mind, Miss Dugdale."

She sat staring at her monitor as if it displayed a battalion of Nazi soldiers doing the can-can.

She opened her mouth. She closed it.

"He says he'd prefer not to go through with this," the med-tech said. "He'd like to quote get up now unquote."

Esther's brain turned into soggy granola.

And, down in the bleachers, at the very same instant, the studio audience began fidgeting and mumbling among themselves like people in a movie theatre six seconds after the film breaks and the lights haven't come on yet. The audio feed from the Delivery Room was shut off, so they couldn't hear exactly what was developing up on the stage in front of them, but they intuited events had skidded off their established course, things were taking too long, whatever had just transpired wasn't any good at all.

Static woke up in Esther's left ear. Bob Bytes from up in the network boardroom spoke.

"Fire," he said.

Esther's heart valves coughed.

She took a long Tantric breath and said: "We have a problem, dear."

"A problem?"

"Yes, dear. I'm afraid so. It seems Mr Snelvellicci has... well... rescinded his initial idea of embarking on a Definitive Sabbatical."

More static fizzed in Esther's left ear.

"Say again," said Anna Konda, Bob's boss, President-and-CEO of Klub Med TV, who, Esther imagined, was hunched forward, half-standing, countenance torqued into a wince-smile, at the head of an imitation-granite table two floors above her in the bronze pyramidal headquarters on Awfully Big Adventure. Anna, a pirate's pirate, was the kind of woman who counted the chocolate chips in her after-lunch cookies, and, if she found fewer than 14, fired this week's floating-island baker after humiliating him in front of her staff and VPs.

"Mr Snelvellicci says he would like to quote get up now unquote," Esther reported.

"Yeah, well tell him he should've thought about that before he signed the goddamn contract," Bob said. "Jesus. Hit the Flood. We got 45 seconds of air-time."

Esther relayed the first part of the message to the med-tech by the bed and listened to his reply.

"Mr Snelvellicci says he doesn't want to die, dear," she said. "He wants to live."

"Pull the plug, Esther. The natives are getting restless."

The med-tech continued talking to her. She passed on the information to Bob Bytes, Anna Konda, and the others in the boardroom as a translator might during an important session at the U.N.

"He says, dear, he'd rather be alive and in emotional turmoil than dead and free of emotional turmoil. He says it just occurred to him that life is a terribly precious thing. Rush, rush, rush, he says, and for what? To age and to die? No sir. He says it just struck him that he'd rather be poor, jobless, divorced, childless, and without reputation than..."

"Pull the plug, Esther."

"He says he doesn't know what he was thinking. Circumstances got away from him... Excuse me, dear? Oh, well, right. Mr Snelvellicci's talking very quickly... It's a little difficult to follow him... Ah, right... But suddenly, he says, lying there with a toxic IV in his arm, and less than a minute left to live, and a studio audience really looking forward to his demise, he's seen things in a new light, from a quote importantly fresh perspective unquote..."

"The plug, Esther. Pull it."

Esther looked at her monitor. Arnie was wiggling in bed, trying to raise himself into a sitting position, but the restraints were holding him back. His eyes were wide with fear, swivelling side to side, his nice hair tussled.

Except you could also see the first hit of morphine crashing down on him, the pharmaceutical fatness buttering his veins, the first sign of the daze-glaze entering his expression. Esther checked his vitals. What should have been hills and troughs appeared more like the jagged outlines of the Rockies against a breathtaking sunset.

Arnie was well into the ebony heart of a panic attack.

"Oh, my," said Esther... to herself more than to Bob or Anna. "He certainly has come a long way."

She imagined Harry lying there, in that exact same position, and wondered what she might have done if he'd changed *his* mind at the last minute... but, then again, that kind of behaviour just didn't belong to the man she'd been married to all those years... it just wasn't like him... except, then again, what if he had? What would she have done? And what if he in fact *did* change his mind, change it utterly, just as the morphine came on... only wasn't able to tell her, too given over to opiate dreams? What did that last conscious look he gave her really mean?

Esther didn't want to think about such ugly ideas. She thought instead about Harry's head in that canister in that warehouse off that narrow alley in Hong Kong... and listened, despite herself, to the studio audience modulate from distracted restlessness to increasing interest.

Here was something new, their murmurs seemed to say.

Here was something unexpected.

Anna Konda must have heard the same subtle adjustment in pitch and intensity, because she spoke again.

"Check out those ratings, Bob," she said.

An eyeblink's pause followed, then: "Holy cow. Will you look at that?"

Somebody up there laughed, though Esther couldn't be sure who.

"What a thing!"

"Geez!"

"Will ya look at that?"

"Okay, okay, hold the Flood, Esther," Bob shouted. "Hold the Flood!"

Esther reached over and punched up the ratings meter. The vivid red line against the tar-black background was turtling higher and higher. The viewers, who must have just put two and two together, couldn't wait to see what happened next.

"Roger, dear," Esther said.

She sighed and reached over to terminate the flow of the narcotic alkaloid, bring Arnie back from the edge of awareness.

As she did so, she gently broke the good news to him.

"Management has granted you a stay, dear," she said. "The morphine drip is off. I'm countering with adrenaline. You'll feel a little warm for a minute." She bit her lower lip. "Congratulations, dear."

Arnie stopped struggling as abruptly as he'd begun. His vitals evened out. A smile unfurled across his face. He lay quietly, looking up at the black pasta-dish of sound-equipment webbing over his head. For the first time all evening, he appeared honestly untroubled.

"We got 'em," Bob said.

"Damn straight we do," said Anna. "Fifteen seconds, and we just got ourselves the best hook money can't buy. George," she said to the announcer with the Cambridge accent, "get ready to feed 'em tomorrow's show... 'The contestant's changed his mind at the eleventh hour... will he change it back again within the next 24... is it better blah blah blah?' You know the drill."

"Roger," George said from his booth.

The studio audience ruptured into applause before George could complete his first sentence. This was exciting stuff. This was the stuff of live television.

As Esther watched, cosy and proud, the vivid red line on the ratings meter slowly eased into uncharted territory, a smart probe drifting beyond the solar system into the mysteries of deep space.

Esther closed her eyes and let out another breath. The ugly thoughts flecked away from her mind like paint chips from an old house. Calmness expanded outward from the centre of her being. Everything became steady. Everything became good. She reached her arms forward and stretched with satisfaction.

And then Bob up in the boardroom whooped with joy.

"Yeeeeee haaaaana!"

Esther jumped.

Her right hand leapt to the left and smacked into her insulated plastic Go-Redskins mug on the control panel next to her monitor.

The mug danced into air, top sealed against urinary spillage, and kicked down heavily on the pretty vacation-sky blue button that told the computer to release the Terminal Flood.

Before her frontal lobes could decode the report of what had just manifested, Esther registered the

milky soup dart into the transparent tube connecting the clear tank under Arnie's bed to his arm. The white stuff sped toward its target like a bullet-train riding a missile.

Reflexively, Esther slapped the EMERGENCY STOP icon with her mouse. But she knew point-three seconds after that Flood flashed from the starting gate it would cross the finish line.

Which was, the very instant she thought that thought, what occurred.

She'd never seen such a look of astonishment ambush someone's facial semiotics. Arnie heaved up in bed as if electrocuted, and he just hung there, suspended, straining against the straps that held him in place, for almost four seconds, a virtual infinity, eyes fixed on the lighter-than-air camera he knew led to Esther's monitor, Esther's heart.

Then he deflated as if the bones and organs had been sucked right out of him.

He collapsed in on himself. He turned into a crumpled sack of human byproducts.

And then Arnie was gone.

Everything else about the next one hundred and twenty seconds was flat and faded for Esther, would always remain flat and faded... the brief cessation of sound while the world received the incoming data, Bob's swallowed yelp, Anna's low growl, the audience's mercuric laughter and applause as if Arnie's sudden slapstick routine had been deliberately conceived and executed like an exploding cigar between St Oprah's lips, a whoopee cushion slipped beneath the Queen's tush... even the announcement from on high of Esther's immediate promotion from med-tech to corporate exec... everything, everything except those eyes.

Those eyes looked into her chest.

They peered into the room where Esther closeted certainty.

And Esther saw, and Esther would never forget, the revelation within them that blew open the door there and let certainty tumble out, bleary and confused, to rise, scan, and hurry away on its gimpy right leg until, two years later, the aneurysm near her left ventricle would burst like a fire-crackered rotten tomato and cut her off in mid-sentence as she sat on Anna Konda's left side in the boardroom on Awfully Big Adventure, proposing to subtract the "staged" part from the torture equation on Shock Circus, and bent over, suddenly clutching her heart like a bad lovelorn actor on a sappy soap opera, and squeeze out her apology, *Harry Harry Harry*, to the puzzled people watching to see what she might do next, who believed she was muttering *hairy hairy hairy*, a philosophical editorial on the nasty nature of one's last existential flash, sputter and wrench, but were wrong.

**Lance Olsen** is the author of the sf novels *Tonguing the Zeitgeist* (1994), favourably reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 87, and *Time Famine* (Permeable Press, September 1996). He lives in Deary, Idaho, and has written several other books, including a critical study of William Gibson's fiction (1992). The above is his first story for this magazine.

In the minutes before launch, Doctor Geoff Lighthill heard the whine of the elevator gantry leaning away from the booster stack, and the clatter of power and propellant umbilicals popping out of their sockets in the Blue Streaks' metal flanks.

The pressure cabin of the Prospero was an aluminium box the size of a small car. There was barely room, in this little cone, for the two of them – Lighthill and his commander, Roly Gough – lying side by side in their contoured couches, cocooned in their bulky white pressure suits.

The walls around Lighthill were coated with switches, circuit breakers and dials. In his months of training at Stevenage, he'd come to learn the meaning and function of every one of those switches. And he knew every step of the mission ahead of him. He felt as if he was a cog in some immense machine, that would work through its predestined sequence of steps, regardless of the spark of consciousness cradled inside his skull...

It was Friday, April 26th, 1974; today, Britain was launching its first astronauts to orbit.

And its last.

Flight director Josh Morris stood at his workstation, scanning the Operations Room.

Morris's controllers were working smoothly through their countdown procedures. There were 20 of them, all in ties and shirtsleeves. Their accents – cultured British, or crisp Australian from the de Havilland contractors who had built the launch facilities – permeated this stuffy box, here in the middle of the Australian desert.

Compared to the jargon-ridden verbal pyrotechnics that typified US launch procedures, this was typically British, he thought.

Big TV monitors showed the public feeds. The BBC coverage was reaching its climax; in a lashed-up studio elsewhere in the Woomera complex, James Burke, Patrick Moore, Arthur C Clarke and Joe Muldoon, the Apollo Moonwalker, were staring intently at monitors. The Brits looked a little absurd in their light tropical-style suits. Another live feed showed a small band of Aboriginal protesters, at the security gate of the complex. The military police faced the protesters now, a calm, solid line; the Aborigines weren't a problem for today, and anyhow, they would get their land back once Woomera was dismantled, after this mission.

Right now, Josh Morris found it hard to care about the plight of Aborigines.

Restless, he looked out, over the heads of his controllers, through the big picture window at the side of the Operations Room.

Launch Complex 6D stood on an escarpment overlooking a dry lake, all of three miles away, isolated

save for the gleaming shells of lox tanks. The Woomera facilities were still crude compared to Canaveral, where he'd trained with the Americans for this mission; the launch stand was not much more than a metal platform, with a single gaunt gantry rising alongside the booster itself.

The Black Prince III, exposed, looked like a complex toy set against the huge tan expanse of the desert.

The Blue Streak boosters were five squat, silvery cylinders, four of them strapped together around a stretched core stage; he could see the flaring nozzles of each booster's twin Rolls Royce RZ-2 rocket engines, and the shine of ice coating the lox tanks. The boosters' bright, striped paintwork was vivid. Above the lower stages rose the Black Knight IV – the squat, kerosene-and-peroxide powered upper stage – and then the cylinder-cone shape of Prospero itself, with the stubby launch escape tower above that.

Around the launch stand stretched the red-brown surface of the South Australian desert. The gibber stone – sun-baked earth covered in sharp, slate-like rocks – was flat, brown, lifeless save for salt bushes and clumps of dark green, spiny grass. It was, Morris thought, like a slab of the surface of Venus, transposed beneath the huge blue sky of Earth.

Lox vapour swirled around the Blue Streaks, dispersing quickly.

In a few weeks, when the flight was done, his assignment here would be over. He was on sabbatical from the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough; he would have to pack up and go home, leaving behind all this – the pure light, the elemental landscape, the electric blue sky – for the stultifying green of Hampshire.

The last time he'd gone home had been the middle of winter. Britain had been on a three-day week, because of striking miners; the whole country seemed huddled, cramped and cold.

Going back would be claustrophobic, hard to take. But Britain wasn't going anywhere else in space; there was nothing else for him to do.

The countdown, orderly and controlled, reached its final minute.

In 1945, Roly Gough had been 19 years old. He had missed out on the war, because he was born too late.

He had built up a career as a test pilot, but that had almost been scuppered in 1964 when he had worked as the lead pilot on the TSR-2, which got itself cancelled by Harold Wilson.

Space had beckoned. But as Britain's aerospace programme had limped through the 1960s, suffering endless cuts and delays, it had started to look to Gough as if he had been born too bloody early.

But now, unlikely as it seemed, here he was, with this one chance to reach orbit. And as far as Gough

# PROSPERO

was concerned, as soon as the blue touch paper had been lit on this firework under him, nothing was going to stand in his way.

The clock reached ten, nine, eight...

Wing Commander Roly Gough closed his eyes.

Four, three.

Morris felt his heart thump, hard.

Two seconds before launch, eight main engines ignited. There was a flare of brilliant white light. Smoke, white but tinged with red Australian dust, billowed out to left and right of the booster stack, blasting out into a ravine towards the Lake Hart Saltbed. In this desert, there could be no fancy water-cooling system of the type employed at Kennedy; instead, the flame buckets were lined with big fire-bricks, bolted down beneath that massive blast.

So it had begun.

At least, Morris thought with a surge of savage anger, I got this far. At least they can't take this away.

Today, there would be fire across the desert. And Morris would control it.

The count reached zero.

When the hold-down bolts exploded, Lighthill felt the ship jerk under him. At first there was vibration but no acceleration; he knew that the rocket had left the ground and was in momentary stasis, burning kerosene and peroxide, balanced on its thrust.

Already, he had left Earth.

It's happening, Lighthill thought, exultant. The Yanks have been to the Moon and back, and now they're heading for Mars. But so what? Right here, right now, Britain is finally putting men into space.

And I'm one of them.

He could hear the Operations Room speaking to them, but could make out no words.

Now the rockets' roar engulfed him. Acceleration settled on his chest, mounting rapidly.

He felt the booster pitch over as it climbed. Prospero One was arcing slowly over to the north-east, tilting into the trajectory for its 53-degree orbit. Inclined enough to permit the all-important Sunday supplement pictures of Britain from space...

He tried to stop analysing. He wanted simply to exist, to be in the mouth of this extraordinary moment, this huge outpouring of energy.

The cabin shook around him, loose equipment rattling.

T plus a hundred and forty seconds. Core ignition, called Woomera; there was another tremor as the core Blue Streak shuddered into life, and the acceleration piled higher.

Then came a clatter of explosive bolts, a dip in the

acceleration. Staging: the four strap-on liquid rocket boosters had been discarded.

Roly Gough was already more than 30 miles high, already in space.

Now the main core of the Black Prince burned under him, and as the mass of the ship decreased the acceleration built up. The acceleration felt savage; the Blue Streak heart of the launcher had, after all, been designed as an ICBM, not as a man-rated booster, and even the weight of its payload seemed barely to hold it back.

The cabin started to rattle, juddering back and forth. Some minor flaw in the core stage was feeding in fuel or oxidiser incorrectly; the booster was chugging and popping.

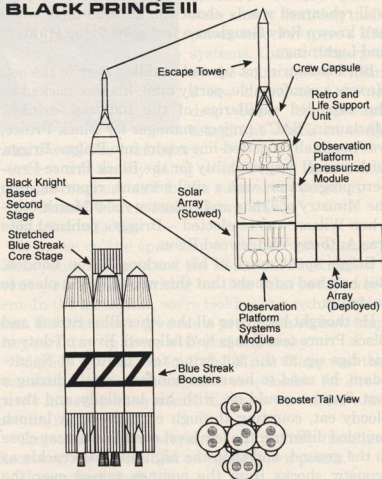
Testing fighters, he had pulled more G than this before – and that had been sitting up, not lying in a contoured couch. But that had been for a few seconds, not minutes on end.

Lighthill, next to him, was muttering: "Bloody hell, bloody hell, bloody hell..."

The chugging smoothed away, leaving a steady pressure on his chest.

Then came a loud bang, right outside the cabin's hull, as the escape tower streaked away, hauling the protective shroud with it. The blue light of Earth flooded the cabin. He could see fragments of ice, shaken free of the hull of the booster; they glittered briefly.

## PROSPERO/ BLACK PRINCE III



*Stephen Baxter &  
Simon Bradshaw*

# ONE

The pressure mounted still further as the core Blue Streak burned the last of its propellant. Then there was a jerk forward, a sudden surge of weightlessness; Gough was hurled forward against his restraints. He heard rattles as the main booster core was discarded, and the clatter of the Siskins, the solid propellant separation rockets, which kicked the final apogee stage forward, settling the propellants in their tanks.

At last he felt the crisp surge of the apogee stage's six Gamma 304s, cutting in for the final and relatively gentle push into orbit. He was thrust back into his seat. The acceleration was light and smooth: good Hawker Siddeley engineering, he thought.

Through the small triangle of tough silica glass before him, he could see the skin of Earth, spread out like a glowing carpet: there was the wrinkled, unmissable profile of New Guinea, and the sea in the Gulf of Carpentaria was as bright as a tropical sky.

Then, right on cue, the apogee stage cut out.

"Bugger," whispered Roly Gough.

Guy Briggs followed the launch on TV, in Bill Maclaurin's office at Stevenage.

In the heart of the screen, blurred and excessively magnified, the Black Prince was finally lost against the glare of cobalt-blue Aussie sky. The BBC cut away to their Woomera studio, where Burke, Moore and Clarke were gushing excitedly. They seemed to be talking an awful lot about the British Interplanetary Society. Raymond Baxter joined them now, intoning well-rehearsed words about the antique days when he'd known Roly Gough as a test pilot flying Hunters and Lightnings.

Bill Maclaurin got up and waddled over to the set. He was a comfortable, portly man, his face pocked by the exploded capillaries of the habitual drinker. Maclaurin, BAC's project manager for Black Prince, was nominally a dotted-line report into Briggs; Briggs, with overall responsibility for the Black Prince-Prospero programme, was a civil servant, reporting into the Ministry of Trade and Industry. As of March 6th - when Wilson was re-elected - Briggs's political boss was Anthony Wedgewood Benn.

Briggs spent much of his working life in London. But he'd had no doubt that this was the right place to be, today.

He thought back over all the other Blue Streak and Black Prince test firings he'd followed. Even off duty in his digs up at the hot-firing test facility at Spadeadam, he used to hear the windows rattle during a test fire; he would sit with his landlady and their bloody cat, counting through each firing. A launch sounded different: the low level rumble and roar close to the ground, and then the high-altitude crackle as acoustic shocks from the engines rained over the green Northumberland moor...

Maclaurin switched to ITV, but when the smug face of David Frost peered out at him he turned the set off. He opened a steel filing cabinet and pulled out two chipped tumblers and a half-empty bottle of Glenlivet; he poured two healthy measures.

Briggs took the drink. "Here's to you, Bill, you old bugger." He rolled the clear, sharp liquid over his tongue.

"End of an era, Guy," Maclaurin said. "Two Brits in orbit, our first astronauts. But it's an end of an era all the same. It's TSR-2 all over again. Harold bloody Wilson. Gives in to the miners on day one, shuts down the space programme on day two." Maclaurin knocked back his drink, and poured himself another.

Briggs declined.

They took their glasses to the window-wall of Maclaurin's office. From here they looked down over the big, brightly-lit plant at the heart of BAC Space Division's Stevenage facility, where the Blue Streak tank bay and airframe structures were manufactured. The plant was now deserted, the jibs and presses and power tools idle under the pitched roof's skylights. The half-finished rocket structures, lying on their sides in their handling frames, looked, Briggs mused, like the corpses of dinosaurs laid out in some museum.

"But you have to look at the bigger picture," Briggs said. "You wouldn't believe the pressure the Americans have brought on us. They just won't accept the competition for their own launch capabilities."

"Pressure, sure. They've bought us off, with a promise for a berth for one of our boys on Skylab A, or the Moonlab. I tell you this, though. They sure won't be taking us to Mars with them... But it's the timing, Guy. The bloody timing that hits you, right in the gut."

Briggs felt vaguely ashamed. "I'm sorry, Bill."

Maclaurin's face worked. "At least we got this far. And we had some bloody good times, didn't we?" He raised his glass to the deserted plant.

Lighthill unlatched his helmet and cautiously raised it over his head. He smelled the fresher air of the cabin, heard the busy hum of the environmental systems' pumps and fans.

He pulled back his hands and watched the helmet tumble slowly, weightless, in the little space before his chest.

My God, he thought. My God.

Roly Gough already had his helmet off. His head, protruding from the neck of the pressure suit, was like a steel cylinder, with its grizzled crewcut and bull neck. "Feeling okay?"

Lighthill turned his head with deliberate slowness. "Better than I expected." Avoid sudden head movements, the NASA astronauts had advised; so far it seemed to be working, although the drug patch on his neck must be helping.

Gough was already working through his flight plan's list of tasks and checks.

Lighthill fumbled in his shin pocket and extracted his own thick ringbound checklist, then set to work with his assigned litany of switch-pushing and dial-reading.

There was no real sense of speed. He was in silence, now, apart from the humming of the cabin's instruments, the gruff voice of Gough, the rustle of paper, the hissing crackle of the capcom's voice.

It was hard to concentrate.

Earthlight slid across his lap and shimmered from the banks of switches, as if the cabin was some underwater jewelled cave.



If he looked ahead he could see the planet's curve, a blue-white arc framed by black space. And there was a slice of pale blue seascape, with an island an irregular patch of grey and brown in the middle of it, and clouds scattered over the top, lightly, like icing sugar.

He was an Englishman, in orbit, aboard a British-built, British-launched spacecraft. He felt a surge of patriotic pride, unexpected and embarrassing.

Gough folded away his plan. "Looks okay down my end. And yours?"

Lighthill focused, and hurried through the rest of his list.

His flight plan listed the steps needed to bring air, light and power to the Observation Module, the short cylinder sandwiched between the Entry Module and the Propulsion Module. Lighthill was an atmospheric scientist on sabbatical from the Met Office at Bracknell. Once through the hatch in the heatshield below them, he would be calling the shots for the next two weeks, running the cameras, radars and telescopes that were the *raison d'être* of the mission.

He got to the point where the twin solar cell panels should be unfolded from the flanks of the Observation Module.

"... Minus Y Array - deployment confirmed. Plus Y Array -"

The deploy light stayed red.

He stopped.

Gough looked across sharply.

From the ground telemetry it looked, immediately, as if the plus Y solar array had got stuck.

At the first hint of a problem, all of Josh Morris's euphoria at achieving orbit evaporated. He listened anxiously to the dialogue between Lighthill, in orbit, and the controllers here at Woomera.

"The positive Y array deploy switch's backlighting is still red," Lighthill was saying.

"Understood." The capcom was Bob Nash, an astronaut trainee who had served as backup to Lighthill. "Prospero, Woomera. What about the negative Y switch?"

"Gone to green."

"Copied, Prospero."

"Woomera, Prospero. I don't think we can have a telemetry problem here. Looks like a genuine gremlin on the starboard array."

Morris knew Lighthill was probably correct. He checked the fat, bound flight plan on the desk before him, looking for options. "Capcom, tell him to recycle."

Lighthill would push the button again, and wait for the red glow to change to green.

"Bugger," Gough called softly.

No green light.

"You can't say 'bugger' on the BBC, Roly," Nash said weakly.

"Tell them to start contingency OPA3C, capcom," Morris said. That was the sub-procedure for diagnosing the non-deployment of an array.

"... Josh, this is Electronics." The electronics con-

troller was a subcontractor from Marconi.

"Go ahead."

"They're working through OPA3C. I'm seeing a nice 60 volts off the neg array, but absolutely nothing off the positive. Microswitches indicate that the array is unlatched, but not at full extension. I'd say that it's jammed in the stowed condition. In fact we ought to get them to cut the array deployment motor before it burns out."

"Did you get that, capcom?"

"Yes, Josh. I'll tell them."

Electronics said, "Josh, the best we can do is to look at the telemetry from the drive motor and see if anything sticks out as the cause."

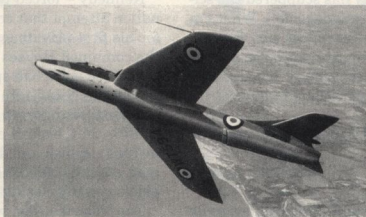
"And how long will that take?"

Morris could see Electronics shrug his broad, fat-laden shoulders.

The answer didn't really matter, Morris knew.

The Prospero was a cut-price spacecraft, capable of sustaining two crew in orbit for a fortnight. The entry capsule, which the crew were riding to orbit, looked a little like the Americans' Gemini - which had first flown nine years before - but it was much cruder, designed only to sustain its crew for a few hours before they transferred to the compact Observation Module beneath it.

Right now, 30 feet behind Lighthill and Gough, the Propulsion Module's battery packs were slowly draining their power into Prospero's life systems. Unless recharged by the solar arrays within a few hours, they would drop below the critical margin at which an early



return would be mandatory.

And it was surely going to take more than a few hours to diagnose and fix the solar array problem.

"... Damn," Morris said. "Damn, damn."

He tried to focus.

He spoke on the open loop to all his controllers. "I think you all understand the situation. Electronics, I want you to keep working on that solar array problem. In the meantime, we're looking at a reduced mission. Environment, give me a prediction on how long they can stay up there with just one array."

"Already working on it, Josh." Mitch Clapp was the Australian spacecraft engineer responsible for Prospero's life-support systems; his voice was calm, competent, reassuring.

"Trajectory, start working on reentry profiles. Recovery, work with him on splashdown points."

"Understood, Josh."

"Flight Activities, start pulling together the reentry checklist. And compile some kind of schedule for what we can achieve before we have to bring them down. Medical tests, observation from the cabin... We ought to get every ounce of value out of this mission while we can."

"Roger."

"We still have a job to do; we still have two men in

orbit. Capcom, inform the crew."

With that, Morris turned off the loop. He picked up the red phone that would connect him to Stevenage, and Guy Briggs.

The state of the cabin showed they were getting a little more adapted to zero G, Lighthill thought. The spare spaces on the walls were peppered, already, with pens and pads and checklists and other small bits of kit, stuck there by Velcro.

In this dreamlike environment, it was somehow hard to become agitated by the problems: to imagine the frantic activity at Woomera, the Clarke-relayed phone calls buzzing back and forth to England.

Roly Gough wasn't so relaxed, though. He was taking a leak, which involved jamming a condom-shaped urine collector up against his crotch. "Four hours. Four bloody hours for a stuck array to magically fix itself, otherwise we're in line for a short trip home. What a waste. What a bloody, bugging waste."

"Roly -"

"What?"

Lighthill hesitated. "Take it easy. We've achieved orbit, and the chances are we're going to make it home. Operationally the mission's already been a success. This snafu with the array has scuppered the science experiments, not the operational side... What I'm saying is that it's my mission that's lost, not yours."

"And you're happy with that, are you? You're content that we should draw a few cc's of blood out of each other's arses, and fall down home like two grinning idiots?"

"What choice do we have? We don't have our solar array."

"No. *But we could fix it.* No array problem, no mission limit."

Suddenly the cabin seemed claustrophobically small. "Are you talking about going outside? You can't be serious. This isn't a bloody Lightning. What are you going to do, go out there and kick the array?"

"That might be all it needs."

Lighthill felt irritation rise, mingled with fear. "For God's sake, we haven't rehearsed this. What happened to the mission rules?"

Gough pointed an accusatory finger at Lighthill. "Look, I'm not going to blow my one mission without a fight. I know the score. You'll be on Skylab A within a couple of years anyhow -"

"Damn right." As far as Lighthill was concerned, that promise for the future was another compelling reason not to risk his neck, now.

But, he knew, the invitation didn't extend to fly-boys like Roly.

"That's not the point," he said.

"Then what is?"

A shaft of blue Earthlight swung through the cabin, illuminating the floating pages of Lighthill's checklist. He thought of Gough going out there, into that silent, blue-lit infinity.

"Roly -"

"What, damn it?"

"You're too old."

Gough glowered at him, for long seconds. Then he

said, "I'm putting it to Woomera. If I can sway them, I'm going out."

Blue Streak's development had begun in the mid-1950s, as an independent ICBM force. It was a different age, back then, Briggs thought.

After the war, Britain was poor. But nevertheless it had gone ahead with ambitious programmes of development in aircraft, nuclear weapons, space rockets: the symbols of a power on the world stage.

But there was a problem.

Blue Streak was a liquid propellant rocket. It took 30 minutes to prepare for flight - much longer than the four minutes' warning available if Soviet ICBMs were ever fired in anger.

So, in 1960, Blue Streak was cancelled as the national deterrent, and the Government started buying in the submarine-launched Polaris from the Americans. And pressure started to build up from the Europeans to join in a joint advanced booster development, perhaps based on Blue Streaks with French and German upper stages.

Flying rockets by committee.

But then, in 1964, everything had changed, when former President Kennedy came to visit.

Kennedy - forced to retire after the failed assassination attempt that crippled him - had chosen Britain for his first private overseas visit. He had addressed the combined Houses of Parliament, and his clipped, weakened voice had spoken of brotherhood and pride: of nations rising into space, from all over the globe, like birds rising from the branches of a tree...

After that, even the incoming Labour Government in 1964 - which had dismantled the TSR-2 strike aircraft amid its cull of aerospace projects - had not been able to justify closing down Blue Streak.

The Polaris order was cancelled. The booster programme was expanded, and Blue Streak was reinstated as the national deterrent. Now there were a lot of boosters available for a peripheral space programme to play with.

And so Britain placed a satellite in orbit by the end of 1964.

Through the rest of the decade momentum had continued to build, towards - it seemed inevitably - an independent manned programme...

Sometimes Briggs thought he had spent too long in Whitehall. He knew the incoming Labour politicians thought all this space stuff was a silly fantasy, selfishly pursued by technocratic types like Bill Maclaurin, with their dreams of beautiful machines. Britain had to learn to live within its means, they said. The Labour government thought there was no realistic choice but to shut the programme down.

But the technocrats said the Government had no conception of the value of technology, and technologists.

Briggs was no longer sure who was right.

In any event, space would soon be gone, and the government could get on with its main job, which was to anaesthetize the nation into accepting its own long term decline...

And now, he had to think about Roly Gough.

"I wish I hadn't had that damn whisky," he said.

"What do you think?" Maclaurin asked.

"I don't know," he said irritably. "I don't know what I think, Bill. Morris is recommending against the EVA. Of course."

"Well, Roly put in a fair bit of water tank time at Houston —"

"He's a rookie astronaut, Bill. He's no Moonwalker."

Maclaurin grunted. "No," he said, his Edinburgh burr soft. "He is Wing Commander Roly Gough, AFC."

"An AFC preparing for a gung-ho stunt. Roly's a headstrong fool. This is typical of him."

Another phone rang on Maclaurin's desk; he picked it up and listened. He replaced the set. "That was Hatfield. The inspectors have arrived." The

inspectors, from Briggs's own department, were being sent in

to ensure the shut-down of the project. "They're

burning the blueprints, Guy," Maclaurin said.

He laughed harshly.

"The bloody timing. It's TSR-2 all over again. A blueprint bonfire in the middle of the car park."

We can't finish like this, Briggs thought.

He picked up the phone, to speak to Josh Morris at Woomera.

Lighthill locked his helmet into place, snapping closed the ring at his neck. His own pulse sounded noisily in his ears.

Because the Entry Module had no airlock, Lighthill was going to have to sit in vacuum in the opened cabin.

Gough opened a covered switch marked DEPRESS, and turned it.

There was a hiss of air, which quickly died. The busy mechanical sounds of the cabin's systems disappeared, leaving Lighthill with only the scratch of his own breathing, the soft rust of oxygen across his face. He felt the suit fabric stiffening around him. When he lifted an arm, he could feel tough resistance from the inflated suit.

This EVA, he realized anew, would be no cakewalk, even for a young, fit, trained astronaut.

Gough unbuckled his restraints. He pulled himself awkwardly to the main hatch and turned the heavy locking handle. Lighthill thought he could hear the gasping escape of the last few millibars of oxygen.

The hatch swung back, and hard-edged Earthlight flooded the cabin.

Gough grunted. He hung for a few seconds, half in and half out, the light eclipsed by his bulk. Then his legs drifted away from the hatch, and his wrist-thick umbilical twisted out into space.

The wrinkled surface of Earth's world-ocean, strewn with the shadows of scattered clouds, slid past the round hatchway, its light flooding the cabin and glimmering from Lighthill's faceplate.

For Roly Gough, it was like a leap into the future.

He drifted 50 feet, to the limit of his gold-coloured

beta-cloth tether. He found he could somersault, and float lazily on his back. It was so bright, with the diffuse glow of Earth enveloping him, that he could see no stars; the sky looked utterly black, far darker than even the deep blue of the stratosphere he'd seen when pushing Lightnings to the top of arcing parabolic climbs.

Earth was extraordinarily beautiful. The detail was astonishing, even with his ageing eyes, better than from an aircraft at 40,000 feet: he could see the outlines of cities, roads, grey against the brown-green land; over sea, he could see the wakes of ships.

His suit was a warm, comfortable bubble around him. The sense of space, of openness, was startling.

When he tugged the tether, he drifted easily towards the fusion-welded

titanium hull of the re-entry capsule; he could see into

the cosy pit of the cabin,

Lighthill sitting there watching him, snapping

photographs with a handheld Pentax.

The spacecraft looked like a glittering model,

brilliantly illuminated. The

Union Flags on its side were sharp and clear. For a second his pride

stirred, and he remembered why he'd come out here. "Bloody marvellous," Roly Gough said.

"I believe you, Roly."

"All right. Let's go see that bally solar array."

There were tether rings fixed to short restraints on his suit. Now he began to work towards the stuck array, using his rings to negotiate, one by one, tether points on the hull.

With his gloved hands he tried to grip at the sleek surface of the Observation Module's hull, but in the absence of rails or rungs, his hands slipped away. And if he pushed too hard, he just floated away from the hull.

Gough could hear his own breathing, laboured already. "Strange world out here, Geoff. I feel like Bambi on the bloody frozen pond."

"Take a rest."

"The Americans weren't kidding — everything is about three times as hard as it feels it should be..."

Fog was collecting inside his helmet visor, and freezing there; he must be overworking the cabin supply, which was straining to pump oxygen through the umbilical to his suit, and scrub out the moisture from his body. It was bizarre: he was too hot, yet almost blinded by frost.

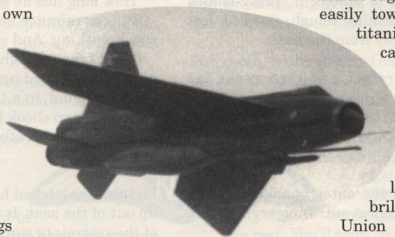
Doggedly, he worked his way down the stack, resting at intervals, as long as he needed to clear his faceplate.

At last he reached the base of the stuck solar array. It looked like a moth's wing, folded against the side of the Propulsion Module, its silvery solar cells shimmering. He tethered himself once more.

"I'm looking at the array now. It looks like the aft restraint tether hasn't cut — the pyro guillotine can't have fired. Motor will have tripped out under the strain. So if I can free it the whole thing should deploy."

"All right, Roly."

He unsheathed a knife from the toolkit at his belt,



braced himself over the stowed array, and began to saw through the thin aluminium tether.

Soon his visor was fogged up once more. No matter, it was sufficient now that he could feel the tether. "It's coming... a few more seconds and I'll be through. Geoff, are you standing by to deploy this bugger?"

"Yes. Are you going to be clear?"

"Even if it clouts me I'm tethered."

"Roly." It was the capcom. "Are you all right? We're reading your heartbeat at a hundred and eighty."

"I'm fine," he growled. "Just a little fogged, that's all."

"Roly, you must -"

Suddenly the strap parted.

The solar array began to unfold, a spring-loaded wing, heading straight for him. Gough, startled, lost his grip, and tumbled away from the hull.

Lighthill heard Gough cry out, and then swear, his voice a throaty rasp.

He began to fumble with his harness. "Roly? What's happening?"

"Stop the deploy."

"What?"

"My tether's caught in the outer panel hinge. It's taking me with it as it comes out. Buggery... Geoff, stop the deploy."

Lighthill punched the cut-off circuit breaker on the panel before him.

More laboured breathing. "Now I really am fogged up. I'm coming back as soon as I've freed the umbilical."

"Hang on - are you sure -"

The Master Caution alarm went off. Half a dozen red lights lit up on the environment control system panel before Lighthill.

"... My mouth's dry," Gough was saying on the air-to-ground loop. "This bloody oxygen..."

"Josh, this is Environment. He has a leak. I'm seeing no oh-two pressure. And it looks like he's lost coolant."

The capcom said, "Roly, this is Woomera. Tell me what you see. Can you see a leak?"

"Ah - it looks like I'm in a cloud of something. Hard to tell what's out there and what's fog on my visor..."

Morris felt paralysed. It was as if the mission were dissolving around him, as if there was nothing he could do or say to stop the disintegration.

"... He should go onto reserve," Clapp said.

"Say again?"

"Put him on reserve, Josh."

I should have thought of that. And so should Roly. "Capcom -"

"Roly, switch to reserve."

"On to reserve. Yes. On to reserve."

Gough would switch to the small personal oxygen supply in his chest pack. Now, Morris thought, all he had to do was free himself and get back to the Entry Module before his oh-two gave out...

"My umbilical's still caught on the array," Gough said. His voice sounded calmer to Lighthill. "I'm going to unplug it - it's no damn use now."

Lighthill tried to think it through. "Roly - if you unplug you'll lose your comms. And you'll have no tether." Christ, he thought. He won't make it.

Lighthill took a deep breath. "I'm coming out to get you. We can tie ourselves together and share my umbilical."

"Stay put. You've got scarcely any EVA training... if you went pear-shaped you'd just put us both at risk. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Roly, wait. I -"

There was a click on the intercom, followed by a hiss of static.

"I've lost Roly. I say again, I see no telemetry from Roly." Morris's heart lurched at Clapp's words.

He's done it; he's unplugged the umbilical.

"How long has he got on suit air?"

"Fifteen minutes nominal. More like ten the way he was breathing. And remember, he's lost cooling."

It had taken Gough half an hour to get to the array, and he had fogged up then, even with suit cooling. To get back, blind, in a third of that...

Mitch Clapp shook his head. "It's not feasible, Josh."

Morris drew breath. There was nothing left for him to say.

Lighthill unlatched his harness, and let himself drift up out of the seat. It was the first time he'd been out of the restraints since reaching orbit, and, for a brief second - in spite of everything - he felt an extraordinary exhilaration.

He checked his own umbilical attachment, and rested his feet on Gough's seat. He stood up awkwardly, his head protruding from the hatch.

Earth hung above his head, bulging and pregnant. Prospero was crossing the equator. There were storm clouds above him, thunderheads which piled up on top of each other like solid things, cliffs and ravines of cloud miles deep, as if reaching down towards him. He had none of the sense of the fragility of the planet which Apollo astronauts had reported; Earth seemed huge to him, overwhelming, crushing.

He looked back along the length of Prospero One. His view was obscured by the conical geometry of the Entry Module, but he could see, foreshortened, the cylindrical flanks of the Observation and Propulsion Modules. The port solar array, fully deployed, was a rectangle coated with big black photovoltaic cells. The starboard array was partly deployed, still folded like a concertina.

Gough was about 20 feet away, half way along the starboard array. He was floating there, his oversuit grey-white in the Earthlight; he looked like a human-shaped balloon. He was surrounded by a halo of ice crystals from the ruptured coolant line. He was pulling himself hand-over-hand along his disconnected umbilical, which Lighthill could see was stretched almost taut from the hatch to where it had snagged on one of the starboard array hinge points.

He was struggling, Lighthill saw. Gough's grip seemed weak, and his legs flailed as he moved, awkward and useless; every few seconds he was forced to rest, and Lighthill imagined he could hear his strained breathing.

Lighthill waited, as Gough approached.

Gough's painful journey across space - here at the climax of this flawed, shut-down programme - was

magnificent, Lighthill realized suddenly. As epic and futile as Captain Scott slogging to the South Pole. Quintessentially British –

Suddenly Roly's umbilical came free of the starboard array.

The cable retracted towards the hatch, like elastic, hauling Gough with it.

Unbalanced, Gough tumbled over. Just before hitting the spacecraft hull, he put his hands out, evidently to break the impact.

He let go of the umbilical.

Gough caromed off the hull and bounced away, tumbling, his limbs flailing weakly. He grabbed for the drifting umbilical, but missed it.

Lighthill prepared himself to leap after Gough, but already the distance was further than his own umbilical would stretch.

In seconds Gough was floating out of Prospero's shadow. His suit glowed in the sudden sunlight as he struggled, grasping at vacuum.

Lighthill was immersed in silence, save only for his own breathing.

Briggs put down the phone.

Maclairin stood at the window of his office, overlooking the Blue Streak manufacturing area. Briggs came to stand behind him.

Teams of Ministry inspectors were moving onto the shop floor, Briggs saw, lugging heavy oxy-acetylene cutting gear.

Maclairin said, "You know how I started in this business? I worked for the RAE, down in Farnborough. This was just after the war. And my job was to scour the countryside, and bomb craters in London, for bits of V-2s. All that beautifully tooled guidance gear Jerry was so bloody smart at, stuff we couldn't match. You have to hand it to the Germans. It was like studying artefacts from the future. Yes, that's it; for us, it was the bloody future." He took another slug of his whisky. "But now it's the past, for you and me, eh, Guy? Makes you wonder who won the bloody war," he growled.

"The Americans," Briggs said bleakly. "The Americans won the war. And we were the prize."

An oxy-acetylene torch flared brightly on the floor below. Its operator lifted it, and raised it to the helpless flank of a Blue Streak airframe.

Josh Morris had never known the Operations Room so quiet.

The TV feed was showing the continuing Aborigine demonstration outside the security perimeter. The Abos were standing silently under a PA speaker; even they, it seemed, were transfixed by the news from orbit. Gough Whitlam, the Prime Minister, was at the fence, making some kind of comment. The white settlers in Australia used to give the Aborigines infected blankets, Morris had heard, a policy of extermination disguised as aid. The Aborigines had suffered more than anyone else following the British nuclear tests at Maralinga. And now here where the Brits, Morris thought, firing off grandiose space rockets from the middle of the old peoples' ancestral grounds. Fizzers

across the gibbers, the Aussies called it.

In another thousand years, he supposed, nothing would remain of Woomera: the launch complexes, the railtrack, the barracks-like housing. It would be as if it never existed. But the Aborigines would endure, as they had already for millennia.

I shouldn't have listened to Briggs, he thought. I knew this damn manoeuvre was too risky. I told him.

I should have had the guts not to refer this upwards. One by one, the controllers' voices, subdued, came back on the loops.

Just another couple of hours, Morris thought. That's all. Then I can walk away from this, return to England, pull the decaying green of Hampshire over my head like a blanket, and hide away for the rest of my life.

The cabin, without Roly Gough, seemed huge; Lighthill covered in his seat.

There was a hiss, a rattly thrust which pushed him into his couch. The big Waxwing retrorocket cluster on the base of the Propulsion Module was working.

"Retrosfire," he whispered.

"We see it, Geoff." The capcom's voice was strong. "We'll do

the rest. You'll soon be home."

Beyond his window, Earth slid away from him.

Now the thrust sighed to silence, and he had a couple of minutes more of zero gravity. There was a muffled rattle, all around the base of the cabin. That would be the ring of pyrotechnic bolts at the base of the conical Entry Module, firing under command from Woomera, casting off the Observation and Propulsion Modules. All that gleaming equipment he'd not been able, in the end, to reach.

There was something rising above the Earth's atmosphere: golden-brown, serene. It was the Moon, slap in the middle of his window.

Now there was a haze beyond his window, a soft, pink glow, like a sunrise. The glow was ionized gas, atoms from the top layer of Earth's atmosphere, broken apart by their impact with Prospero's heatshield. The attitude thrusters continued to fire, their glow reflecting from the thin atmosphere around him.

He thought of Roly Gough, drifting away, his RAF wings bright on his oversuit, brilliant white in the sunlight. The essence of Britain: magnificent, defiant, absurd.

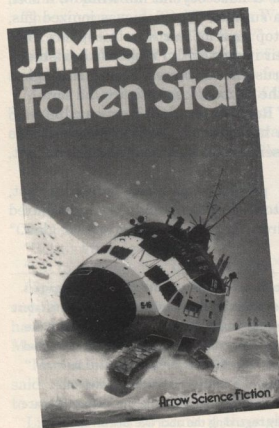
Suddenly the pressure mounted, climbing fast, crushing him into the couch. A cold grey light glared into the cabin, drowning out the instruments' glow.



**Stephen Baxter** needs no introduction to our regular readers. The above story is set against the general background of his latest novel, due out imminently from HarperCollins – trailed in these pages as *Ares*, but now, after a last-minute title-change, renamed *Voyage*. Steve's collaborator, **Simon Bradshaw**, was born in 1968 and lives in Hampshire, where he works in satellite communications. He has a strong interest in the history of space exploration, especially regarding the abortive British space programme, and has been active in fandom – notably at "Inter-section," the World SF Convention held in Glasgow in 1995.

# Life on Mars?

Paul J. McAuley



To the sf community, it does not seem such a surprise, for we have been speculating about it for years. We have populated the Red Planet with barbarian princesses and monsters, with fey ghosts or with fire balloons, with vast, unsympathetic intelligences, or with unfallen creatures in perfect communion with God. And since the 1976 Viking landings and the subsequent production of detailed maps by the US Geological Survey we know more about the surface of Mars than the abyssal plains of the Earth's oceans. We see it clearly as a real place, a place utterly distinct from anything on Earth, with huge volcanoes and vast chasms and high, cratered plains, and the most likely venue for the next stage of human endeavour in space. In response to this there have been a slew of novels set on Mars in the past six years: Terry Bisson's *Voyage to the Red Planet*; Ben Bova's *Mars*; Allen Steele's *Labyrinth of Night*; Jack Williamson's *Beachhead*; my own *Red Dust*. *Blue Mars*, the final volume of Kim Stanley Robinson's epic future history trilogy, has just been published, as has Stephen Baxter's *Voyage*, an alternate history in which Project Apollo yielded smoothly to Project Ares.

There have even been fictions about fossilized ecologies, including Varley's "In the Hall of the Martian Kings" and Greg Bear's *Moving Mars*, which like sleeping fairy-tale princesses could be awakened with a kiss – or at least, by a drop of water.

The real thing is more prosaic, and more profound: a scattering of tiny carbonate specks with associated smears of organic material deep inside a very old rock, with what might be the fossilized remains of incredibly tiny bacteria. We should remember that NASA is lobbying congress for more funds to plan into the next decade. We should also remember that there have been tremendous scientific hypes which quickly faded away. Remember cold fusion? Or Q-rays? Nevertheless, this is a very careful multidisciplinary study which, if confirmed, is the most exciting and most important scientific discovery of the century.

For if it is true, it means that Earth is not the only place where life arose.

If it is true, it means that the Galaxy – the Universe – may be blooming and buzzing with life.

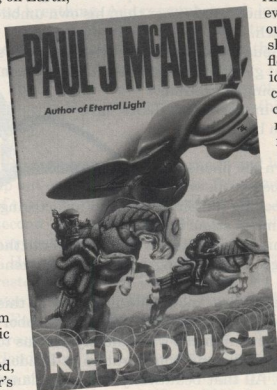
The story begins with a small rock.

The meteorite, designated ALH84001, is a rare type (only 12 have been found) identified as being from Mars by the extremely strong correlation of the isotopic composition of gases trapped in tiny inclusions with that of the Martian atmosphere sampled by the Viking Landers. Meteorites fall on all parts of Earth, but because they look like ordinary rocks they are difficult to identify. In

Antarctica, however, they stand out on the ice sheet, and slow-flowing glacial ice also acts as a conveyor belt, concentrating meteorites in regions where the flow is obstructed by hills, or where evaporation rapidly removes the ice. ALH84001 was found in one such region – it was the first meteorite to be collected in Antarctica in 1984.

Before it was collected, it led an eventful existence. It was formed 4.5 billion years ago, when the planets were condensing from the proto-planetary disc. 3.5 billion years ago, the inner planets, including Mars, were subjected to an intense bombardment, and minute flaws were opened in the matrix of which ALH84001 is a fragment. At this time, it is thought that Mars was relatively warm and wet, and there is evidence that water penetrated the rock. 16 million years ago, a major asteroid impact on Mars threw ALH84001 into space, and 13,000 years ago it intersected Earth's orbit, and fell onto Antarctica. And 12 years ago, it was collected as part of a NASA sampling project. It's expensive to go to Mars or the Moon to get rock samples; it is difficult, but not impossible, to find them on Earth.

Scientists have looked inside many meteorites for traces of organic materials (and James Blish's spookily prescient *Fallen Star* describes how scientists find Martian life within a meteorite collected in the Arctic), but ALH84001 was subjected to a battery of relatively new techniques. The team which examined it have produced four lines of evidence which



each have alternative explanations, but which when "considered collectively... are evidence for primitive life on early Mars."<sup>1</sup>

First, carbonate globules were found inside minute fractures deep inside the meteorite; isotopic data indicates that these are a billion years younger than the rock itself, and their shape is similar to those formed by biological activity in terrestrial rocks. Some were shock-faulted on Mars or in space, so cannot have been formed after ALH84001 landed on Earth.

Second, organic molecules known as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) are associated with the carbonate globules. These are the first organic molecules detected in Martian rocks. PAHs are formed by activity of bacteria; they are also formed by fossilization of organic material, or during partial combustion of organic material. You can make PAHs by lighting a candle or grilling a steak. However, the concentration of PAHs inside ALH84001 is higher than in other, non-Martian, meteorites collected at the same site, and increases towards the centre of the meteorite, suggesting that they are not due to contamination after the meteorite landed. Further, the PAHs inside ALH84001 are much simpler than those produced by, say, burning fossil fuel in a diesel engine.

Third, magnetite and iron-sulphite particles were found inside the carbonates – again, these are similar in shape and composition to those produced by terrestrial bacteria. Magnetite is formed by addition of oxygen to iron; iron-sulphide by removal of oxygen. These two processes can only occur together if biological activity is present.

Fourth, ovoid and elongated shapes have been found in and on the carbonates. They are very small – about a hundred nanometres in diameter, or a hundred millionths of a millimetre. You could pack about ten million across this full stop. This is a hundred times smaller than fossils of primitive bacteria found in 3.5 billion-year-old terrestrial rocks, but they are similar to certain types of bacteria found in deep bore holes.

It is virtually certain that the meteorite is Martian in origin, and that the carbonate particles and the associated PAH's and magnetite and iron-sulphite particles were laid down 3.5 billion years ago, while the rock was percolated by ground water on a warm, wet Mars. It is less certain, but still highly likely, that they were produced by biogenic activity. By life. Identification of the ovoids as fossil bacteria is less convincing. At present, there's no evidence for the fine structure which could positively identify them as fossil bacteria, and other

interpretations – that they could be mineral clay particles – cannot be ruled out.

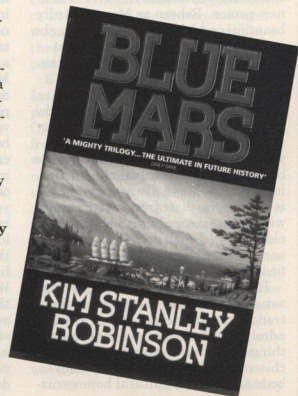
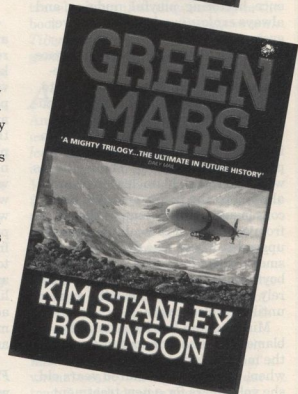
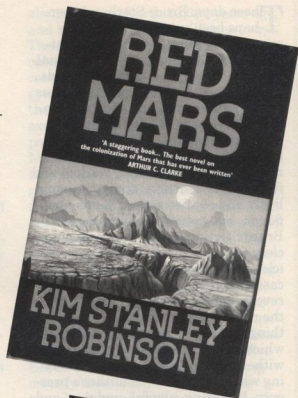
But the implications are clear. At some point, it is highly likely that Mars harboured primitive life, or conditions which enabled formation of complex organic materials associated with life. It means that wherever there is a source of energy and liquid water, then life is likely to arise. This vastly increases the chances that many of the ten thousand or so stars we can see on a clear night possess planets on which life exists – or existed. And we now know that there are at least seven extra-solar planets, and many more will almost certainly be discovered in the next few years.

Does life still exist on Mars? After the early and relatively brief wet and warm period, most water vanished – lost to space, or locked in carbonates or possibly in vast lenses of ground water or permafrost. It is now known that bacteria live deep beneath the Earth's surface, using as an energy source hydrogen formed by oxidation of iron in rocks. If any Martian life is still extant, it will probably be found in rocks deep below the surface, not in canals, but in tiny fissures and pores.

We do not know yet whether the primitive life on Mars was closely similar to our own, except that it was water- and carbon-based, and that its metabolic products were very similar to those of terrestrial bacteria. It is possible that Mars was seeded with Earth bacteria by the same process of interplanetary transfer of material by which ALH84001 arrived on Earth, although given Earth's deeper gravity well and its inner position in the Solar System (things tend to fall towards the Sun, not away from it), transfer of material from Earth to Mars is much more difficult than transfer of material from Mars to Earth. We remember ALH84001 was knocked from the surface of Mars 16 million years ago by a single large impact, and that four billion years ago inner-solar-system bodies, including Mars, were undergoing intense bombardment. Perhaps at that time many life-bearing Martian meteorites fell to Earth. Perhaps they flourished here. Perhaps we are all Martians.

Paul J. McAuley

1 "Search for Past Life on Mars: Possible Biogenic Activity in Martian Meteorite ALH84001." *Science*, Vol. 273, pp. 924-930. Those of you with access to the World Wide Web can find links to this paper and a host of other related material at <http://www.fas.org/mars/index.html>





REVIEWED

## The Posthuman Crew

Paul J. McAuley

These days, Bruce Sterling is perhaps best known for being the guru of cyberpunk: for his penetrating, incisive and entertaining journalism and commentaries on the trends and mores of the wired world. He has written a well-received and commendably level-headed book on hacking, gives speeches about the future at a bewildering variety of venues. His novels, with their densely worked and fully realized futures, share the same lively and shrewd regard as his non-fiction, but sometimes the voice of Bruce Sterling, novelist, is rather too close to that of Bruce Sterling, polemicist. *Holy Fire* (Orion, £16.99) is a case in point. It is a fluent and witty reversal of that traditional sf theme, the rite-of-passage, but it is also something of a baggy monster of a book in which a dozen topics nudge and jostle without quite cohering into a satisfying whole, in which the author's presence, hectoring, playful, nudging, and always explaining, looms large over every page.

Echoing Sterling's cyberpunk space opera, *Schismatrix*, *Holy Fire's* rite-of-passage is not from childhood into adulthood, but from human to posthuman. It's set a century ahead, in a world winnowed by plagues and dominated by the medical-industrial complex of the global polity. Those citizens who lead bland, blameless lives are allowed by the polity, a kind of benign consensual gerontocracy, to choose from a variety of radical life extension upgrades. Those who drink alcohol, or smoke, or eat fatty food, such as an old boyfriend of the novel's heroine, must rely on merely mechanical life support until they elect to die.

Mia Ziemann has led a dutifully blameless life as a minor functionary in the medical industry in San Francisco when, at close to a hundred years old, she volunteers for a new treatment which literally makes her over into a new person. Reborn as Maya, weirdly beautiful and looking about twenty, she runs away from the post-treatment monitoring programme and embarks on a *wanderjahr* across Europe. In a series of picaresque adventures, as petty thief, artistic muse, fashion model and, finally, apprentice photographer and member of a group of radical youngsters who perceive themselves to be standing on the threshold of true immortality, Maya discovers what life is like for the disenfranchised young, who cannot compete with healthy elders armed with decades of experience and real wealth based on certified funds.

The best sf draws its strength from astute observation of contemporary trends, and *Holy Fire's* milieu is an adroit heightening of, amongst other things, health fascism, the disenfranchisement of Generation X by baby-boomers, and the cultural homogeniza-

tion of Europe, sharpened by ironic reversals. Pace Woody Allen's well-known trope in *Sleeper*, fresh fruit and vegetables are considered to be more poisonous than meat; reading is an antisocial disease; young Japanese on their *wanderjahres* despise photography. Mia/Maya's quest is likewise a neat reversal. Instead of searching for what she can be, she is searching for a way to integrate what she has become with what she once was, and her progress is marked by a slow change from reborn innocent to a spookily wise and not altogether likeable posthuman adept at invisibly manipulating those around her.

But while *Holy Fire* is crammed with ideas and eye-kicks, what is missing for much of the novel is a moral centre. Immediately after her rebirth, Maya readily accepts other people's values at face value; later, she becomes so self-centred that she capriciously accepts or rejects arguments as they suit her purpose. A contrasting subplot concerning a young woman who believes, with good reason, that Maya has stolen her identity, lurks in the background and then is casually defenestrated. And like Sterling's previous novel, *Heavy Weather*, *Holy Fire* is terminated by the arbitrary imposition of a *deus ex machina*: in *Heavy Weather*, a tornado strike; in *Holy Fire*, a policewoman who arrests Maya but imposes no punishment. As the novel observes, "... people don't stop going on," but unlike life a

work of art must be rounded by more than mere circumstance. *Holy Fire* doesn't quite transcend its picaresque structure, and neither attempts to bring together its plethora of topics nor to resolve all the moral questions it throws into the air.

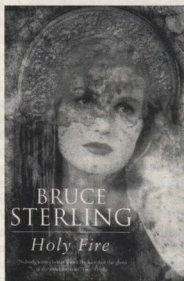
Nevertheless, there's much to admire. Sterling transmits a vibrant feeling of a future crammed with wonders and horrors. There's a density of newly minted ideas that's still regrettably rare in sf, which all too often trumpets itself as being a literature of ideas while too often being no more than rewarmed trope soup. Every page has its moment of genuine strangeness: the living architecture of Stuttgart; Europe clad in forests of giant fungi; a landscape of virtual reality memory castles; a fashion photographer's semi-independent arm; a liquid computer the size of a swimming pool, in which the operators immerse themselves. And despite the somewhat arbitrary and abrupt closure of Maya's wanderjahr, there is a genuinely affecting coda that finally provides a context in which we can see Maya for what she was, and what she has become, and which, for once, is quietly observed, without footnotes.

Richard Calder's *Dead Things* (Voyager, £4.99) brings to a close one of the stranger sf series of recent years, begun with *Dead Girls* and continued in *Dead Boys*. Like Sterling's *Holy Fire*, it is a slim but densely

imagined book centred upon an imaginative examination of the effects of technology on human evolution. In *Dead Girls*, a viral plague changed human girls into Lilim, vampiric automata which can, via fellatio, infect the germ cells of their male victims so that they can father only Lilim; in *Dead Boys* the plague, Meta, spread through the fabric of the Universe, changing history. Dead boys, or Elohim, human males transformed by the virus into supermen, stalk and kill dead girls who spread the infection too vig-

orously, for otherwise the human race, on which Meta is a parasite, would be destroyed. In *Dead Things*, one of these avenging angels, Dagon, a.k.a. Gabriel, a.k.a. Iggy (the human antihero of *Dead Girls*), has returned to Earth on a mission to plant a Reality Bomb at the heart of the Meta infection, and so destroy it before it causes the sex death of the universe.

But *Dead Things* is more concerned with reification of its own imagery than with genre power fantasies. The plot is merely a moving line, decorated by manga-like set-pieces of hyperkinetic violence, on which to hang a plethora







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of metaphysical riffs which provide a heightened and self-conscious analysis of the signs and signifiers embedded in its own text. Early on, Dagon muses that "An age of information is inevitably one that evolves into an age of pornography..." and so with this postcyberpunk postmodern self-engulfing novel. The Lilim deploy fetishistic trappings and heightened sexual characteristics (described by Calder, with deadpan irony, in the earnestly lubricious style of pornography: catalogues of underwear and make-up mostly replace traditional characterization) seduce their prey, and those same characteristics make them vulnerable to the Elohim, who are immune to their charms. Sex is death, both for the human victims (whose infections wipe out generations of possible human descendants), and for the Lilim, vampires who must play the role of sexually oppressed to feed and to reproduce.

Calder's mix of violent and graphically sexual images, and dizzily recursive explications of sf tropes blended through a reality mixer, is unsettling, genuinely exotic and fiercely intelligent. *Dead Things* is highly recommended, but be warned that to read it properly it is necessary to read (or re-read) its predecessors first.

Brian Stableford's *Salamander's Fire* (Legend, £16.99) is the second volume of his *Genesis* series and the sequel to *Serpent's Blood* (reviewed in *IZ* 100). It is the middle part of a complicated quest that is slowly forging towards The Navel of the World, or Idun, where the solution to the mystery of what is driving sudden and vast changes in the world's ecosystems might be found. Although structured as a fantasy quest, it is set on a world colonized by humans who have forgotten much of their interstellar technology but not their origins. The characters may wield swords rather than blasters, but the non-human characters are aliens with puzzling life cycles, not dwarves or elves, and the quest is for knowledge and enlightenment, not defeat of some dark lord.

The first volume was notable for its plethora of inventive alien biology, including three very different types of sentient aliens, in a world where decay is rampant, and rots and moulds quickly destroy even stone and metal. *Serpent's Blood* is less concerned with continuing this deft world-building, however, but with detailing the adventures of the disparate band of pilgrims who, for very different reasons, are travelling towards Idun, and have split into three groups while attempting to cross a hostile nation. Their adventures are enjoyably embroidered with plausible heroics, but they add little to the explication of the world or the deepening of the mystery towards which the characters are travelling.

As in all too many second volumes of genre trilogies, in *Salamander's Fire* interminably drawn-out and inconclusive skirmishes seem designed mostly to pad out the book to its contractual length while revealing as little as possible, so as not to spoil the presumed climax of the third volume. But Stableford is too knowing a writer to lose his way. His characters are notable for their rational analysis of their world's mysteries: conclusions are reached (albeit sometimes too conveniently) through application of Occam's Razor rather than mystical insight, and the final scenes, when the characters are reunited in a living Crystal City, show a return of the imaginative world-building flair which graced the first book. We travel on, hopefully.

There are few writers who could put their own name to spaceships or space stations in their fictions with the confidence that it is likely to come to pass, but one can forgive Buzz Aldrin this touch of *chutzpa* in his and John Barnes's *Encounter with Tiber* (Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99). After all, not only is Aldrin's place in history secure, but he is also an expert in orbital mechanics: the Mars cycle described in the novel, shuttling in continuous orbit between Earth and Mars, is one of his inventions.

There's an undeniable frisson to be had in reading scenes set on the Moon in a novel written jointly by one of the few human beings who was actually there, but *Encounter with Tiber* is an odd sandwich of a book. Best are those sections based on extended technical speculations on how human activity in space might realistically be developed in the next hundred years. The case for manned space exploration is plausibly and urgently set out, but given the earnest realism, the motivation for all this activity is unusual. Following reception of an alien transmission from Alpha Centauri (and echoing Arthur C. Clarke's "The Sentinel," the short story which was the seed for *2001: A Space Odyssey*) a base complete with an electronic library containing all of the aliens' knowledge is discovered at the Moon's pole. The library is lost in an accident, but the existence of a second base on Mars is hinted, catalysing a global effort to mount a mission to recover it.

Interleaved with these sections are two long narratives describing how the

aliens came to Earth 10,000 years ago, and it's here that the book goes awry. The aliens aren't much different in culture or world view from twentieth century Americans (their juveniles do gym and homework, stick posters on their walls and the two distinct races exchange puerile exchanges: "Hey, pointy ears"; "Hey yourself, fossil man"). Moreover, unlike Clarke's transcendental visions of uplift by superior intelligences, Aldrin and Barnes present a Serb-eat-Serb encounter between aliens and humans in which rule is based not on moral superiority but better firepower, enforced by brutal massacres and slavery and justified on the morally dubious, or to be charitable, naive, grounds that "the things we have to do are as much for their good as ours." There's little attempt to connect these long, bloody adventures on primitive Earth with the enthusiastic and rigorously detailed accounts of space travel, except that they bulk up to the book to bestseller size. *Encounter with Tiber* ends up as an odd hybrid, only good in parts.

Also noted. Mary Rosenblum has attracted some attention in American sf circles through the stories and the novel which make up her *Dryland* sequence. Some of those stories are collected in *Synthesis and Other Virtual Realities* (Arkham House, \$21.95). Taken together, one notes that the stories are only marginally sf, in that their plots are decorated with, rather than informed by, sf imagery, and that while Rosenblum skilfully and sympathetically portrays the desperation of lives lived at the edge of society, her acute characterization is sapped by a fatal sentimentality. Those stories which live up to their initial promise include "Synthesis," a virtual-reality farrago, and "Border-town," which depicts the marginal culture of illegal refugees to good effect, or at least until an all-wise conjure woman turns up. But on the whole, these well-written stories are disappointingly mundane.

Elizabeth Moon's *Remnant Population* (Baen, \$22) is notable for its portrayal of a cantankerous old woman, Ofelia, who refuses to be evacuated from a Company-controlled colony when its planet is taken over. When new settlers are killed by previously unknown aliens, Ofelia finds herself unexpectedly acting as broker between aliens and the military outfit sent to control them. Moon fudges quite how the aliens — who have several populous cities — were overlooked, and the ending is weakened by sentiment, but her warts-and-all portrayal of Ofelia, particularly the first encounter with the murderous aliens, which Ofelia wisely resolves by treating them as boisterous adolescents, is finely judged.

Paul J. McAuley



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Life as a character in a medieval fantasy often isn't a lot of fun. The more a writer aspires to gory authenticity, the more miserable the story has to be. Or does it? Garry Kilworth's new novel *The Roof of Voyaging* (Orbit, £16.99) opens with a gruesome supernatural attack on some sleeping voyagers, to make sure we know that medieval Polynesia isn't going to be unalloyed paradise. But when master-navigator Kupe returns from the legendary "Isle of Mists" with a couple of strange castaways, Pacific island life a thousand years ago turns out to be all you imagined it might be. The climate's delightful, the islands are fruitful, the reef is bountiful; the language is full of poetry and superb oceanic images. Even being a woman is not so bad – though being a dog is dodgy. Seamus and Dorcha, Pictish man and Scottish woman, are settling quite contentedly, until they become embroiled in a succession dispute – which in the end can only be resolved by a flight into the unknown. The good prince Tangia and his charming beloved, Kula; the infuriating Boy-Girl, transvestite slingshot champion with a fine line in camp dialogue, along with a whole slew of brave followers, pigs, hens, traitors, and a celibate priestess, all set sail for nowhere, pursued by bad prince Tutapu with his army; and an epic begins.

But how come a Polynesian navigator managed to pick up two British castaways? That's because Garry Kilworth has placed the island of Britain about where you'd expect to bump into New Zealand, an exchange which will be important (we're promised) in volume two. I found *The Roof of Voyaging* rather slow, with too much authentic detail about how to build your own ocean-going canoe. And I'm not sure if I can accept the whole of British history up to the tenth century somehow having happened in isolation in the Southern Ocean. Still, it's a rich, expansive read with some good jokes. What more can you ask?

The supernatural fantasy element in *The Roof of Voyaging* is slight. There is as much magic in the astonishing feats of navigation as in the personified natural forces who take a hand, in an absent-minded way, in human affairs. Gory authenticity, however, is pervasive. But Garry Kilworth lets his fictional society describe itself, from the inside. None of the characters notices anything peculiar about the savagely enforced law of tabu that clings to every aspect of life. Even Seamus and Dorcha are only a little perturbed by the prevalence of human sacrifice in their paradise; and the casual acceptance of massacre and infanticide. It's left to the reader to decide whether to be shocked, outraged, or simply amazed to find that life can be sweet without the illusions of mercy.

## Expect No Mercy

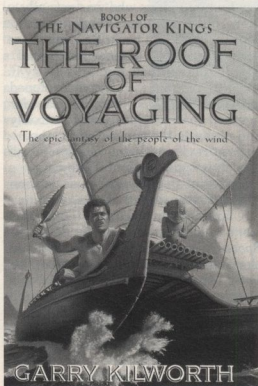
Gwyneth Jones

In Sheri S. Tepper's latest novel, *Gibbon's Decline and Fall* (Bantam, \$22.95) the savagery is contemporary, the fantasy element blatant, and the author's moral position is centre-stage. It's the year 2000, or thereabouts. Caroline, Ophy, Jessamine, Bettiann, Agnes and Faye, a disparate bunch of women who have remained friends since college, are preparing for their next reunion, all of them haunted by the memory of "Sophy," the mysterious and maybe supernatural vanished seventh member of their group. They know she felt she had a mission to discover exactly what happens to women in this man's world. They know that over the years she found out more and more about worse and worse, from Pakistan to the Bronx. But why did she disap-

pear? Has Sophy, whose real name may be *Santa Sophia*, Holy Wisdom, the third Person of the Trinity, given up hope? Or has she set her terrible solution in motion, and returned to heaven?

The answer to these questions involves a no-kidding sulphur and brimstone devil masterminding the male supremacists; an implausible form of drug-induced coma, which has (three years from now!) replaced normal incarceration in the USA's bursting prisons; a highly significant (and equally unlikely) section of wolf-siamang DNA which somehow gets into the whole global water supply; a showcase infanticide trial, a bag-lady army, and a clan of Saurian "Native Americans" in a secret hi-tech matriarchal enclave in New Mexico. Anyone who enjoys Sheri Tepper, as I do, won't need to be told that the story is gripping, and the object of the exercise is the same as always. Women, with heavy supernatural backing, are going to rule the world. Men, though kindly treated, are to be as powerless as their wives and daughters and sisters have been for so long. Sheri Tepper's come a long way since I first reviewed her work in these pages in 1991. But her Old-Testament attitudes have not changed. Yet even as you splutter in disbelief (I particularly disliked the way the nun and the lesbian were regularly thumped over the head by authorial disapproval – presumably, bizarre as it seems, for the crime of not having husbands) you'll be wishing the book was twice as long.

I came across a phrase the other day that describes Sheri Tepper's fictional programme admirably: "fantasies of infinite instrumentality." There are no effortless final solutions available in *A Game of Thrones* (Bantam, \$21.95; Voyager, £16.99). This, the first volume of a series called "A Song of Ice and Fire," represents George R. R. Martin's return to print fiction after a decade in TV and movie writing. *A Game of Thrones* is set in an offshore island kingdom, with a continent to the east reached across a narrow sea. It recounts the tragic, bloody downfall of the Starks, who rule the rugged and spectacular fief of Winterfell, between the great Wall that shuts out the monsters of the far north, and the boggy Neck that joins them to the soft and treacherous South. I quickly decided I was in a fantasy-Scotland, pitched somewhere between *Macbeth* and Culloden; and I found this template worked well. There's something very Scottish Calvinist about the stubbornly upright Lord Eddard Stark, loyal vassal to the debauched and cuckolded southern king whom he helped to put on the throne after a bloody insurrection about 20 years before the story





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opens. There's even a "king over the water" who is blond, feeble, and wanders round the continent getting drunk and being no good – though his young sister, the dragon-suckling Daenerys, is from a different sort of story entirely.

For most of this episode historical romance is the key: all plate-armour, vile living conditions, sumptuous frocks for the ladies; plenty of food for the crows. But as in Brian Aldiss's "Helliconia" series (though on a smaller scale) George Martin plans to use an extended seasonal cycle to mark the changing moods of his mega-world. A ten-year summer is ending in *A Game of Swords*. Next book it will be winter. The court poisonings, the intrigues, executions and betrayals will fade into insignificance. As the cold advances and historical romance gives way before horror fantasy, the few surviving Starks will be up against fell, unnatural things from beyond the Wall; and the dragons will surely have a large part to play.

I couldn't help noticing that apart from Daenerys the significant female characters are fools and rotters to a filly, except for one little girl who wants to be a boy. And I'm not sure about Daenerys, who has no characteristics beyond a will of iron. The best of them is a harsh, narrow Mom-figure who commits the act of folly that sets the ruin of her whole family in train. But this denigration is to be expected in the kind of book where "realism" is a term meaning "lots of violence." No element that might interfere with that promise has been allowed to intrude. One circumstance that shook my view of Winterfell as a bleak, Covenanting enclave up against the Highland Line, is that nobody in the first cast list, except the dwarf Tyrion (clearly something of a favoured child of his creator), appears to have had a decent education. But though I'd advise female readers to buy the book half-price, or read someone else's copy and skip any time you spot a female-bashing bit coming up; and though I still prefer this sort of thing scripted by Shakespeare or Webster, or directed by Kurosawa, I enjoyed *Game of Thrones*. It's gratuitous and exploitative etc etc, yet it still has plenty of class.

**L**isa Goldstein's *Walking the Labyrinth* (Tor, \$21.95) is the odd one out in my collection. The cruelty in this story is prevalent but mild, and though a violent death occurs nobody, least of all the reader, seems expected to take it seriously. Molly Travers, a rather rootless and aimless young woman working as a temp in modern-day San Francisco, has been brought up by an aunt. She only knows vaguely that her family used to be on the stage. She's accosted one day by a private detective who claims he's been hired to find out

about this Allalie theatrical clan. He tells her that the original Allalies – all a lie, get it? – fled to the US from England and adopted this brazen pseudonym after running into problems – maybe fraud, maybe murder, certainly adultery – to do with a Victorian spiritualist cult called the Order of the Labyrinth. On an impulse Molly packs in her job and goes to England with John Stow, the detective. They find (actually they steal it from a private library) the first of a series of diary accounts of the family's past; and uncover a mystery that seems to involve genuine magical powers. They then find that other people are sufficiently interested in the secret of the Allalies to kill for it. Defying their legal obligations as witnesses to a murder, they return to the US. After some more detection and discovery, Molly is eventually led to understand the truth about her upbringing; and is restored to the magical clan.

Without realizing it Molly has been only half alive. Through John Snow's unemotional intervention (it's not a sexual relationship, he already has a girlfriend) she becomes a real person, discovers the true nature of the woman she's regarded as her parent, and opens herself to the life-enhancing freedom represented by the Allalie talent for colourful, show-stopping illusion. There is murder, psychic and otherwise. There is a magical labyrinth that leads initiates into self-discovery; there is an interesting implication that to become fully alive Molly must acknowledge that she, like her ruthless Aunt Fentrice and all her psychically gifted relatives, is a naturally amoral creature. But this slight story of a young woman's coming of age seems to me unfocused and insubstantial, and the fantasy element never seemed to be heading anywhere. *Walking the Labyrinth* is very easy to read, in spite of the frequent recourse to secret diaries and serial letters to keep the narrative going. But there is none of the intensity that can make a lightly told story burn in the mind.

**I**an Watson's techno-thriller *Hard Questions* (Gollancz, £16.99) was a disappointment. The "Hard Question" of the title refers to the debate currently raging in scientific circles over the nature of consciousness. Is self-awareness a product of evolution, which

will eventually be tracked down to some physiological, molecular mechanism in our living cells? That's the "soft" version of the problem. The "hard" version invokes some kind of non-biological agency operating at a sub-atomic level: quantum effects in the brain, Bose-Einstein equations. I fancy the evolutionary model myself, but I have been following both sides in the popular-science press. I was pleased and interested to get hold of *Hard Questions*, I thought Ian Watson was definitely the man to give me a good story about weird brain-science. But I don't think this is it. The science is mostly undigested chunks served up sporadically through a casually thrown-together text devoted to car-chases, rocket-launching Waco style death-cults, and any plausible (or implausible) excuse for female undress. Things brighten up somewhat when the quantum computer goes self-aware, and parallel realities start exploding all over the place like boiling chip fat. But that's far too late on in the story for me.

**T**he last time I read a book by Orson Scott Card it was *Ender's Game*. I remember feeling it was very unfair that this excruciating, really horrible account of the corruption of a troubled child was considered great All-American entertainment – while British sf of the time was soundly castigated for being "too depressing." I admit, I'm probably prejudiced against Orson Scott Card, and his fans should take anything I say with caution. Even so, I think *Children of the Mind* (Tor, \$23.95) can't be one of his better books. This is the long-delayed final episode of the "Xenocide" story that began in *Ender's Game*. Three thousand years after the child Ender committed an act of genocide to save the earth from invasion, believing (maybe) that he was playing a video game, a similar terrifying cataclysmic situation has developed. Two of Ender's avatars (hypo-real versions of himself created in a trip outside space and time) are involved in different last-ditch attempts to save the day. Visits to a planet that preserves the traditional culture of Japan, and another that preserves the traditional culture (coincidentally) of Polynesia, further the plot a little, and seem thin as tourist excursions around a theme park. Most of the rest of the book is devoted to merciless, highly stylized, encounter-group dialogue between the patriarch Ender, his avatars, wives (one of whom is a self-aware AI) and satellites. I was left feeling that readers must care a real lot about a writer to put up with this sort of thing; and you definitely have to be a mega-bestselling writer first before your publishers will let you get away with it.

Gwyneth Jones



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Reviewing Stephan Grundy's *Rhinegold* in *Interzone* 85, I observed that the matter of the Walsings was the first great family saga to emerge from the European tradition after the Dark Ages. That saga is continued and elaborated in *Attila's Treasure* (Bantam, \$13.95; Michael Joseph, £10.99), a slighter work of lighter tone which overlaps *Rhinegold's* later chapters. Such descriptions are relative, of course; it runs to over 500 pages and its prologue consists of an account of how Hagan (the hero) has his heart cut out and (purely to prove his Teutonic mettle, for he is not usually given to levity) dies laughing. So this is no sunshine story – as someone remarks early on, the Walsings don't have much luck. Nor do the Gebicungs.

It's a classic *Bildungsroman*, of the sort that heroic fantasy is uniquely equipped to express. The 14-year-old Hagan is despatched to the camp of Attila as a "frith-bonder": part foster-son, part pupil, part hostage. As a young man beginning his martial education he is a pledge of faith between the Burgundians and the Huns, Attila's obligation being to train him up as a future war-leader, while his family is expected to refrain from acts of overt and covert unfriendliness towards the Hunnish hosts.

Well enough, but (like many who occupy such positions), Hagan has a foot or three in two camps already. For a start, he is widely presumed not to be the king's younger son, but the queen's bastard by Heaven knows whom or what; moreover, his voice is harsh and his features unsmiling, so that strangers who meet him are far more likely to see an enemy than a friend they don't yet know; furthermore, he is naturally psychic, and but for his rank would have been apprenticed to a shaman. This last quality is immediately recognized by Attila's resident shaman, as is his shamanistic bisexuality. Such a combination would overegg most cakes, but Grundy is so well steeped in Nordic legend that Hagan emerges as a hero proper to his era.

The era itself emerges less well. The history of Attila, Theodosius II of Byzantium and Theoderik I of the Visigoths is less overtly mythological than that of Sigfrith (as Grundy calls Siegfried) – they were the most notable men of a moderately literate time – and (as he admits) Grundy takes liberties with the record for the sake of the story. The name of Attila's brother, whom he murdered, is attached to his son; and Theoderik is represented as a vassal in Attila's warband. This is more than an unorthodox interpretation of an obscure episode from Dark-Age history, and may spoil the book for those who know the period best, as it's less the usual sort of heroic fantasy than an historical novel with strong fantasy elements. A further difficulty

## No Sunshine

Chris Gilmore

is presented by the advance of Christianity, at that time establishing itself among the Goths and Franks; one knows that it supplanted the older faiths, but given the strength of shamanistic magic so meticulously described, how was that possible?

Grundy is attempting to impose the world of *The Ring* on the commonplaces of history without the authority of Wagner, as is made clear by his second important viewpoint. Hildegund is a Christian Gothic maiden frith-bonded to Attila with the explicit intention that should she find favour she will become his bride; whereas should she not, she can wind up as a prostitute-cum-serving-wench in a wayside inn for all her father cares, he being a pious Christian who has already cracked a few of her bones in

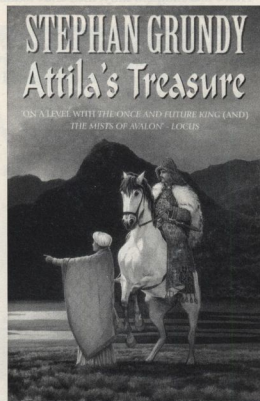
the course of necessary discipline. The pathos of her situation supplies much of the book's emotional power, while the very different ways in which her and Hagan's choices are trammelled bring the action into balance.

Grundy also essays a dangerous balancing-act in portraying Attila's personality. That the man was a monster even by the standards of his time, let alone those of any modern liberal, is as irrelevant as it is obvious; Grundy's trick is to portray the monstrosity and the manhood simultaneously so that he emerges, if not as a sympathetic character, yet as a character with whom one can sympathize. To this end some meaty passages are written from his viewpoint, the one when he contemplates the mystery of transubstantiation and interprets it in terms of his own brutal animism being among the most brilliant in a book of very high quality throughout.

There's nothing accidental about any of this, but there's always a cost to such experiments: here the cost is that some readers will find a favourite viewpoint, and be impatient with the others. But it's difficult to fault Grundy for his approach – he's a visionary writer, and presents his vision as it has arisen from his study of the time. With its tighter timescale – covering a bare two years rather than the generations of *Rhinegold* – *Attila's Treasure* is a more excellent work, no harder to get into than David Gemmell in his darker moods, and no less serious. That it can't safely be used as a crib to its period does nothing to lessen its qualities of psychological portraiture, nor the intensity of the vision that informs it.

For *Arcady* (Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99) Michael Williams claims as his immediate literary progenitors Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Emily Dickinson and "especially" Blake; for which he deserves a modest brass plaque in the temple of Chutzpah if nothing else. Apart from some insistent cloud imagery I can't trace much stylistic influence – far from it, his technique is naive, and over-dependent on ultra-short paragraphs and italicized words – but his central conceit is relevant enough.

In this world Blake's Prophetic Books (called Text) are regarded as sacred, and used for magical operations much in the manner of Pamela Dean's *The Dubious Hills*; his songs are described as hymns; the works of the other poets mentioned are taken to be commentaries thereupon; and much blood has at times been spilt over which are spurious or heretical. That raises immediate problems for me as (apart from a boyhood attachment to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) I am unfamiliar with the Prophetic Books, and suspect many of Williams's read-





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ers will be equally in the dark. Moreover, the rationale for such a belief is never expounded, though it must surely be perverse by even the most tortuous standards of post-grad. Eng. Lit.

The story combines the family saga with a standard Sword-&Sorcery idea – in this case the “threatened land” scenario – in a setting reminiscent of Hugh Cook’s *Chronicles of an Age of Darkness*. The land is afflicted with “Borders,” areas of what another terminology would call spatio-temporal discontinuity, which drift about the countryside to unsettling effect. Statues come alive, and houses grow new storeys into which it is inadvisable to venture; but once the Borders have retreated, leaving the land desolate and stirred as with a giant spoon, the bold may find treasure – huge masses of valuable scrap metal which may be the detritus of our own age.

These have become the occasion for civil war, and members of the Harken family, whose sprawling and Borderderanged mansion Arcady is central to the action, are involved on both sides. The Harkens are an heroic but neurotic lot, much given to obsessive behaviour, drunkenness, irrational guilt and (most of all) rancour against each other; Williams describes them and their estate in a lush, atmospheric style with frequent flashback so that the story is rather overwhelmed by its own *dramatis personae* and milieu.

That leads him into occasional absurdities, as when a minor character described as having died in 1351 is still active after 1360, and in fact the story is weak and consists mainly of sundry Harkens blundering ineptly among the borders. The book’s most interesting point arises when Solomon Harken, a theologian of the Text almost turned atheist, is confronted with a genuine believer: a boy who has penetrated the “Absence” at the heart of the borders, and emerged transfigured into a true but unschooled prophet. Roger Zelazny used a similar trope in *Lord of Light*, where the cynical introduction of phoney Buddhism evokes a genuine Buddha; Williams, lacking Zelazny’s perceptions, wastes the opportunity, but the main problem is that while nobody doubts the sanity of Prince Siddhartha, Blake was a choir short of an angelic host.

The reason why most of us have some sort of acquaintance with the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* but never got much past *The Book of Thel* is that sanity is preferable to madness. Eternity may be “in love with the productions of time,” as Blake averred; but the sane soon reject the bombastic and repetitive claims of the crazed, consigning their pretensions to the unread latter volumes of definitive editions. The same discrimination exists within the corpus of even the best writers, which is

why *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are produced more often than *Timon of Athens* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* – and why *Arcady* ultimately fails: the worst of Blake is unfit to sustain the pretensions of Sword-&Sorcery. Williams has produced an interesting literary grotesque and, given his chosen material, could hardly have done much better; but it is true to its foundations, and they are incoherent.

As the blurb mentions, with *Darkfell* (Orion, £16.99) Mary Corran returns to the world of her first novel *Imperial Light* (reviewed in *Interzone* 87). This doesn’t seem such a good idea, as her second novel, *Fate* (*Interzone* 97) was such an improvement; the book stands alone, but is so haunted by its predecessor that it seems very much the story of a side-issue. Here is one of those rare occasions when to have read the earlier book is a disadvantage.

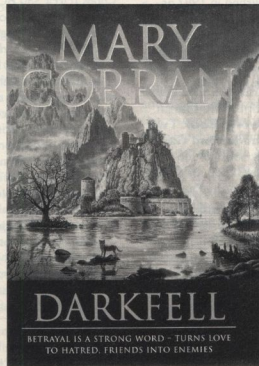
Fantasy is often anti-clerical in tone, the gluttonous, larcenous, lazy, lecherous, cowardly priest having been a stock figure in the Anglo-American literary tradition since well before the Reformation; even so, to attack the practice of a religion you’ve just run up from whole cloth, as Corran does here, is rather shooting fish in a barrel. Being too enraged at every aspect of revelation, especially worship, submission and sacrifice, to

lampon it with humour or even satire in the manner of Iain Banks or Jack Vance, she has resurrected the Order of Light from the earlier book so that her new heroines, the *akhal* (Lake People) ladies Ran and Ninian may do battle with it.

It is here personified by three bad priests: Borland is bad enough, regarding his office simply as a source of revenue and compliant acolytes; Kerron is worse, having no faith, but having been corrupted by the demon lurking below the flim-flam of the Order; Quest is worse still, being a sincere fanatic who has gullibly swallowed whole the theology of the Order with all its attendant propaganda. Corran is at some pains to present both the latter in the round – neither is a mere archetype of mindless malignancy – but finds herself at odds with her own assumptions: because her message is so unexceptionable her tone emerges as strident. Few people reading this will hold much brief for patriarchal theocracy as the ideal form of government, but its condemnation is hardly a message to shout from the rooftops of London or New York, however worthily it might resound from Qom, Salt Lake City or Palermo. The cumulative effect is a bit like being buttonholed by an earnest seven-year-old, keen to impart her flowers of new-found mystery gathered in school that morning. Such children can command our suffering, but Corran is a grown-up lady.

The construction is complex, weaving together the relationships between Ran and her wimpish brother, Affer; Quest and his bastard daughter (by Ninian), Sarai; and Ninian’s wife Bellene, the aging autocrat whom she will someday succeed. These are worked out against the background of two poisonous incursions: a fast-growing, toxic plant spreading through the lakes, and the demon within Kerron is driving him mad with its demands that he quench the mysterious light which illumines Lake Arval at night, while giving him no hint how (let alone why) he should do it. With all this going on, and with Corran’s lengthy analyses of her characters’ mental states, the story moves slowly, even the several deaths being suspiciously easy. This is no great defect; Corran is more concerned with character than action, with internal than external conflict, and with her message than anything else. The interest grows as the irreconcilable demands on all characters become ever more insistent, but the tone retains a certain piety to the end. So if you know someone who may be inclining to the belief that patriarchal theocracy is the paradigm for ultimate happiness, buy him this book – too bad it wasn’t available in Waco!

Chris Gilmore



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.

Aldiss, Brian. **Helliconia**. "The classic epic trilogy in one volume." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648223-6, pagination various [roman-numeral sections fore and aft, plus each of the three constituent novels separately paginated – about 1,000 pages altogether], B-format paperback, cover by Peter Goodfellow, £9.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition; the three novels, *Helliconia Spring*, *Helliconia Summer* and *Helliconia Winter*, were first published in 1982, 1983 and 1985; this edition contains a new five-page introduction by the author, and several technical appendices; recommended.) 22nd July 1996.

Anthony, Piers. **Roc and a Hard Place**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-65423-6, 323pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK [?], 1995; 19th in the "Xanth" series.) 15th August 1996.

Anthony, Piers. **Yon III Wind**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-65424-4, 263pp, hardcover, cover by Peter Elson, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; yet another "Xanth" novel – the 20th in a semi-juvenile, semi-humorous series which has now sold in the millions.) 15th August 1996.

Anthony, Piers. **Yon III Wind**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86227-X, 320pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1996; proof copy received.) October 1996.

Bachman, Richard. **The Regulators**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-67176-9, 334pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £16.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1996; "Richard Bachman," as all the world knows by now, is a pseudonym of Stephen King; this novel, pre-

sumably from King's bottom drawer, is being released simultaneously with his new official opus, *Desperation* [see below].) 21st September 1996.

Ballard, J. G. **Cocaine Nights**. Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-224135-8, 329pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Non-sf novel by a leading sf writer, first edition; proof copy received; set among mainly English expatriates on Spain's Costa del Sol, it takes the form of a psychological murder mystery; he may no longer be writing what the world regards as sf, but it's becoming increasingly clear, in novels such as this and his last, *Rushing to Paradise* [1994], that Ballard's is still a fiction which operates on the utopian-dystopian axis which is at the heart of sf: in this case, an apparently utopian retirement resort is in effect the "villain.") 19th September 1994.

Brite, Poppy Z. **Exquisite Corpse**. Orion/Millennium, ISBN 0-75280-206-2, 244pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 1996; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; the last novel by British writer Robert Irwin had exactly the same title.) 22nd July 1996.

Bussing, Sabine. **A Darker Shade of Blue**. Bole Guild, ISBN 1-85776-148-0, 200pp, C-format paperback, £6.95. (Horror collection, first published in 1994; the author is German, and her doctoral thesis was published in 1987 as *Aliens in the Home: The Child in Horror Fiction* [Greenwood Press]; Ramsey Campbell commends her stories on the back cover.) 25th July 1996.

Chalker, Jack L. **The March Hare Network: Book Two of The Wonderland Gambit**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38691-4, viii+325pp, B-format paperback, cover by Paul Youll, \$11. (Sf novel, first edition.) Late entry: 1st May publication, received in July 1996.

Clarke, Arthur C. **Childhood's End**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-34795-1, 218pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Stevenson, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1953; it's the traditional text –

## BOOKS RECEIVED



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i.e. it doesn't have the new foreword and revised first chapter which appeared in the Pan Books UK edition of 1990; if the information given inside is reliable, this is only the seventh Ballantine/Del Rey printing in over 40 years: that seems too low a figure for such a venerable classic of the field – Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, first issued by the same publisher in the same year, had been through 30 or more paperback printings last time we looked.) 1st July 1996.

Collins, Andrew. **From the Ashes of Angels**. "The Forbidden Legacy of a Fallen Race." Michael Joseph, ISBN 0-7181-4132-6, xiii+448pp, hardcover, cover by Nanette Hoogslag, £16.99. (Pseudo-historical/occult text, first edition; an account of the author's search for "angels," a prehistoric people of great beauty and spiritual power and suchlike, who supposedly flourished in the Middle East about 9,000 years BC [hmm ... a suspiciously familiar date, that]; it's illustrated with eight pages of photos; novelist Storm

Constantine is named as a helper in the acknowledgments [see her new novel, below]; what are we sf readers to make of books such as this, which appear to be very big business indeed? – in a sense, they feed on yesteryear's sf: all credulous accounts of ancient vanished races descend from what may be the world's first sf story, Plato's unfinished *Critias* [circa 350 BC], although of course some people think Plato wasn't writing a fictional parable at all, but *true history*; over the centuries, many other sf notions have been taken all-too-literally by the occultists [notably Flying Saucers], and sometimes sf authors themselves have collaborated in, and profited from, the nonsense – as, notoriously, did L. Ron Hubbard; nevertheless, this type of "non-fiction" is itself a kind of popular fiction which has been around for ages and probably never will go away, so perhaps more attention ought to be paid to it as a form of literature.) 29th August 1996.

Constantine, Storm. **Scenting Hallowed Blood**. Signet/Creed, ISBN 0-4511-0929-9,

357pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Occult/horror/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; second in the "Grigori Trilogy" which began with *Stalking Tender Prey* [1995]; it's about "fallen angels" [see Andrew Collins, above].) 3rd October 1996.

Contreras, Isabel. **The Happy Halo**. Pentland Press [1 Hut-ton Close, South Church, Bishop Auckland, Durham DL14 6XB], ISBN 1-85821-379-7, 275pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Hobbs, £14.50. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 111.) No date shown: received in July 1996.

Corran, Mary. **Darkfell**. Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-455-2, 326pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; it's set in the world of her first novel, *Imperial Light*.) 22nd July 1996.

Corran, Mary. **Fate**. Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-311-4, 363pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1995; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 97.) 1st July 1996.

Crowther, Peter, and James Lovegrove. **Escardy Gap**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86210-5, 543pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; a large chunk of "Americana" by two of our regular [British] reviewers, this represents Pete Crowther's debut as a novelist; at the same time, it's James Lovegrove's second novel [his first was *The Hope*, 1990]; there's a 16-year age gap between the two authors, but they seem to have worked well together; this proof comes adorned with approving quotes from Pat Cadigan, Ramsey Campbell, Charles de Lint and others.) September 1996.

Dick, Philip K. **The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch**. "Limited Edition Exclusive to Waterstone's." Introduction by Fay Weldon. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648274-0, 204pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1964; previously a Jonathan Cape hardcover in the UK, followed by at least two Penguin paperback printings and four Grafton Books

printings, but recently out-of-print for some years; this is a special edition produced by HarperCollins on behalf of Waterstone's Bookshops; it's probably a one-off occurrence, but let's hope not – wouldn't it would be nice if H/C and W could get together to republish a whole series of sf classics?) 15th July 1996.

Eddings, David and Leigh. **Belgarath the Sorcerer.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40395-9, 723pp, A-format paperback, cover by Laurence Schwinger, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1995; Leigh Eddings, David's wife, is credited for the first time on this novel, although a prefatory note states that in fact all past books under the Eddings byline have been collaborations between the two.) 1st July 1996.

Eddings, David and Leigh. **Belgarath the Sorcerer: The Prequel to the Belgariad.** Voyager, ISBN 0-586-21315-5, 840pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1995; the sub-title given on this UK edition does not appear anywhere on the US edition.) 22nd July 1996.

Edgill, Rosemary. **The Bowl of Night: A Bast Mystery.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-85606-7, 220pp, hardcover, \$20.95. (Mystery novel about a modern-day witch, first edition; proof copy received; third in the series which began with *Speak Daggers to Her* [1994] and *Book of Moons* [1995]; "Rosemary Edgill" is a pseudonym of sf/fantasy writer Eluki Bes Shahar.) October 1996.

Evans, Christopher. **Mortal Remains, or Heirs of the Noosphere.** Vista, ISBN 0-575-60043-8, 319pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1995; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 102.) 8th August 1996.

Foster, Alan Dean. **Mid-Flinx.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-424-3, 346pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; latest in the "Flinx of the Commonwealth" series of adventures which began with *Foster's* first published novel, *The Tar-Aiyam Krang*, in 1972.) 1st August 1996.

Gentle, Mary. **Golden Witchbreed.** Vista, ISBN 0-575-60033-0, 476pp, A-format pa-

perback, cover by Christopher Brown, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1983; this was Gentle's "breakthrough" book 13 years ago, and a bestseller when it originally went into paperback in the mid-1980s.) 8th August 1996.

Gibson, William. **Idoru.** Viking, ISBN 0-670-85778-5, 292pp, hardcover, £16. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; set in near-future Japan, it's about a rock star who aims to marry a virtual girl – the "idoru," or "idol singer," of the title.) 3rd October 1996.

Harrison, Harry. **The Stainless Steel Rat Goes to Hell.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86063-3, 254pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the latest in what has become a very long-running series [commenced 1961].) November 1996.

Hartwell, David G. **Age of Wonders: Exploring the World of Science Fiction.** "Newly revised for the 1990s." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86151-6, 319pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Non-fiction ramble round the sf scene; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; the original edition appeared in 1984, and this new version seems to have been beefed up both by revisions to the main text and by the addition of half a dozen appendices reprinting various Hartwell articles of recent years; it's a chatty, informal, enjoyable book.) October 1996.

Hayden, Patrick Nielsen, ed. **Starlight 1.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86215-6, 316pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at \$13.95 [not seen]; billed as "the debut of an original anthology series dedicated to sf and fantasy worth caring about," it contains all new stories by Gregory Feeley, John M. Ford, Maureen F. McHugh, Susan Palwick, Robert Reed, Carter Scholz, Martha Soukup, Michael Swanwick, Jane Yolen and others.) September 1996.

Jacques, Brian. **Outcast of Redwall.** Illustrations by Allan Curless. Red Fox, ISBN 0-09-



960091-9, 366pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Animal fantasy novel, first published in 1995.) 4th July 1996.

Jacques, Brian. **The Pearls of Lutra: A Tale of Redwall.** Illustrations by Allan Curless. Hutchinson, ISBN 0-09-176536-6,

406pp, hardcover, cover by Fangorn, £12.99. (Animal fantasy novel, first edition; according to the blurb, Jacques's "Redwall" novels, of which this is the ninth, have now sold almost two million copies worldwide; their success seems to be mainly in America, where adults appreciate them.) 4th July 1996.

Johnson, Oliver. **The Forging of the Shadows: Book One of the Lightbringer Trilogy.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-968541-8, 596pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; this is a first adult novel by a British publisher's editor [born 1957] who comes from a gaming background and previously has written a number of kids' game-books; it looks to be bog-standard post-Tolkienian "high" fantasy, but skilfully written.) 3rd October 1996.

Jones, J. V. **A Man Betrayed.** "The Book of Words, Volume II." Warner/Aspect, ISBN 0-446-67098-7, 504pp, C-format paperback, cover by Darrell Sweet, \$12.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; J. V. Jones [Julie Victoria Jones, not to be confused with the more stylish writer Jenny Jones] is a new British author, born 1963, now living in California; she's basically a purveyor of "light" fantasy, and *Locus* praised her first book for "a distinctive touch compounded largely of sadism and food"; in this new volume there seems to be a fair amount of sex and evacuation of the bowels too...) Late entry: April publication, received in July 1996.

Jones, Stephen, and David Sutton, eds. **Dark Terrors 2: The Gollancz Book of Horror.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06326-2, 379pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; proof copy received; it contains new stories by Ramsey Campbell, Dennis Etchison, Brian Lumley, Paul J. McAuley, Graham Masterton,

Kim Newman, Nicholas Royle, David J. Schow, Michael Marshall Smith, Thomas Tessler and others, plus reprints of recent stories by Clive Barker, Harlan Ellison and Peter Straub; a strong line-up; it's dedicated to the memories of John Brunner and Bob Shaw.) 24th October 1996.

Kearney, Paul. **The Heretic Kings: Book 2 of The Monarchies of God.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06312-2, 320pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 24th October 1996.

King, Stephen. **Desperation.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-65427-9, 545pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £16.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1996; it's set in the Nevada desert, in the eponymous small town.) 21st September 1996.

Knight, Damon. **Humpty Dumpty: An Oval.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86223-7, 287pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's billed as "a career-capping masterpiece by one of the sf field's greatest writers" – no less.) September 1996.

Koontz, Dean. **Ticktock.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1398-4, 311pp, hardcover, cover by Lee Gibbons, £16.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA [?], 1996; in his three-page afterword the author states that the book is really a "screwball comedy"; not to be confused with L. Frank Baum's *Tik-Tok of Oz* or John Sladek's robot novel *Tik-Tok*; Koontz's total sales are now up to "160 million copies worldwide," the blurb tells us.) 25th July 1996.

Kress, Nancy. **Beggars & Choosers.** Roc, ISBN 0-45-145484-7, 316pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; sequel to *Beggars in Spain*.) 25th July 1996.

Kress, Nancy. **Beggars Ride.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-44554-6, 303pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; conclusion of the "Beggars" trilogy, of which David G. Hartwell says in his accompanying publicity letter "this is one of the major sf works of the decade, perhaps of this part of the century.") November 1996.

La Plante, Richard. **Tegné: Soul Warrior**. Tor [distributed in the UK by Macmillan], ISBN 0-330-34853-1, 347pp, hardcover, cover by Eric Peterson, £16.99. (Pseudo-Japanese martial-arts fantasy novel, first published in the UK as Tegné: *Warlord of Zendow*, 1988; this is the US edition of November 1995 with a British price sticker; it was the author's debut novel; it seems a bit odd that Macmillan are re-importing it in its US hardcover edition when it has already appeared as a Sphere paperback original in 1988.) 23rd August 1996.

Lawhead, Stephen. **Byzantium**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224636-8, x+646pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Posen, £16.99. (Historical fantasy [?] novel, first edition [?]; Lawhead seems to have left the Christian publishing house, Lion, which produced all his previous books and is now being re-launched for the mainline genre audience; however, there's nothing in the blurb of this novel to suggest that it's anything but a "straight" historical epic about the adventures of a Dark-Age Irish monk journeying to fabled Byzantium; perhaps the book has real fantasy elements, but it seems a shame that so much historical fiction [a 200-year-old genre] has to masquerade as fantasy these days in order to find an audience.) 2nd September 1996.

Laymon, Richard. **Body Rides**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-5100-2, 501pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1996.) 8th August 1996.

Ligotti, Thomas. **The Nightmare Factory**. Foreword by Poppy Z. Brite. Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-0302-4, xxi+551pp, B-format paperback, cover by Eric Dinyer, \$13.95. (Horror collection, first published in the UK, 1996; as described in our last issue, this is an omnibus of most of Ligotti's short stories to date, including six substantial pieces which have not appeared in any previous collection; recommended.) August 1996.

Lucas, George, and Chris Claremont. **Shadow Moon: First in the Chronicles of the Shadow War**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50426-6, 452pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ciruelo Cabral, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; we weren't sent

the hardcover of this last year [despite the publishers advertising it on our back cover] so we haven't had a chance to look at it until now; it seems to be standard high fantasy with a humorous touch, Eddings style; we're not told much, but presumably it's a spinoff from an as-yet unrealized film project of Lucas's; Claremont, best known as a comics writer although he is the author of several sf novels, is likely to have done most of the writing.) 8th August 1996.

McAuley, Paul J. **The Invisible Country**. Introduction by Kim Newman. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06072-7, 319pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Young, £16.99. (Sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; McAuley's second collection, it contains nine excellent stories, including three from *Interzone* ["Gene Wars," "Dr Luther's Assistant" and "The True History of Dr Pretorius"]; the others come from such sources as *F&SF*, *New Worlds*, *New Legends* and *Omnis Online*; recommended.) 16th September 1996.

McDevitt, Jack. **The Engines of God**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648227-9, 419pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; this is McDevitt's third sf novel, following *The Hercules Text* [1986] and *A Talent for War* [1989]; the title is given on the cover as *Engines of God* [no "The"]; but that's not what its says on the title page.) 19th August 1996.

McGrath, Patrick. **The Grottesque**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-023929-4, 186pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Literary horror novel, first published in the USA, 1989; this is the film tie-in edition, issued to coincide with the movie directed by John-Paul Davidson.) Late entry: 27th June publication, received in July 1996.

Middleton, Haydn. **The King's Evil: Book I of the Mordred Cycle**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-1299-0, 328pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Player, £5.99. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first published in 1995; we never know whether to put these Arthurian items under "Spinoffery" or not; in a



sense, the Matter of Britain is the first great fantasy "shared world" – or it would be if the Greeks hadn't got there first with their Matter of Troy.) 22nd August 1996.

[Milhon, Jude] St. Jude, R. U. Sirius and Bart Nagel. **Cyberpunk Handbook [The Real Cyberpunk Fakebook]**. "How to tell if you or someone you know is a cyberpunk." Foreword by Bruce Sterling. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-979161-7, 192pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Humorous guidebook to all things cyberpunkish; first published in the USA, 1995.) August (?) 1996.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Adiamante**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86021-8, 316pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it seems to be an adventure novel-of-ideas about the human war-instinct versus pacifism, set in Earth's future.) October 1996.

Moorcock, Michael. **Fabulous Harbours: A Sequel to Blood**. Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-312-2, 228pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gustav Moreau, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in 1995; despite the misleading words "a sequel" in the subtitle, it's very much a collection, consisting of sundry linked "multiverse" stories first published in 1993-95 – although one, "The Girl Who Killed Sylvia Blade," dates from 1966; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 102.) 5th August 1996.

Moore, Alan. **Voice of the Fire**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05249-X, 320pp, C-format paperback, cover by Robert Mason, £9.99. (Collection of linked stories by a leading sf/fantasy graphic novelist; first edition; proof copy received; this is Moore's long-awaited debut "novel," a sequence of tales strung along a 6,000-year timeline in the Midlands city of Northampton; it's written in an intense, poetic manner, at times reminiscent of Russell Hoban's *Ridley Walker*, at times of Iain Sinclair's London novels; uncompromisingly "local," and as "English" as Garner or Holdstock, it will be interesting to see what the world makes of it.) 10th October 1996.

Murphy, Pat. **Nadya: The Wolf Chronicles**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86226-1, 382pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; Murphy's first novel in several years, it's a werewolf story set in the 19th-century American west.) November 1996.

Niven, Larry. **The Ringworld Throne**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-35861-9, 424pp, hardcover, cover by Barclay Shaw, \$23. (Sf novel, first edition; a belated sequel to *Ringworld* [1970] and *Ringworld Engineers* [1979]; reviewed, from an early proof of the subsequent British edition, by Neil Jones in *Interzone* 111.) Late entry: 1st June publication, received in July 1996.

Pewsey, Elizabeth. **The Talking Head**. Orion, ISBN 1-85881-298-4, 215pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Young, £9.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous A-format paperback edition [not seen]; this is a first children's book by "a well-known adult novelist" – presumably a British romantic novelist.) 22nd July 1996.

Pohl, Frederik. **The Other End of Time**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85644-X, 348pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it concerns Frank Tipler's theory of the entire human race's resurrection at the far-future "Omega Point" [see Paul McAuley's review of Tipler's book *The Physics of Immortality* in *Interzone* 98]; whether or not we're all going to achieve everlasting life, it's good to see an oldtime writer like Pohl [born 1919] still going strong after all these years.) November 1996.

Robinson, Spider. **Callahan's Legacy**. "The Long-Awaited Return to (Mary) Callahan's Place!" Tor, ISBN 0-312-85776-4, 219pp, hardcover, \$20.95. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) October 1996.

Russell, Mary Doria. **The Sparrow**. Villard, ISBN 0-679-45150-1, 380pp, hardcover, £23. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is a debut novel by a 46-year-old American paleo-anthropologist; it concerns a Jesuit priest and the theme of first contact with an alien civilization – which, on the face of it, makes it sound a bit like James Blish's *A Case of Conscience*; it's a "non-genre"



book, i.e. it seems to be pitched to the mainstream audience, "a magical novel, as literate as *The Name of the Rose*, as farsighted as *The Handmaid's Tale* and as readable as *The Thorn Birds*." 1st October 1996.

Saul, John. **Black Lightning**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40860-7, 397pp, A-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 8th August 1996.

Somtow, S. P. **Vanitas**. Vista, ISBN 0-575-60051-9, 352pp, A-format paperback, cover by Max Schindler, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995; a quote on the front cover, from SFX, describes it as containing "a full measure of orgasmic spurting, steaming blood and bad sex" - which is one way to sell a book.) 8th August 1996.

Stasheff, Christopher. **The Sage: The Star Stone, Book Two**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-39239-6, 374pp, hardcover, cover by Stephen Youll, \$22. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) Late entry: 1st June publication, received in July 1996.

Sullivan, Tricia. **Lethe**. Vista, ISBN 0-575-60039-X, 384pp, A-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £5.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this was a debut novel, and the American author, born 1968, who lives with her husband Todd Wiggins [see below] in Edinburgh, has been shortlisted for the 1996 John W. Campbell Award for best new writer.) 8th August 1996.

Tem, Melanie. **Tides**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1613-4, 246pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £16.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 1996.) 8th August 1996.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **The Peoples of Middle-earth**. "The History of Middle-earth, 12." Edited by Christopher Tolkien. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10337-7, xiii+482pp, hardcover, £25. (Fantasy collection, first edition; the final volume in the series, this may be the last "new" Tolkien book we'll see; like previous volumes, it consists of bits and pieces of various drafts, copiously annotated; in his valedictory foreword, Christopher Tolkien [who must be in his 70s by now] sounds rather weary.) 2nd September 1996.

Turtledove, Harry. **Worldwar: Upsetting the Balance**. New English Library, ISBN 0-

340-66698-6, xi+468pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Alternative-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; sequel to *Worldwar: In the Balance* and *Worldwar: Tilting the Balance*; apparently, a British hardcover edition appeared earlier from Hodder & Stoughton, but they didn't send us a review copy.) 15th August 1996.

Vance, Jack. **Night Lamp**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85687-7, 380pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (SF novel, first edition; proof copy received; my comment on Frederick Pohl [see above] also applies here: it's good to see an oldtime writer like Vance [born 1916] still going strong after all these years.) October 1996.

Wiggins, Todd. **Zeitgeist**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06316-5, 320pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (SF [?] novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it's a debut novel, set in the near-future turn-of-the-millennium USA, by an American writer of "literary fiction" [he uses that phrase himself, in his acknowledgments] who resides in London with his wife, sf novelist Tricia Sullivan [see above - the accompanying notes to her novel state that she lives in Edinburgh; perhaps they've moved]; the publishers are characterizing it as "Tom Robbins meets Quentin Tarantino," and Iain Sinclair, who has been brought in to give his imprimatur, uses the adjective "Pynchonesque.") 8th August 1996.

Willey, Elizabeth. **The Price of Blood and Honor**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85784-5, 445pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to her first two books, *The Well-Favored Man* [1993] and *A Sorcerer and a Gentleman* [1995], about the wizard Prospero - the relationship to Shakespeare's character of that name is unclear, though *Publishers Weekly* is quoted as saying that Willey is an author who plays in "the thinking fan-fant's forest of delights.") September 1996.

Williams, Sean. **Metal Fatigue**. HarperCollins Australia, ISBN 0-7322-5633-X, 458pp, A-format paperback, cover by Greg Bridges, A\$12.95. (SF novel, first edition; this is the first solo

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novel by Williams [born 1967], "one of Australia's most prolific and promising young writers of sf and horror"; Lucas has already given it a good review.) No date shown: received in July 1996.

Wilson, F. Paul, and Matthew J. Costello.

**Mirage**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1674-6, 312pp, hardcover, £16.99. (SF/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996 [?]; according to the accompanying publicity, this novel is "set to become a fascinating CD-ROM game.") 8th August 1996.

Winding, Terri. **The Wood Wife**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85988-0, 319pp, hardcover, cover by Susan Seddon Boulet, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by the woman who has become one of fantasy's best-known names in her capacity as the editor of numerous anthologies, it's set mainly in the Arizona desert.) October 1996.

Wingrove, David. **Days of Bitter Strength: Chung Kuo, Book Seven**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-67253-6, xxvi+662pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark

Harrison, £6.99. (SF novel, first published in 1995; the eighth and final volume of this huge opus, *The Marriage of the Living Dark*, has been put back to 1997.) 15th August 1996.

Wolfe, Gene. **Exodus from the Long Sun**. "Book Four of the Book of the Long Sun." Tor, ISBN 0-312-85585-0, 384pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (SF novel, first edition; proof copy received; the final "Long Sun" novel, by rights this should be another "career-capping masterpiece by one of the sf field's greatest writers" - see comment under Damon Knight, above.) November 1996.

Wood, N. Lee. **Faraday's Orphans**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06392-0, 351pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (SF novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received; N. Lee Wood, an American living in Paris, is married to sf novelist Norman Spinrad.) 24th October 1996.

Wood, N. Lee. **Looking for the Mahdi**. Vista, ISBN 0-575-60109-4, 383pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1996; proof copy received; this was the author's debut novel, published by Ace Books in the States some months ago.) 24th October 1996.

## Spinoffery

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 McBride. **Isaac Asimov's Utopia**. Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-280-0, 320pp, hardcover, cover by Bruce Jensen, £16.99. (SF sharecrop novel, first published in the USA, 1996; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; third in the trilogy begun with *Isaac Asimov's Caliban* and *Isaac Asimov's Inferno*, it's copyright "Byron Preiss Visual Publications Inc.") 19th August 1996.

Dalton, Sean. **Puzzle**. "Earth 2." Warner, ISBN 0-7515-1744-5, 230pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (SF TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; "Sean Dalton,"

we are reliably informed by another source, is a pseudonym for one Deborah A. Chester [born 1957], who has previously written sf novels in the "Operation StarHawks" and "Time/Trap" series and has also written under the further pseudonym "Jay D. Blakeney"; this book is "based on the Universal Television and Amblin Entertainment television series created by Billy Ray and Michael Duggan & Carol Flint & Mark Levin" [all "ands" and ampersands sit: read the Hollywood runs! - do they have arguments in the Writers' Guild about whether a given individual should rate an "and" or an "&?"] 1st August 1996.

Devlin, Dean, Roland Emmerich and Stephen Molstad. **Independence Day**. Bantam, ISBN 0-7522-0281-2, 280pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf movie novelization, first published in the USA, 1996; based on the screenplay by Devlin and Emmerich, in which aliens invade our planet and "a small band of survivors, led by a 12-year-old boy, a TV repairman and the last US president, plan a counteroffensive to save mankind" [the "TV repairman" is a nice Philclidian touch, isn't it?]; we haven't heard of Stephen Molstad before, but suspect that he is the actual writer of this book: a note on the authors describes him as "a collaborator on the Hugo-nominated novelization, *StarGate*" - which is news to us, as that book seemed to be credited to scriptwriters Devlin and Emmerich alone; so Molstad probably wrote the previous book too [and since when has any movie novelization been "Hugo-nominated"? - presumably they mean the film was so nominated].) 29th July 1996.

Foster, Alan Dean. **Dinotopia Lost**. "A bold new adventure in a hidden land of humans and dinosaurs." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50495-9, 350pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996; it has a brief quotation from Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* as an epigraph [which is more than Michael Crichton had the decency to do]; it's "set in the world of James Gurney's *Dinotopia*," though we're not told what this might be - a role-playing game?) 8th August 1996.

Gaiman, Neil, and Edward E. Kramer, eds. **The Sandman Book of Dreams**. "Stories Based on the World Fantasy Award-Winning Bestseller." Preface by Frank McConnell. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224632-5, xv+293pp, hardcover, cover by Dave McKean, £16.99. (Fantasy anthology, spun off from the graphic-novel series by Gaiman et al; first published in the USA, 1996; it's copyright "DC Comics," and contains all-new stories by Steven Brust, Nancy A. Collins, George Alec Effinger, John M. Ford, Lisa Goldstein, Colin Greenland, Barbara Hambly, Delia Sherman, Will Shetterly, Tad Williams, Gene Wolfe and others; it has no story by Gaiman himself, al-

though he has written the story-heads; as is the case with 90% of anthologies published these days, Martin H. Greenberg is the eminence grise behind this book - one deduces this from the fact that he's included in the back-page "Biographical Notes," although he's mentioned nowhere else; it's strange that this man, whose total of 700-plus anthologies makes the once-notorious Roger Elwood's score look paltry, now has so complete an arm-lock on American anthology publishing [not just in sf and fantasy, but also in the crime field] that he doesn't even bother to have his name on his books any more - perhaps it was proving counter-productive.) 22nd August 1996.

Gillis, S. J. **The Gillis Guide to Star Trek**. "Over 4000 entries, Every Episode, Every Series, Every Movie, Every Actor, Every Director, Every Writer, Every Producer." JG Communications Services [PO Box 44, Shrewsbury, SY2 5WB], ISBN 0-9528441-0-9, 307pp plus 10 unnumbered index pages, very large-format paperback, £11.99 [or £15 by mail order, including postage and packing]. (Alphabetically-arranged guide to the people behind the *Star Trek* TV series and its spinoffs; first edition; this has a simple black-and-white cover and may not at first look very attractive, but its large, double-columned, small-printed pages contain a great deal of information - more, surely, than can be found in any previous *Star Trek* guide; in fact, it's not just a guide to *Trek* but a potentially very useful guide to American TV in general, attempting as it does to describe the entire careers of the personnel involved [all series, TV movies and mini-series are listed for each individual, as well as cinematic feature-film work]; my only serious complaints are twofold: 1) there is no acknowledgment of sources, and 2) although scriptwriters are included, there's no attempt to cover the writers of novelizations and spinoff books [thus, it lacks entries for the likes of Diane Carey, Peter David and Michael Jan Friedman, who



have helped - but overall this self-published item is a genuine reference book which I'm sure I shall consult often; recommended.) No date shown: received in July 1996.

Gunn, James. **The Joy Machine**. "Star Trek, #80." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-00221-X, 278pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996; it's based on an unfilmed 1960s *Star Trek* story outline by the late Theodore Sturgeon; there's a ten-page afterword, "Ted and Me," in which Gunn pays tribute to Sturgeon and talks about his own return to creative writing after a decade or so of silence.) September 1996.

Jeter, K. W. **Blade Runner: Replicant Night**. Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-09983-3, 321pp, hardcover, cover by Stephen Youll, £22.95. (Spinoff sf novel, a sequel by another hand to Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and to the 1982 film based on it, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* [title courtesy of the late Alan E. Nourse]; first edition; proof copy received.) 14th October 1996.

Jordan, Robert. **Conan the Invincible**. Legend, ISBN 0-09-970391-2, 284pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £4.99. (Sequel-by-another-hand fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1982; this UK edition mentions the hero's original creator, Robert E. Howard, nowhere - and that's a shame; "Robert Jordan" is a pseudonym of James O. Rigney, Jr.) 1st August 1996.

Kervin, Rosalind. **The Mythical Quest: In Search of Adventure, Romance & Enlightenment**. Introduction by Penelopeively. Introductory text by Janet Benoy and others. The British Library, ISBN 0-7123-0491-6, ix+102pp, hardcover, cover anonymous (from an "Old French Prose

version of the Alexander Romance, produced in Rouen in 1445"), £12.95. (Fantasy retellings, first edition; an attractive, beautifully illustrated and well-annotated large-format book giving resumés of the stories of Gilgamesh, Jason, Odysseus, Alexander, Sindbad, St Brendan and others - rather a lot to cover in one slim volume; it accompanies a British Library exhibition of the same title, June-September 1996.) Late entry: 13th June publication, received in July 1996.

Lovece, Frank. **The X-Files Declassified: The Unauthorized Guide to the Complete Series**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-68232-9, 419pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Guide to the sf/horror TV series created by Chris Carter; first published in the USA [?], 1996; this one differs from previous books about the cult show in that it's bigger and more up-to-date but almost completely unillustrated [as is usually the way with "unauthorized" books].) 15th August 1996.

McIntee, David A. **The Shadow of Weng-Chiang**. "Doctor Who: The Missing Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20479-4, 293pp, A-format paperback, cover by Alister Pearson, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition; this one is set in 1930s Shanghai.) 15th August 1996.

Orman, Kate. **Return of the Living Dead**. "Doctor Who: The New Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20482-4, 281pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Wilkinson, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) 15th August 1996.

Rusch, Kristine Kathryn. **The New Rebellion**. "Star Wars." Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-10093-9, 383pp, hardcover, £22.95. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first edition; proof copy received.) November 1996.

Thompson, W. R. **Infiltrator**. "Star Trek: The Next Generation, #42." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-56831-0, 279pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) September 1996.

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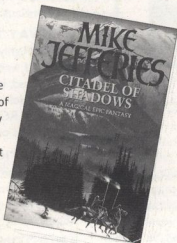
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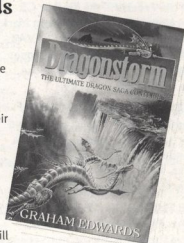


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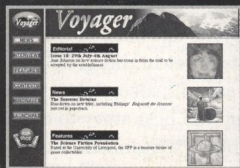
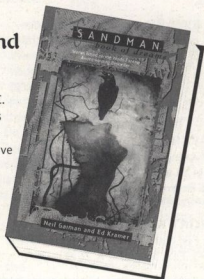


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