

December 1996




interZone

£2.75

114

- Guest editor Nicholas Royle
- M John Harrison
 - Rikki Ducornet
 - Christopher Burns
 - Nicholas Lezard
 - Elizabeth Young
 - Jonathan Carroll
 - Toby Litt

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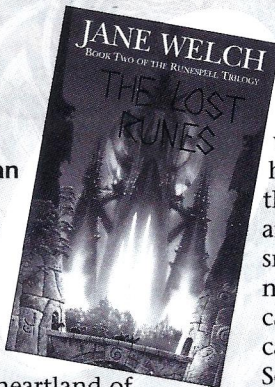
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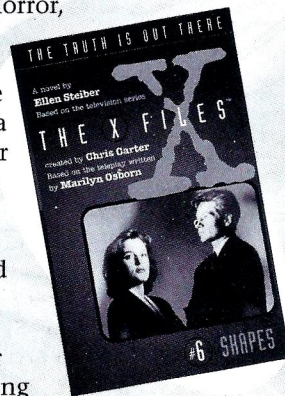
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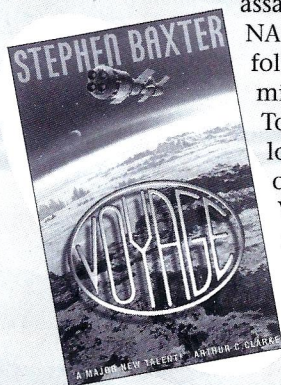


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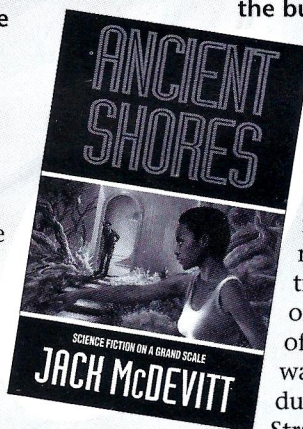
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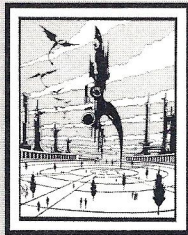
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science fiction & fantasy

Contents

Fiction

M John Harrison	6
The East	
Rikki Ducornet	13
Egyptian Gum	
Christopher Burns	16
Life Afterwards	
Nicholas Lezard	22
Planet of Shit	
Elizabeth Young	28
The Canon	
Jonathan Carroll	36
Alone Alarm	
Toby Litt	42
Zips	

Non-fiction

Interaction	4
Guest editorial & readers' letters	
David Langford	15
Ansible link	
Nicholas Royle	46
Millennial dreamer: profile of JG Ballard	
Nick Lowe	48
Mutant popcorn	
Paul McAuley, Chris Gilmore, Brian Stableford,	51
James Lovegrove, Andy Cox	
Book & magazine reviews	

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Nicholas Royle is the author of *Counterparts* and *Saxophone Dreams* (Penguin) and editor of the anthologies *Darklands*, *Darklands 2* (NEL), *A Book of Two Halves* (Gollancz) and *The Tiger Garden: A Book of Writers' Dreams* (Serpent's Tail). He has sold 100 short stories, several of which have appeared in *Interzone*.

Guest designer John Oakey

John Oakey is a designer for *Time Out*. He has also designed covers for Joel Lane's *The Earth Wire* (Egerton Press), Matthew Collin's *Altered State* (Serpent's Tail) and *The Tiger Garden: A Book of Writers' Dreams* (Serpent's Tail).

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Interface

Nicholas Royle

Discussion of the relative merits of genre and mainstream fiction will not go away as long as 'different' kinds of books are shelved in different parts of the bookshop. Likewise discussion of the merits of retaining a distinction between genre and mainstream. As most readers hardly need telling, the categories are beloved of the trade, the major publishing houses and the bookshop chains through which they shift their product.

There are readers and writers who will always prefer the cosy community feel of the sf section in Waterstone's or the horror shelf in Dillons. There are readers and writers also who will continue to benefit from the perpetuation of the ghettoes. And there are writers who would protest if an enterprising art editor wanted to adorn his or her next cover with anything other than a spaceship, a knight on horseback or a slobbering wee beastie; just as there are readers who require instant branding of their product so that there's no danger of them selecting a bum read.

I have never really been one of those writers or one of those readers. Instead, I am sufficiently naive to believe there are just books – good books, indifferent books and bad books. Books you like and books you don't like, as well as books you couldn't care less about. It works both ways, this cover thing. People can be put off writers' work by crass covers. Anyone buying M John Harrison's *The Machine in Shaft Ten and Other Stories* and expecting a bunch of spaceship stories would have been disappointed; similarly, anyone who might enjoy Harrison's distinctive treatment of the short story form would not have found themselves drawn to his work by the cover illustration. His covers these days – both from Gollancz in hardback and Flamingo in soft – are hugely improved and his books are categorised as general fiction. As indeed they should be: their appeal is sufficiently broad. And broad enough still to embrace the genre audience who were the first to appreciate his work in *New Worlds* and elsewhere.

Christopher Burns is another mainstream novelist who published some of his early short stories in the genre. Anyone who enjoyed the subtly beguiling qualities of Burns' fiction in early issues of *Interzone* will derive just as much pleasure from his mainstream novels.

Jonathan Carroll is published as a horror writer in the UK by HarperCollins, but they may be selling him short. The potential reader of a Carroll novel – someone who enjoys the presence of the magical, who appreciates the deeply felt emotional dimension, who is prepared to let go and be taken on a fantastic voyage through the imagination – sees a tombstone cover with lots of gold leaf and thinks *trash*. If Jonathan Carroll were writing in Spanish or Portuguese he would be called a magic-realist.

The example set by Little, Brown/Abacus with Iain Banks is a good one. The sf novels – which clearly are genre novels and none the less entertaining for that – get the middle initial and an honest, straightforward sf cover. The mainstream books continue to appear in variations on the simple black and white design that has become his trademark. They still sell in to Forbidden Planet and they still sell on to customers. The reason is simple. Punters don't simply want blood and guts, or knights and dragons, or spaceships and aliens – they want Iain Banks, they want his new book, just as they want Harrison and Carroll and Ballard, or whoever their favourite authors may be.

Call me naive and idealistic, but readers are not stupid and do not need to be talked down to constantly by publishers and media who persist in insulting their intelligence.

None of the above should be taken to mean that I don't care for the genre. I do. I love it. I love science fiction, fantasy and horror. The good stuff. Not the bad stuff. And I'm indifferent to the indifferent stuff. Of course, it's largely subjective. I love what I love: the authors I have already talked about, and others, often writers you're as likely to find in general fiction as on the genre

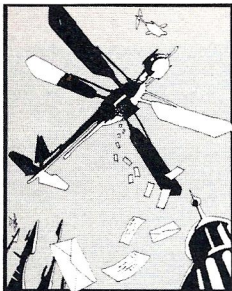
shelves. It was my love of the genre that prompted me to ask David Pringle if he might want to repeat the guest-editing experiment that *Interzone* tried in April 1995 when Charles Platt borrowed the editor's chair for one issue. I am grateful to David Pringle for having said yes, thereby giving me the chance to introduce to the *Interzone* readership some writers they might not otherwise have come across, yet, as well as reintroducing some of the finest names from the magazine's earlier days.

Rikki Ducornet is an American novelist and short story writer whose work I only came across recently, on the recommendation of a friend, while I was compiling a book of writers' dreams for *Serpent's Tail*. As Ducornet is well known as an illustrator as well as a writer, I am delighted she also agreed to provide the tailpiece illustrations which appear with her story.

Nicholas Lezard and Elizabeth Young, widely published as literary critics over recent years, have lately started to produce some excellent short fiction. Sharing an interest in sf, both Lezard and Young relished the challenge to produce original stories for *Interzone*. Likewise Toby Litt, whose debut collection *Adventures in Capitalism* made quite a splash when launched by Secker & Warburg earlier this year.

I have greatly enjoyed guest-editing the issue but will only consider it to have been entirely successful if you, the readers, enjoy the fiction and its presentation. If, for whatever reason you don't, please remember it's only for one issue; normal service will be resumed with *Interzone* 115. I have only been responsible for commissioning the fiction; the non-fiction has been commissioned and edited, as usual, by David Pringle, whose choice it was to use the JG Ballard profile which I wrote originally for the *Guardian*. The whole issue, fiction and non-fiction, has been designed by John Oakey, whose services I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been able to secure.

Enough from me.



Interaction

Readers' letters

Dear Editors:

Having just returned to the *Interzone* after an extended time in so-called reality, I arrived to discover that all is well in your domain of space time. I arrived at *Interzone* 112 and found the letter from Mark Baumgart of Ortonville, Michigan.

The wider issue of this is that, like it or not, we now live in a multi-media world where it is the ideas that are important, not so much the media of their expression. We watch *Babylon 5* or *Doctor Who* and we automatically classify them as one form of media and reject them as any other. We suspect a rip-off that destroys the original. Merchandising and TV success is the most recent form of what has happened to successful novels for years, whether science fiction or not. We have all had the experience of reading a great book then seeing it butchered into a movie.

But it doesn't have to be that way. It used to be *the Book of the Film*, today it is *the Book*, *the Audio-tape*, *the Computer Game*, *the Fanzine*, *the Internet Newsgroup*... and then *the Film*. To echo Harlan Ellison, the writer must be responsible for the creation of his work as a total entity, and we must recognize that the form of its expression is merely a bridge between the creator and the audience. The outcome must be that the creator's meaning should be expressed in one form or department of media without the whole becoming butchered in the process.

The ultimate responsibility lies with the creator of the work of art and it is they who must be aware of the many challenging opportunities of our multi-media world. Ellison makes the point that the movie industry is dominated by the personality cult of the director and the writer gets left behind as little more than a word mechanic. Equally, in the great Literature Industry there is a corresponding cult of the writer in the guise of the eminent Victorian gentleperson living in high and mighty intellectual superiority outside the modern world. In my view, both are seriously in error.

The multi-media world demonstrates that the world of ideas

and their meaning requires more than one format for their expression. Meaning is not just words, meaning far exceeds the capacity of the dictionary to express it. What we must do is look at the work of art in a new way that reflects the changes in the means of expression that technology has created. If we in science fiction cannot manage this, then what chance for the rest of creative free expression?

John Sutcliffe

New Mills, High Peak

Dear Editors:

I was quite surprised to see Nick Laury's long letter in *Interzone* 111 on *Babylon 5*, and I was quite irritated by the views he put forward, though I shouldn't be amazed. After all, I immediately thought, isn't this just another example of the bad British habit of knocking something or someone because it's successful? Then I sat back and thought again. Hadn't I got a little irritated at times with all this talk about the "five year story arc"? Well, yes; but it's my own stupid fault for reading so much comment from the trades about an sf TV series. If I were a Net junky as well, this might be even worse...

I'm not convinced that the talk about the "five year story arc" is all generated from J. Michael Straczynski and the production team and publicists; but let's for a minute assume that it is. The big difference between *Babylon 5* and *Trek* in their back story and strategic development is that with *B5*, the thing is limited. It was conceived as a whole, and when we reach the end of the five years, that will be all. No licensing, no characters brought back from the dead, no sequels. On the other hand, events in the *Trek* universe are dictated by how Paramount see the financial performance of "the franchise." Let's be honest, even Roddenberry never had any idea how much back story would be generated by the three seasons of the original series, and there are some considerable howlers generated by the inconsistencies which have arisen from events alluded to in early stories of what we now have to call "classic *Trek*."

And let's look at it in terms of product. Every product, the marketeers tell us, has to have a USF – a Unique Selling Feature. For *B5*, the USF is that it lasts five years and then finishes. No plots left dangling in mid-air after cancellation, and a degree of being able to get your audience hooked for the whole run because the thing is structured to hold together.

I do feel that Nick Laury was falling into the trap of the sterile "*Trek* is better than *B5*" "Oh no it isn't" "Oh yes it is" argument which is one of the more worrying aspects of any sort of enthusiasm. The trouble is, that's all too easy a trap to fall into. I prefer to work on the premise that sf in the media is reminiscent of Dr Johnson's comment about women preaching: "Sir, it is like a dog walking on its hind legs. One does not expect to see the trick done well: one is surprised to see it done at all."

This does, from time to time, result in some disappointments. Back in the fifties there was a cartoon in a fanzine showing a cinema queue for an sf film: two fans (in the traditional propellor beanies) were in the queue and were both enthusiastic about what they were going to see, whilst the rest of the crowd had long faces. The second frame showed everyone coming out – all with great big smiles across their faces except for the two fans... so we come forward to the present day and what do we find? *Independence Day* grosses hugely everywhere that it's shown, with multiplexes showing it simultaneously on multiple screens, whilst fans mutter darkly into their beer over how it's all been done before, and don't you remember *V*, and what's with that laptop that magically communicates with the aliens, and fancy pampering to the conspiracy theorists with all this talk of Area 51 and so on and so on and so on...

Though I hate to say "lighten up", lighten up! Enjoy these things for what they are, not for what they are not. Then some out there might even be able to enjoy both *B5* and *Trek*, and curl up with a good book afterwards (possibly even cyberpunk).

Robert Day

Coventry



The East M John Harri

To Claire McDonald

I lived for some time in central London. My work kept me busy in the evenings. But during the day, especially the early afternoon, I had nothing better to do than sit in Soho cafés. I liked Soho. I can't remember now if the Bar Italia was open in those days. I know the Living Room wasn't. Anyway, I tended to frequent old-fashioned places with a mixed clientèle. Places like Presto's where you could still meet someone over thirty, someone who wasn't in films, advertising or comics: someone with – or more likely without – a real job.

In late 1989, at about the time of the opening-up of East Berlin, I used to see around the streets and parks an old man, a bit frail, strangely dressed, clearly a foreigner in a world where there are few clear foreigners any more. He was reluctant to talk. Sometimes he seemed reluctant even to stop walking. After some effort I cornered him one day in Soho Square. He was sitting on a bench with some pigeons round his feet. He wasn't feeding them. They seemed agitated with pleasure anyway, bobbing and dipping and walking up and down in the sunshine.

"You're reluctant to talk," I said.

He smiled.

"You would be too," he said. "If you were me."

When I say that he was old I am using the word in a special sense. At first I put his age at sixty or seventy. Later I realised that time had less to do with it than use. I began to think of him not so much as an old man as a young one who had been used up or tired out by some enormous effort of will.

The way he dressed was in itself odd. He always wore a long, very dark gaberdine, unbelted and buttoned from the neck right down to his knees

with large buttons of the same colour. It was tight at the shoulders and loose at the hem. The cloth was dusty and had faded unevenly – as if at some time in his life he had stood still for very long periods in strong sunlight – so that it looked grey in one light, purple in another. He also wore a stiff black hat with a round crown and a wide round brim. Both of these items had a strikingly foreign, old-fashioned air.

All the time I knew him he never seemed to shave. Despite that his beard was rarely more than a white stubble. Strong curly white hairs sprouted out of his nose, from deep in his nostrils. Also from the edges of his ears. His eyes, pink-rimmed, with irises of a very pale blue, were always watering. One day they gave him a look of intelligence, and you thought he might be an academic of some kind; the next, a look of cheerful cunning and you didn't know what to think. Every so often he would take out an enormous cotton handkerchief – white with a border of blue and brown lines of different thicknesses – and blow his nose loudly on it. This never failed to attract attention, especially in the crowded Patisserie Valerie.

He reminded me of someone but I could never think who. He claimed to have come from the East.

"So. What do you do?" he said.

"I'm an entertainer," I said. "Conjuror. Look."

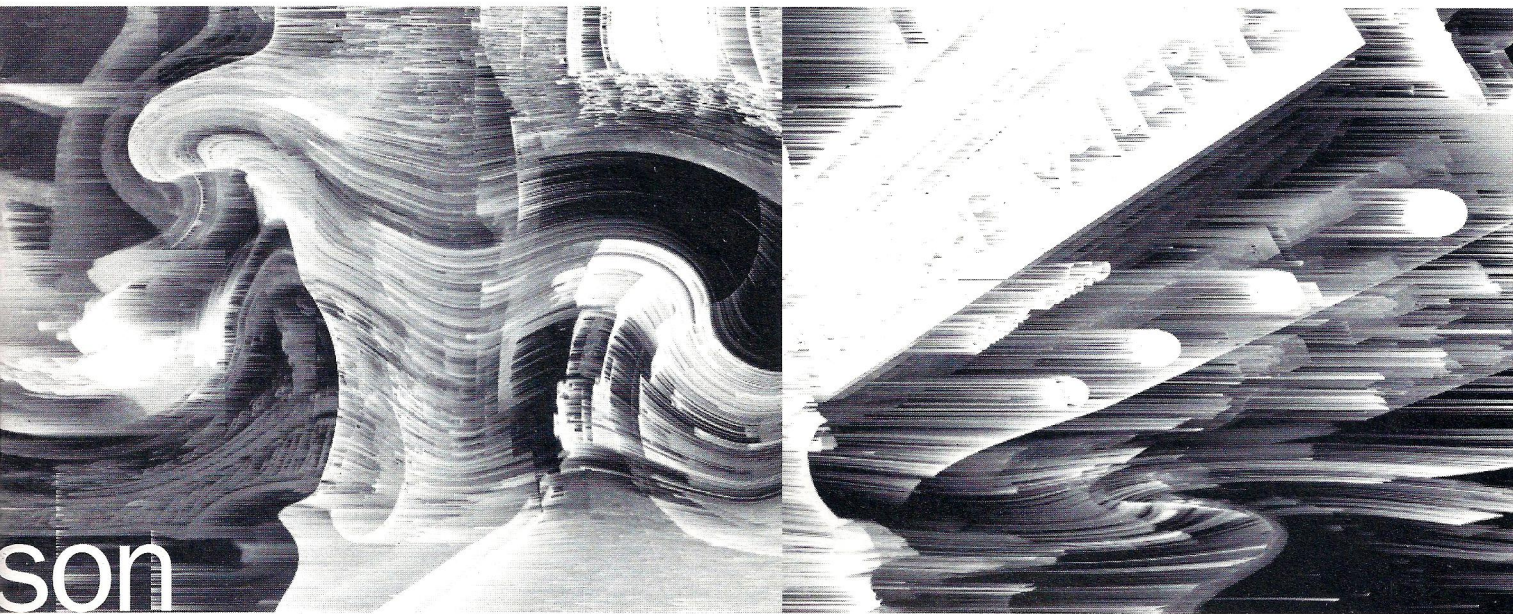
"Very impressive," he said.

"What do you do?"

He indicated Soho Square, the pigeons, the young women in the windy sunshine.

"I do nothing, as you see."

Drawn to one another the way a young man and an old man often are, we began to meet frequently. It was always in Soho. I introduced him to caffè latte and zabaglioni. I found, too, that he would eat



son

anything baked with crushed almonds. Confectionery like that reminded him of something eaten daily in the East. He couldn't successfully explain what, and I was left feeling that if I didn't understand him the fault was mine. It was a small thing. After a while, he began to tell me the story of his escape. He always began the same way, by giving me this advice:

"Michael, never be a refugee."

"Will I have a choice?"

"A clever answer. Someone as clever as you doesn't need to hear my story."

"I'm sorry. Go on."

"I mean this: never try to shove your life into a cheap suitcase at the last moment. Never try to save your books. Never wear your best overcoat. Have a light rucksack ready-packed. Take it with you to the office. Take it to the homes of your lovers. Always wear tough outdoor clothes and boots. Never try to save your family –"

There he broke off, breathing hard and staring at me intently. One side of his lower lip trembled.

"Promise me that, Michael."

And before he would carry on I had to promise.

"Your English is good," I said one day.

He smiled.

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"You're a linguist then," I said.

"We're all linguists in the heart," said the old man. And his blue eyes glittered like water seen from far off on a good day.

His English was very good indeed. There was never any doubt about his English. But the story he told had such a skewed feel it was like a bad translation, full of innuendoes just where you wanted clarity. The language he couched it in was good, it was more than good. The story itself was

what needed translating. This he failed to do.

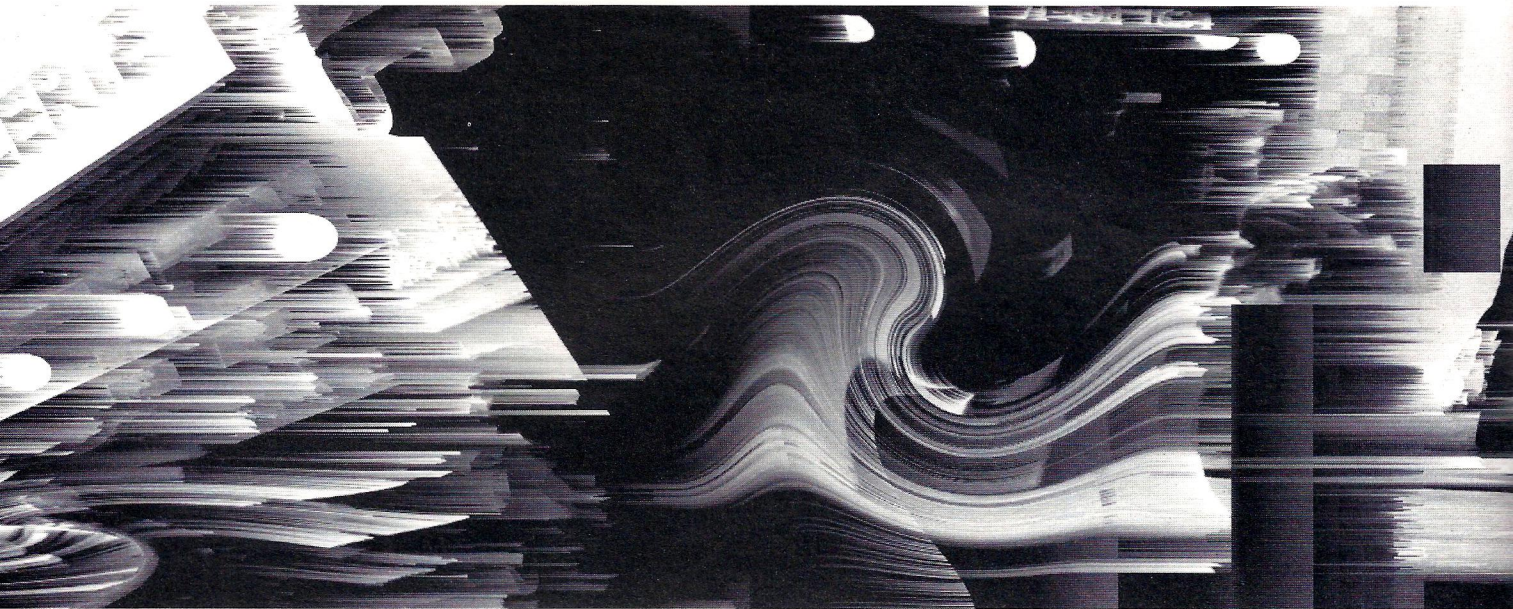
"Every spring, the thaw leaves black mud eighteen inches deep on top of the permanent ice. The day we came west from Zoostry, we were up to our knees in it. People from further back kept catching us. We stumbled along as best we could. They drove past in everything from post vans to horse-drawn sleds. Then, on the outskirts of Avigdor: a child run down ten minutes before we arrived! Stolen military vehicle. Her little white leg was like a stick someone had driven into the mud until it broke. She looked up at us with such dumb surprise."

He put his face in his hands.

"What could we do? Menkorad, Zentny Norosh, the Triangle: we'd come three hundred miles. We had no morphine, no blankets. No supplies of any kind. The Vorslatt people hadn't eaten for days. You could see them in the evening, trying to cook their shoes."

We were conscious of our roles. I was young, he was old. I would listen while he spoke. Each time we met the old man had a new story for the young one. But he was careful not to monopolise our conversations. He drew a history from me, too. Who was I? How had I come to be what I was? He listened to my drab little tales – Northern colleges, Northern towns, Hell, Hull and Halifax – with as much interest as I had in his exotic ones.

"What I hate is the women with faces like buns," I tried to explain. "Every one of them carrying this plastic bag with a Pierrot printed on it. Do you know what I mean?" Or: "Up there it still smells of the coking plant. The buses are always late. And there's always this fucking sign on the baker's van: 'REAL' BREAD. I mean," I asked the old man, "what's that? Inverted fucking commas!"



Even the the fucking *bread* calls its own existence into question?”

I don't know what he made of Britain through my eyes. But each of his stories further wrenched my idea of Eastern Europe. It dawned on me one day that he wasn't describing any Europe, any East, I knew. Was he using some abandoned nomenclature? For instance when he spoke of "Autotelia", perhaps he only meant Bulgaria. Just as when you say "Bohemia" you are essentially talking about the place we know today – well anyway the place we used to know – as Czechoslovakia. Encyclopaedias and atlases could tell me nothing. The tiny nation-states he described had gone unrecorded. They lay curled up inside his memory, but nowhere else: bereft of landscape or tradition, cultural heritage or political and economic history.

"The Triangle," I tried one day: "I'm not sure I understand you when you say that."

We were upstairs at Maison Bertaux. Despite that, the old man looked off into the distance, as if the walls were no impediment.

"You said," he reminded me, "that my English was perfect."

"Oh it is. It is."

His escape, the old man often said, had exhausted his reserves not just of physical but psychic energy: imagination, hope, his whole sense of himself. But in the end I had to ask myself this. If he had come from the East, why should he have had to escape? Wasn't that the whole point? No one had to escape from there any more. I stopped believing him. Slowly he assumed a new definition. Just another old man, I told my friends, who had gone mad in a bedsitter in North London. This didn't make his stories any less entertaining (if entertaining is the proper word to use here). Neither did it prevent me from following him around London to see if I could discover more.

At the British Museum he studied trays of broken artifacts from vanished Polynesian cultures. At the Science Museum he was afforded some amusement by an exhibit meant to deconstruct the phlogiston theory of burning. At the Imperial War Museum he stood for almost an hour in front of a diorama of Mons. His face was illuminated by nostalgia. I kept a list. I still have it, though it grows more meaningless to me every year. He visited more than forty sites of this type, including the incomplete buildings of the new British Library. He attended an opera scored by Philip Glass, during which he slept; and the Man Ray exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery. There he smiled sadly over an amazing photograph entitled "Rose Selavy, 1924", as if he had once known its subject.

(Was "Rose" the proper spelling here, or a mistake of the Serpentine's? Was the whole name perhaps only an alias or Surrealist *nom de guerre*, "Selavy" code for "C'est la vie"? How would one ever find out? I still puzzle over this. Had Man Ray somehow managed to reach out over the years and counter the old man's mystery with a mystery of his own?)

Museums, art galleries, exhibitions.

These are not inexplicable locations. But how to describe the others? Abandoned cinemas in Haringey and East Finchley. The filled-in dock network between Surrey Quays and the river. Railway arches in Forest Hills and Putney. He visited them all. Even less explicable were the deserted intersections of arterial roads, viewed at midnight; the rainswept forecourts of Ikea, Wickes, Do It All, entered after closing time. At these venues he met other displaced people. They were men or women with white faces, often well dressed but bothered by two or three winter flies. I never heard them speak. They stood in groups of two or three, apparently studying the entrance arch of the Blackwall Tunnel or the north-



west corner of the Tottenham Hale one-way system.

I don't know why I say "apparently" here. But it seems apt enough. I shadowed him for a month. Nothing was revealed. Did he know I was there? Was the very meaninglessness of his itinerary a way of telling me how little I could learn?

Eventually, irritable and determined, I followed him all the way home.

Well, in fact I didn't.

He lived on Anson Road, one of the wide endless tree-lined streets that connect Tufnell Park and Holloway. An entire generation disappeared into those streets and never came out again. They came to attend the polytechnic and ended up staring at the peeling wallpaper above the Ascot. They put money in the gas meters and payphones. They paid or were unable to pay the rent. Answering the doorbell, they left a trail of wet footprints on the stairs from the bathroom – it was for someone else. They arrived young and quickly became middle aged – in the end they owned a shelf of outdated sociology texts and some albums on the verge of collectibility. They had become bald men in black leather jackets, women like fat pigeons with woollen coats and very red lipstick.

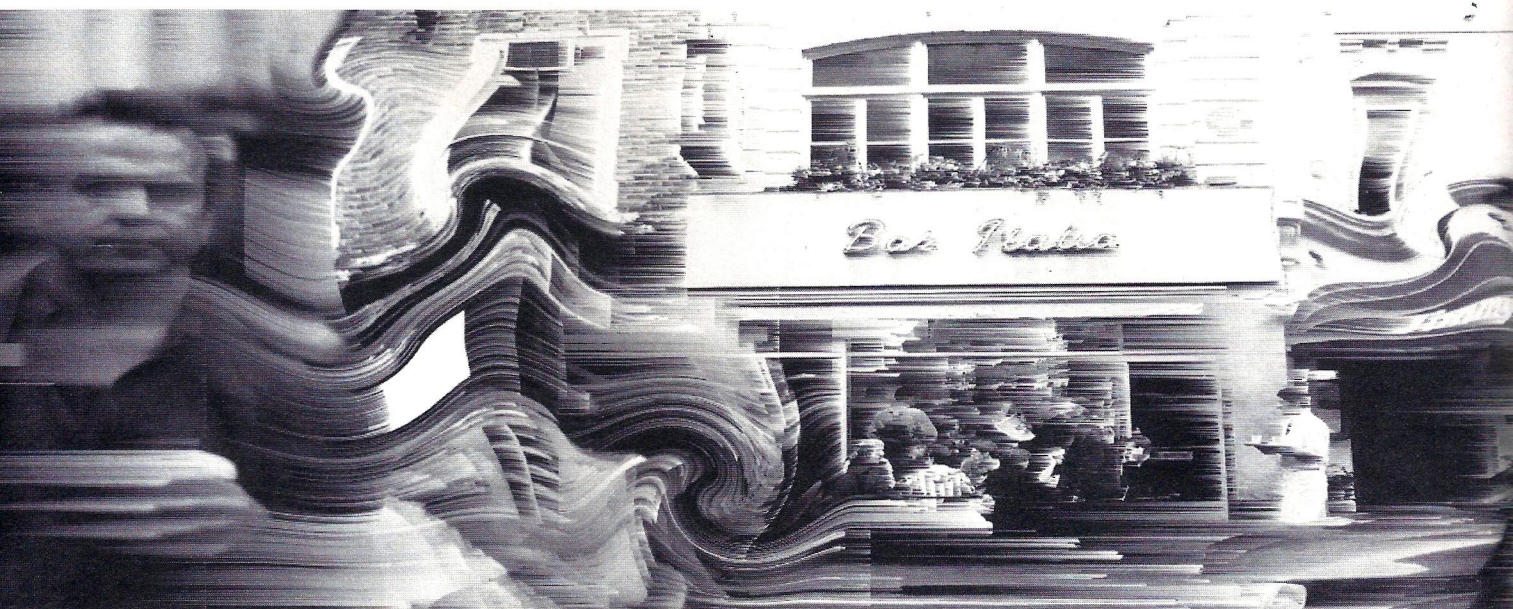
Motionless in the pouring rain, I watched him move to and fro behind an uncurtained third-floor window. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. Light from the bare bulb above his head gleamed dully on the yellowed wallpaper. He still had his hat on. If you had asked me then, I would have identified him as the perfect inhabitant of the vanished 60s bedsitterland I have just described. It was the last time I could have claimed that. I was wrong about the old man. Perhaps I was wrong about Tufnell Park, too.

About an hour later he left the house and went off towards Holloway. I watched him out of sight then hurried up the cracked stone steps and rang doorbells until someone buzzed me in. The lino on the

stairs was grey-green, the fire-retardant door of each bedsitter a starved matt white. I let myself into the old man's room – *Hey Presto!* – and looked around.

It was one of three single rooms partitioned out of the original double, with about twelve feet by seven of floor space. The stuff crowded in there fell into two broad categories, that which had been provided by the landlord and that which belonged to the old man himself. Into the former category fell the single bed (but not its yellow coverlet); the Baby Belling stove (but not the coffee-maker on its blackened front ring); the wardrobe with its peeling veneers, but not the short feathered stick propped up in one corner of it. Into the latter, a random collection of small objects (but not the chipped green chest of drawers he had arranged them on); an oval mirror (but not the stained sink he had positioned it above); and two or three items of clothing hanging on a hook on the back of the door.

I sat on the bed for some time studying these things. I felt only faintly guilty for being in there with them, perhaps because I could make nothing of them or the life they represented. The coffee-maker seemed bulbous and misproportioned. The mirror frame featured in bas-relief what appeared to be a fight between mink. The feathers were dyed fluorescent greens and reds; or were they? One moment the items on the chest of drawers looked like the residue of a hundred days out – trips to the seaside, trips to the country, river trips in hired boats – the next they seemed otherworldly, unreadable, impassive. A brass lizard, part of a triangular candle, a few polished stones, a tiny red tin of ointment, two or three ornamental boxes – all placed carefully around a framed photograph and smelling faintly of incense. As the light went out of the air outside, they seemed to shift a little, to settle towards one another. There was a faint, objective sigh in the air – the sound that inanimate things might make if they relaxed – a smell of dust.



Suddenly I realised what the design on the yellow bedcover was intended to represent. I got to my feet quickly and, blundering out of the room, slammed the door behind me, breathing as if I had run halfway down the Strand after a bus. I was desperate to get out of there. Then something compelled me to go back in and break everything I could find. In the end, I was breaking perfectly ordinary things. They seemed wrong to me. I broke a Birds of the World tea tray; a mug with Ronald MacDonald's face.

The old man vanished from Soho. Within a week I missed him. I missed the challenge of him. Also, I remembered his watery blue eyes and his trembling lip, and wondered if I had gone too far. About a month later he walked into Presto's and sat down opposite me. His coat was glazed with dirt, as if he had been living in the street. He looked ill. His face was emaciated, his movements stiff; his hands had a continual slight tremor. When he spoke, I could hear his breath going effortfully in and out in the pauses between sentences.

"You don't look too well," I said. "Can I get you something?"

When the waitress came he ordered zabaglioni but had trouble with the spoon. "I can't eat this," he said helplessly. To start with it was hard to get him to say anything else. He kept looking at me out of the side of his eye, like a nervous horse. If he wasn't watching me, he was watching the pedestrians entering Old Compton Street.

"No different here," he said.

Suddenly, he laid his hand over mine.

"Michael, these people are animals! You must be so careful with them!" He stared hard at me.

"Michael, promise me you'll be careful!"

"I promise," I said.

This seemed to relax him. He began spooning up the zabaglioni very fast and noisily.

"I haven't eaten!" he said. "I haven't dared eat!"

He said: "Someone broke into my room. My things. I —"

He looked out of the window.

"Look, that man!"

"It's just a man," I said.

"No. He —"

He stopped.

"I haven't been back there," he said.

"You feel violated," I said.

"It's not that," he said. He took his hat off and looked inside it. "It's the terror of the return journey. You know?"

I didn't know.

"Despite that," he told me, "I'm determined to go back."

"Do you mean the bedsit?" I asked.

He stared at me.

"Home," he said. "The terror of the journey home."

"Ah."

He said that he could no longer get on with the Western life. That was what he called it: the Western life. He shrugged, wiped around the inside of the hat with his handkerchief.

"I'm going back to the East."

By then, I suppose, every journey had become a terror for him. As soon as he finished eating, I offered to help him along Charing Cross Road to the tube station and put him on a train. He eyed me uncertainly. I saw that he was frightened of me now, whatever he might say. Not because I had wrecked his room. He couldn't know I had done that. It was because I was human.

He thought. Then he said:

"Very well. Thank you. At least someone has been kind to me."

It was the early evening rush hour. We walked slowly. He leaned on my arm. Despite it all, he was still interested in the West. The newest Japanese sports car or motorcycle, parked at the kerb like a halogen-lit sculpture, would stop him dead. A



bookshop window would draw him across the pavement against the grain of the crowds. Paperbacks and maps, cheap souvenir T-shirts: he winced away from secretaries, but he wouldn't be put off the things that attracted him.

Leicester Square station was a nightmare. Tourists and schoolchildren marbled a solid pack of commuters like the fat in beef. He clung to the escalator rail. When we found his platform at last, he wavered near the edge of it, nodding morosely as the older kids kicked the younger ones and tried to push them on to the rails. "I suppose the train will be crowded," he said. It was. "I don't think I can get on," he said; but he did. Before it pulled away, there was one of those empty moments typical to the Underground. (The carriage doors remain open. Apart from some faint ticking noises the train is silent and goes nowhere. People begin to look at one another.) For perhaps a minute the old man stared out at me from between two women in business suits and heavy eye make-up, terror in his eyes. I stared back uncomfortably, aware that everyone was watching us. He fumbled suddenly in his coat.

"Take this, Michael. Please take it."

He pressed into my hand something small and angular, folding my fingers round it gently with his own.

At that the doors banged shut and the train drew away from the platform.

That was the last I saw of him.

When I looked down I saw that he had given me the little framed photograph which had stood on the chest of drawers in his room, surrounded like an icon by the votive objects of his exile. Something I had failed to break.

I found it difficult to pick up my existence where it had left off.

At night I worked, drawing dyed feathers out of a top hat. Hey Presto. By day I could not get the old

man out of my head. I was bitterly sorry to have been the cause of his despair. But how could I help that now? In addition, Soho seemed empty to me without his ironies. I missed the sound of him snorting into his large handkerchief. I was bored.

To get away – and perhaps as a kind of penance too – I revisited many of the sites I had followed him to, haunting a street of deserted factories here, the strip of derelict land behind a Sainsbury's there. I was attracted to Hackney and Wanstead, the bleak parks, the chains of reservoirs which lay like mirrors discarded northward along the Lea Valley. Winter turned to spring. In Clissold Park the wind tore the petals off the crocuses and blew them about. Male pigeons fluttered down to the paths, inflating themselves to bob and dip. The females looked up in *faux* surprise and walked in rather aimless arcs. It was spring, and suddenly the streets were full of haggard young men and women from Stoke Newington, made tired and anxious by their success at marriage, culture journalism and modern parenting. They looked so awkward somehow, so uncomfortable with their lot. I stared at them puzzledly all one afternoon. They gave me an idea. I went back to the old man's bedsitter.

It was empty.

Even the carpet had gone. All I could find of him was a diagram drawn on the floor in chalk; a permanent sense that the room had only just been vacated.

I sat there in the silence.

I thought to myself:

So. The world is now full of people like him.

People who have taken advantage of political change to infiltrate a society in which they would otherwise be easily discovered. Every lonely Soviet businessman we overhear discussing kilos of this, kilos of that in a pub in Cosmo Place. Every white-faced fifteen-year-old girl in a belted black PVC jacket, being sick on the Central Line platform at Tottenham Court Road.



Kazakhstanis with cowed mothers, Kurds with political magazines, Estonians who run literary agencies from rather nice houses in Camberwell – they are all less from the East than the “East”.

Is it possible to believe that?

The photograph he had given me was no help.

It had been taken in a garden darkened with laurel and close-set silver birch – a family picture centred on a very attractive black-haired woman in her mid-thirties. She wore a long jumper over jeans. Her brown eyes had the round, frank, slightly protrusive look and nervous vivacity associated with thyroid disorder. Her smile was delighted and ironic at once – the smile of a lively art student rather surprised to find herself a matron. In front of her stood two boys five and ten years old, resembling her closely about the mouth and eyes. And there, behind the three of them, with his hand on her shoulder and his face slightly out of focus, stood the old man: younger-looking but clearly himself. Was he her father? Or were they a marriage? It was hard to say. I inclined to the former. I found myself staring as deeply into the photograph as he had stared into my face when he said:

“Michael, never become a refugee!”

I placed it on the floor in front of me.

Towards dark, the world spun briefly. Vertigo! I thought. I thought I heard a bird call sweetly from one of the laurel bushes in the picture. I felt myself falling in towards it. I thought I heard a woman’s voice exclaim –

“Aren’t we lucky to have this? Aren’t we?”

I stopped myself in time.

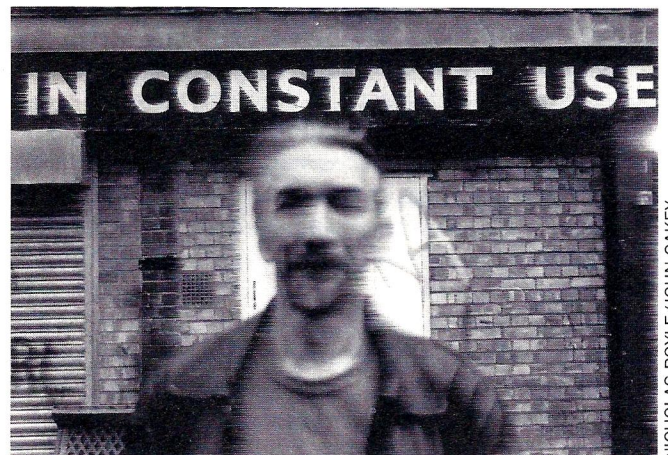
Those were the words I used to myself, “in time”; although what I meant by them I wasn’t then entirely sure. I went out of the bedsit and locked the door behind me. I went down into the quiet street.

The room is mine now. I don’t live in it. I keep it locked when I’m not there. I bought a small chest of

drawers and painted it green. On it I put a few of the things that have had meaning in my life so far. A ceramic rose brooch bought from a stall in Camden in 1986. A box of Norwegian matches. Some shells which, if you put your nose close to them, still give off the faint salt smell of the East Anglian coast. One or two things like that, set in front of the old man’s photograph. Once a week I go there and stare into his daughter’s eyes until I begin to feel myself falling.

“In time,” I tell myself. “In time.”

M John Harrison’s association with *Interzone* dates back to the magazine’s origins in the spring of 1982 when his story “The New Rays” opened the very first issue. Several stories have appeared in these pages since. He has published seven novels, of which *In Viriconium* was nominated for the *Guardian* Fiction Prize, and *Climbers* won the Boardman Tasker Award in 1989. His new novel, *Signs of Life*, will appear in the spring from Victor Gollancz. His short stories have appeared in venues as diverse as *Woman’s Journal*, *New Worlds* and *Omni*. He currently reviews new fiction for the *TLS*. M John Harrison lives in Tottenham with a three-year-old burmilla cat called Iggy.



NICHOLAS ROYLE/JOHN ONKEY

Egyptian Gum Rikki Ducornet

Despite the Egyptian Gum she has been out of sorts all day. The gum is four thousand years old and until recently congested the cranial cavity of the Princess Noferu-Ra. The gum is gorgeous, a little like a fine piece of black jade threaded green. It has the consistency of toffee and tastes like arak and tar. But so far it has not taken effect; perhaps the effect is cumulative? The directions on the tin are maddeningly vague. Should she wait another hour or should she take another bite? She isn't used to organics, but the gum is supposed to clear the nasal passages and invigorate the mind, and she is desperate for a clean wind to dispel the brain's evil weather.

She breaks off another piece and pops it into her mouth. This organic stuff has her optimistic; everything is so damned virtual these days, including her own mutable children. How selfish they are in their chronic dissatisfaction! Despite the care she had taken during their gestation, the aesthetics established well in advance of conception, Doctor Baltrúsaitis' bold affirmations she had embraced despite the price.

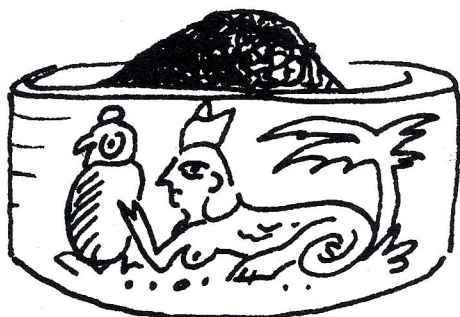
Feeling queasy she recalls a conversation with her youngest, Belpagor, when he was only four. He had asked her what he was *truly* like. "*Truly*. Before the changes." "The changes were made when you were in the womb," she had said, "so you see, you are truly what you always were and what you were meant to be." "Before the changes I was *smooth*," Belpagor had squealed, squirming in her lap. "As smooth as a little pig." And he had oinked.



Wakeful at dawn, she is infected with wistfulness, wistfulness for a simpler time. Once, and not too long ago either, things were more likely to last. The pyramids of Egypt had barely budged until the twenty-first century when an experimental *son et lumière* had caused them to spontaneously combust. A chain reaction had levelled Cairo; the Blue Nile was white now, and the White Nile blue. Ever since, mutability has spread so thick and fast the entire planet is crepitating in an ongoing fit.

All of her children are beautiful and all of them scaled. Their little tusks are so perfectly charming it breaks her heart to see them laugh, and the inflorescence at their throats and wrists is stunning if – she is the first to admit it – a little dated, a little "sixties". "The fashion will be back," she tells them. "It's a perennial favourite! Hold on! Don't be so jittery!" But now they are clamouring for fins – a thing beyond her comprehension. A costly intervention and there could be scarring. She pleads with them but the children, recently designated archons, cannot be reasoned with, reason having been outlawed in the nineties. What's more, they're armed. "Aren't you taking your new powers a little too seriously?" she chides them, gently. "After all, I am your Mom." Clearly exasperated with her they roll their eyes. "These days, Dickhead," Aurora grumbles, "all the archons are finned. Mom – where have you been? Don't you ever tune in to the Beepathon or what?"

Sucking on the Egyptian Gum she frowns and while they scurry about thrusting their fists into



cereal boxes she attempts to philosophize. *My children are like astronomical bodies*, she tells herself. *They existed even before they appeared. One needs a star chart to track them down.*

Because her children are so mutable, more than the children of other generations, they describe the shape of time (look how fluid, how viperlike they are, draped over counters, the kitchen table and chairs!) – at least the shape time takes within a limited horizon. They, poor innocents, are too inexperienced yet to know that there is a limit to mutability.

“There’s a limit to mutability,” she mumbles, the gum sticking to her teeth. “You know.”

“The limits of the corporeal are surpassed daily,” snaps Belpagor, the most pedantic of the lot, his voice bristling with what she fears is contempt. She notices how whenever this topic of conversation comes up – the topic of limits – her children grow even more agitated.

“The theory,” Belpagor barks, “is boundless.” She nods.

They are enigmas, these children of mine, she thinks, swallowing one piece of gum and breaking off another, *for if on the one hand they are human and therefore both mortal and unpredictable (and so, surely, somehow transcendent), they are also bound by certain predictable laws. Puberty, for example, and Heaven help them, senescence.* As her children, glittering like glass in the morning sun devour breakfast, she continues to brood: *Still they need to eat. And they shit – now there’s a function even archons cannot do without, although it is true that the original artifact, so unappealing, has been dramatically modified; the event is now aesthetic and philosophic: the artifact, lucent, compact, shaped like a shell or the seed of a rare flower, tells the archeologist who slumbers in us all something substantial and highly personal about ourselves. A minute or two of interpretation of this elegant frass is always one of the morning’s greatest pleasures. Furthermore, there is something reassuring about it, because it continues to be, despite the modifications (which are, after all, only so much window-dressing), an event that has taken place since Eve fed the Apple to Adam. And yet the event is always a unique event, a little like a birth or the production of a work of art.*



“Shitting should be enough to satisfy you!” she blurts out, startling the children who for a moment stare at her with a glimmer of interest. “Make you proud to be human – that *constancy*, I mean. Or, at least, make you *feel* human!”

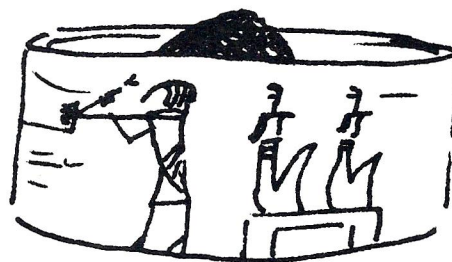
“O, that.” Belpagor yawns. “Fuckit, Mom. You’re just talking *residues*, here.” Aurora agrees: “*Not* events.”

“Yes! Yes!” she cries. “But *tangible* residues. So little is tangible these days. You yourselves are barely palpable! Look at you! Dressed to the gills in sequins, anamorphoscopic rings in all your pierceable parts and forever up and running. Why! You’re barely there!”

“That’s the whole point, Mom!” They peel past her and out the door. “It’s the pulse that lights up the sign that matters, not the sign!” His back to her, she reads Belpagor’s T-shirt:

SIGNIFICATION SUCKS

What’s odd, she thinks, *is the persistence of certain archaic expressions such as Mom and Dickhead and Fuckit.*



“Fuckit sticks!” she hollers after them. “But nothing else sticks! You children flow through my fingers like sand.”

“Consider the ratio of events!” Aurora turns and hisses as she continues to move away, gathering speed. “Mom: you’ve see a lot of us and let’s face it: we’ve seen a lot of you.”

“But not in the *new guises!*” she is screaming now. “Give me a chance to catch up! All night I’m awake thinking of schemes of classification! For my own fucking children!” She is raving to the wind. The children have vanished and the street, as empty as a skull, is silent.

Of course she knows it is a lost battle. Back inside the kitchen the Beepathon has ignited and is already firing new exalted messages as even now her children are on their way to have their skeletons attuned to some new narrative, some undreamed-of interpretation bubbling in the torrent of the possible. The days wears on. In its tin the Egyptian Gum bakes malevolently.



JONATHAN COHEN

Rikki Ducornet is the author of five novels - *Phosphor in Dreamland*, *The Stain*, *The Jade Cabinet*, *The Fountains of Neptune* and *Entering Fire*. She is currently working on a book of short fiction for Henry Holt publishers, *The Word “Desire”*. Rikki Ducornet lives in Denver, Colorado.



Ansible link

David Langford

In a simple but moving ceremony at the Clute residence on 21 September, *Fantasy Encyclopedia* co-editors John Clute and John Grant (with various cronies) got resoundingly smashed to mark the completion, at long, long last, of this mighty tome. Diana Wynne Jones proudly related her critical input of writing "Bollocks!" in the margins of all the more high-flown passages. Toasts were drunk to patient publishers Little, Brown, who had rather expected to have the book in print before now (see FANTASIES OF HISTORY); a 1997 Eastercon launch is likely (see PROPHECY). Finally, the end of more than three years of BONDAGE was signalled by a RITUAL derived from ARTHUR and CELTIC FANTASY, as the tired and over-emotional editors simultaneously gave their noses a DOLOROUS BLOW and cast the 4000-plus-page MS into a sacred puddle on Camden High Street, where it was grasped by the mystic arms, clad in white samite, of the LADY OF THE LAKE (played by L,B editors Tim Holman and Colin Murray) and borne away to the blessed ISLAND of AVALON, played by an editorial desk in Lancaster Place. And in the solemn silence that ensued, the one faint sound that could be heard through the poignant evening stillness was a hoarse cry of, "Oh fuck, we've still got to write the Introduction..." *Explicit.*

Down the Fontinella Wisp

Harlan Ellison's hot new publication is his 1960s *Star Trek* script *The City on the Edge of Forever*, with a "blistering" 25,000-word introduction describing how the version screened in 1967 was "eviscerated" in such a "fatally inept" fashion that it won a Hugo award. Tragically, Ellison failed to publish this fearless denunciation in the fleeting interval, from 1967 to 1991, when its prime target Gene Roddenberry was alive to reply.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch has resigned as editor of *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, to write many contracted books ... and is angered by the "mean, vicious, ugly rumor" that she didn't jump but was pushed. She'll stay in charge until her successor has been trained, probably in early 1997.

Jane Yolen announces with great sadness that her eponymous young

adult fantasy/sf imprint at Harcourt Brace Co. "is yet another victim of publishing *-ity*. (As in iniquity, stupidity, cupidity, or any other *-ity* one can think up. In fact we could have a contest: *name the publisher's -ity*)." That is, despite being highly praised and gathering various awards, it has fallen victim to the grey-suited priests of the Bottom Line.

Danger: Contagious Penguins

Much uproar was caused by a "Virus Warning from the Internet" flyer, sent to hordes of British sf people in late September. This was based on the pernicious "Good Times" hoax, which falsely warns of an e-mail virus so hideous that merely reading a message headed "Good Times" will erase your hard disk, damage the computer processor by placing it in a nonsensical "nth-complexity infinite binary loop," automatically e-mail the fatal message to all your friends, etc. The thing doesn't infect computers but people, who are urged to spread the false meme by warning everyone they know: it propagates like a chain letter. Internet watchers who have spent ages trying to clean this particular brand of shit from the stables were less than pleased that some dim-brained hoaxer had dumped in a whole new bucket, with a changed name - "Irina" instead of "Good Times" - and a false signature, "Professor Edward Prideaux" of the non-existent "College of Slavonic Studies."

The hoax flyer was traceable, through characteristic errors in address labels, to Penguin's sf review mailing list! Some warned the publishers of this abuse of their database... only to be boggled by flyer #2, on Penguin notepaper: "You may have received a letter from a Professor Edward Prideaux recently falsely warning of a virus called Irina. Please note that Irina is *not a virus*, and the views of Prof. Prideaux are not those of Penguin Books. Irina is the title of Penguin Books' ground-breaking interactive novel ... put together by the sf author, Stephen Baxter, by Guy Gadney, former Head of Electronic Publishing at Penguin, and Hugh Barnes, an Executive Editor at Penguin."

That is, Penguin started a virus scare simply to promote the book. Steve Baxter hastened to say that he

hadn't been told of this deliberate idiocy: "I did know they were planning a teaser-type PR campaign, but..." Net and virus pundits urinated on Penguin from a great height; the *Daily Telegraph* quoted Guy Gadney as responding, "It is very unfortunate that we have created a scare - it was not our intention."

Gadney wrote to me: "The intention of the release was to convey the tone and the conspiratorial nature both of the plot of the novel, and of some areas of the Internet itself. Of course, we were keen that the information should be kept by the journalists and not sent out electronically. To this end, the release was sent in hard copy by post to named individuals to avoid any wider dissemination." A bit disingenuous! Compare the first flyer: "Please be careful and forward this mail to anyone you care about ... Alert your friends and local system users." Quick quiz: when people are urgently instructed to warn e-mail contacts, what route are they likely to use? Sending scary information to journalists and reviewers is of course a well-known way "to avoid any wider dissemination."

To speak with careful understatement: there are some very, very silly people at Penguin.

Infinitely Improbable

Hugo Goes. A motion to eliminate the Hugo Award for Best Original Artwork, originally carried at the 1995 World SF Convention, was ratified this year: the category no longer exists. I gather there is now to be a campaign for its reinstatement...

Thog's Masterclass. *Ostrich Dept:* "Aldous Huxley was one of a handful of writers to integrate ideas about science into his novels." (*New Scientist*) *Sports Dept* ("Wide!"): "He [Arthur Conan Doyle] wore his fame lightly, taking more joy in bowling a century on the cricket field than in all the kudos of the literary establishment." (William Hjortsberg, *Nevermore*) *Simile Dept:* "So we stayed, and tried to sleep, and the moon tumbled by like the ball in an exhausted roll-on deodorant." (Michael Bishop, "Snapshots from the Butterfly Plague") *Rough Justice Dept:* "The X-Files. At the end of the last series [...] Scully (Gillian Anderson) faced dismissal for subordination." (*The Times*)

Life Afterwards

Christopher Burns

The curtains closed with a mechanical smoothness that was as unnatural as motion in a cheap cartoon film. For a few seconds everything was silent but for the noise of their hems trailing across the tiled floor, and then the room filled with the light reverberations of pre-recorded organ music. A minute later we filed out into the ornamental gardens. A statue depicting the resurrection was shining with rainwater, and around its plinth the black soil was vivid with splashes of crocus. I made my way to the line of cars and turned to look back. Above the chimney the sky trembled as heated air collided with the cold.

At home there was silence in every room. I turned on the television just to have noise and movement. Everything went on as if nothing had happened. There was trouble in Belfast, a soldier shot dead in Israel, politicians argued over economic statistics. On the other side of the world an eruption had thrown thousands of tons of ash so high into the air that it would circulate for months, perhaps years, altering the climate before it fell back to earth. I thought of the violence of heat, of Iris's coffin bursting into flame as instantaneously as if it

had been touched by lava. I was exhausted and tense, and full of emotions which I could not begin to resolve. For a long time, perhaps years, I had wanted her dead.

And now I began to feel guilt. Everyone had told me that I had been-a saint, that I could have done no more, but my conscience still worried at me. Even the vicar, later that day, shook my hand and said "Alan, you have my admiration as well as my sympathies." Then we walked together to the back of the church. A square had been neatly cut in the turf, and I saw that a severed worm was slowly writhing in the dark soil.

"Do you want to do this?" the vicar asked, and when I nodded he handed me the plastic container. I unscrewed the top while he placed a pad beside the hole so that I could kneel down. I slipped my finger into the mouth of the container. I had to push it deep, as long as the finger itself, before I touched powder. I thought I could detect heat still lingering in the milled remains. And then I poured what was left of Iris into the ground.

On the way back, before I shook hands, I noticed that ash still coated my fingertip. I slid it into my

mouth and sucked. The ash tasted of charred wood, nothing else. I was disappointed; I had wanted it to taste of death.

As soon as I got home I phoned Kate. "Do you want to come round?" she asked.

"No," I said, "It's better that I leave it."

She was silent.

"People will be calling here to make sure I'm all right," I explained. "It will take a few days, no more."

That night I still slept on my half of the bed.

Neither could I break the habit of laying two places at the table. On the next morning the paper arrived that Iris always read, but I never did.

When I went shopping I put enough food for two in the basket, and had to return some to the shelves.

On the way out I even noticed a new paperback by one of Iris's favourite authors, and bought it for her. I took it home and placed it unopened among her collection. It was the only one with an uncreased spine.

That day I had a number of visitors and phone calls, but there was only one person I wanted to talk to.

"I don't think I can stay here," I said. "I thought I could, but I can't."

"Living with another person for a long time must dull the senses," Kate said, her lips close to the receiver. "You've become a creature of habit and comfort."

"Yes," I agreed, "thank God I have you."

"Loss," she murmured, "sharpens the appetite."

I had met Kate about three months before Iris died. I began by being both defensive and patronising. I played the man of experience, the selfless husband nursing his wife through the final stages of a harrowing illness, the samaritan who bore the insults and misjudgements that had become part of a loved one's terminal disease. Secretly I felt that this was the only way in which I could be of interest to Kate. After all, she was twenty years younger than me.

But after a short while she began to make me feel gauche and uninformed. I had always had an interest in classical music, and foolishly I tried to impress her by mentioning a concert I had attended several years before. Intrigued, she began to question me on points of interpretation. Her knowledge far exceeded mine. I had been put on the spot.

Kate lived in a house in the country, at the end of a confusion of unsigned lanes. Inside were hundreds of records and books. I was astonished that someone so much younger than me could lead a life which was so cultivated, so unencumbered by expectation and routine. I was, of course, completely smitten.

"I want to come to you," I told her.

"When?"

"Now."

There was only a short pause.

"I'll be waiting," she said.

I hung up. Iris had been poured into the ground less than a day ago.

That night I was freed of the past. It fell from me like shackles loosened by an angel. Sated, languorously happy, I fell asleep in the arms of the only woman I had ever truly loved.

But during the night I dreamed of Iris. I woke gripped by panic. Everything was silent, Kate slept soundly beside me, and yet the extraordinary force of the dream still hung like smoke in the room, and would not let me return to sleep.

When, some hours later, Kate opened her eyes and reached out for me, she asked if I had slept well.

"As if I were dead," I said.

We married quickly. I insisted on a honeymoon abroad. Kate agreed but asked me where.

"Wherever you want," I answered; "I'll be happy so long as I'm with you."

The truth was that each night I was swallowed up by the past. It held me within its grip, suffocated me in times that had gone for ever. Each evening, as I waited for sleep, I knew that somewhere in the night I would be married to Iris again. She had never travelled, had not wanted to. If I were out of the country, I reasoned, she would not be able to follow.

And she did not. Kate and I spent a fortnight in Italy on a cultural tour, and during all that time I slept through peaceful, easy nights.

We returned with our bags filled with used film, books, mementoes, and a blissed sense of tiredness. After we had unpacked I changed into some old things and stretched out on the couch. Kate kissed me, then went to take a shower.

The telephone rang and I picked it up. A woman spoke. The voice was familiar but unreal.

"Is she there?"

I was so weak that I fell down on to my knees. There was a thump as they hit the floor, but I felt no pain.

"I said, is she there?"

"No."

"Of course," she went on, "you only had eyes for each other, so you wouldn't have noticed anyone as insignificant as me. But I was there all right, at the very back of the church, in the corner, almost in the shadows. You never even looked my way."

"Iris —"

"How strange, how unsettling, how repulsive to see someone your age behave like a lovestruck adolescent. You were revolting. I was nearly sick watching you. And what about all our friends? None of them were there. I was the only one from your side. Every guest was from your little tart's family. It proves something: you can live with someone for years and years, and still not know them. I'm ashamed of you, Alan,"

"Where are you, Iris?"

"Where do you think I am? Where you left me. At our house."

"Our house?"

"That's right," she said firmly. "Our home. You should have no difficulty finding it again. There's an estate agent's sign in the garden. A big one."

The line went dead.

I stood silently for a while, then went to the door of the bathroom and shouted that I was going out. Kate peered round the glass door with sodden hair. "There's no need. We'll shop for food tomorrow."

"I'm going to check on the house. There could have been some vandalism while we've been away."

She was puzzled. "Surely not. The agent would have written." She stepped out of the shower. Her skin was slippery with water and a few bubbles of lather, and my heart went out to her. "Are you sure you're all right?" she asked. "There's no reason for you to drive all the way there and back."

"It will make me feel better. You know, put my mind at rest."

But I drove towards the house like a man driving into the unknown.

The house was in darkness. The estate agent's Sold sign stood undisturbed in the front garden. As I unlocked the door and pushed it open a sense of coldness touched my throat. There was a small stack of letters beside the telephone; someone had picked them up from behind the front door and placed them there.

"Iris?" I asked. I was so nervous I could hear my voice flutter.

There was no reply.

"Iris," I said again, more firmly this time. Nothing greeted me but silence.

I looked at the mail.

Of course there was a rational explanation: the new owners must have picked it up and left it there. They had wanted to repaint the walls before moving in, and had also talked of new carpets, new curtains; I had authorised the agent to let them enter so that they could take the measurements.

A fine scattering of dust coated the surfaces of the telephone. I scored a track through it by running a finger along the edge of the cradle. Then I grasped the phone and picked it up. There was no sound in the receiver. As I requested, it had been disconnected.

I switched on every light in the house and went from room to room, calling Iris's name into the silence. The name echoed in the empty spaces. All her furniture had been sold, her books and clothes given to a charity shop. There should have been no trace of her at all. But like a fool, I even opened cupboards and peered behind curtains. I wanted to be utterly certain that I had overlooked nothing. Finally I returned to each room, switched off each light, and closed the front door behind me.

"Everything all right?" Kate asked me on my return. She was lazing by the fire, listening to

a CD of baroque music she had bought in Milan.

"Yes," I said, "fine."

I had been hallucinating, I thought. There was nothing to worry about. Everything had a logical explanation. I was tired, exhausted even. Why, I'd read accounts of men enduring terrible hardships whose imaginations had become overactive, men who were spoken to by people no longer there. No doubt loss, moving homes, remarriage had played their part in whatever equation had led me to imagine that Iris had called. It was even possible that I had an infection of some kind, a viral attack probably, which could induce mild neuroses.

But several days later, when Kate was out, Iris rang again.

"You didn't come. I was waiting."

"I came, Iris. But the house was empty."

"Do you expect me to believe that? I'm sitting here now, still waiting. You didn't even ring back."

"The phone is disconnected."

"Really, Alan, if you're going to lie then at least have the decency to tell a *believable* lie. How am I speaking to you now, can you answer me that? And what have I done to deserve this treatment? I was a good wife to you. Now look how you repay me. You desert me, you run off with someone who's young

enough to be your daughter. She fills your head with airs and graces, with rubbish about music – *you*, who I always thought was tone deaf. You refuse to acknowledge me, you won't return my calls, you spend all your time with your mistress when you should be looking after me. I *am* an invalid, after all."

"The house is empty, Iris. I sold your things. The house has the carpets and the curtains and a few chairs, and that's about all. I even sold the beds. I don't know where you are, but you're certainly not at our home. Anyways, it's been sold. The new people are ready to move in."

"Do you think I can't read a notice? But you can't have me evicted. That's not legal."

"You don't exist, Iris. Earlier this year I watched you die. They carried you out of our home in a zip-up bag. I had you cremated because you said you wanted that. I even went to the garden behind the church and tipped out your ashes. I can't be having this conversation with you, because that's all you are – a couple of pounds of ash buried in a garden."

"You poor man. You're sick. I'm your *wife*. Your only legal flesh-and-blood wife. I'm not a figment of your imagination."

"You must be. I must be ill in some way."

She laughed. "If you're going mad it's because that woman is driving you mad. How do you expect me to react to you, when you say things like that? You should forget her. Forget her and come back to me. It's the only way."

"Earlier this year I watched you die. They carried you out of our home in a zip-up bag."

"Iris, she's my wife."

"Wife? Wife? You didn't divorce me, did you?"

I did not reply. A car was pulling up outside.

"You're married to me, Alan. I'm not going to let you go. Your marriage is bigamous; it's void. I wanted to shout that from the back of the church, but out of love for you I kept silent. But I could see how weak-willed you've become, and what a charlatan you are. I imagine that you hang on that girl's every word, pretending to understand what she says. Where is she now?"

"Shopping. She's just coming back."

"Really? You used to do *all* of that. Making you dependent on her, is she?" She made a clicking sound of disapproval. "Really, everything is so *obvious*."

"I live a different life now."

"Not for much longer. You're coming back to me. You're married to me, not to anyone else. And that's the way it will be until one of us dies."

I heard Kate's key in the door, and saw her shape shiver through the whorls of glass. I pushed my fingers on to the prongs to cut off the call, then raised them so that I could hear a dialling tone in the earpiece. As soon as Kate came through the door I put the phone back on its cradle.

Almost immediately it started to ring.

I stood motionless. The ringing drove like a squall through the room. Kate looked at me curiously, her hands filled with shopping bags.

"Answer it then," she said; "I can't."

Gingerly I picked up the phone.

Iris was frighteningly quiet and reasonable.

"You can't get rid of me as easily as that. And I'll make you face up to your responsibilities, see if I don't. Oh, and Alan?"

"Yes?"

"You'll tell Kate that I called, won't you?"

She hung up.

"Who was it?" Kate asked, walking into the kitchen with her bags.

"A wrong number."

"You look flustered. I thought it must be bad news."

"It was just someone fooling around, that's all."

She looked at me with a level stare, and I had to avert my eyes.

I thought she had forgotten the incident, but half an hour later she said "Alan, I heard you talking when I was walking up the drive. Was that really a wrong number?"

I could not tell her the truth; she would never believe me. She would think me insane. Worst of all was the possibility that she might think that Iris was somehow still alive, and that I had been lying to her from the moment that we met.

"Was it?"

I sat helpless.

"Because it sounded to me as if it was much more than that."

I breathed deeply. "It was someone who has been annoying me. She rings me up and I wish she wouldn't."

"You don't know who she is?"

I shook my head.

"Have you tried tracing the call?"

"No."

Kate strode across to the phone and keyed in the code that would announce who the last caller was. I waited. She shook her head. "There's nothing on here," she said. "The last incoming call was yesterday. It must have been you who rang out."

"Of course it wasn't me. The system must have failed, that's all."

Kate sat down again and studied her fingernails for a while.

"Look," she said at last, "if someone has decided to harass us I don't want to receive calls like that. It happened to a friend of mine. She told me that Telecom will put an interception on the line for a fortnight, so that all incoming calls go to their switchboard."

"A fortnight – is that all?"

"After that, if the calls persist, they recommend changing the number."

"Right," I said.

For two weeks I had peace, but in my bones I knew that Iris would phone me the day after the interceptions ended. I was terrified, too, that Kate would answer. What would Iris say to her, I wondered; and how would Kate react?

I was near the phone all day, pacing close, circling it, a man expecting an attack. In the late afternoon it began to ring, then stopped just as I lunged to pick it up. Kate walked into the room. I shook like a criminal caught in the act.

"You look guilty," she said crisply.

I grinned weakly.

"Are you sure there isn't more to this? Don't you want to tell me something?"

"No. I can't be responsible for other people's stupid games."

She nodded but was unconvinced. I hesitated, and for a rash moment thought I would tell her everything. A second later I realised how foolish this would be.

"I think I'll go for a walk across the fields," Kate said. "Perhaps your friend will ring while I'm away."

"I'll come with you. Please."

"Alan, you've been standing guard over that phone. I'm going out for half an hour. Why don't you ring whoever you want to when you know I'm not here?"

"Half an hour," she said.

Five minutes after she had left the phone rang again. This time it did not stop ringing until I lifted it from the cradle. I held it to my ear but did not speak.

"Alan, aren't you tired of childish tricks? And why did you have my calls intercepted?"

"It could have been my wife who answered this, Iris. Why are you trying to destroy me?"

"How dare you accuse me -- you of all people! And I could have got through, you know."

"What?"

"It would have been easy, a simple little lie, that's all. But I thought I'd humour you, just to prove how much I still want you. But that's as far as I'll go. Change your number, go ex-directory, and I'll still get through."

"Iris, why can't you just leave me alone?"

"Why should I turn my back on the only person who gave my life meaning and purpose?"

"It was never that way between us."

"Don't lie. You felt good with me because you know how much I needed you. You were *necessary*. You can't tell me that this girl makes you feel the same. She certainly won't feel it about you. Face it, Alan, you're not her kind. You haven't got the right sensibility. Music means nothing to you. Deep down, you think it's valueless, flippant."

"You're wrong."

"Inch by inch, minute by minute, I'm drawing you back to me. I've given you the strength to leave her now. Do it. Do it quickly, before she gets bored with you. I forgive you. You know I do."

I cut off the call and left the phone lying beside its cradle. It was silent for about a minute, and then a piercing unearthly whine squealed from its earpiece.

For a few moments I was scared, and then I realised that Iris had reported that I had left the phone off the hook. The exchange had put a howler tone on the line.

I hung up. I was ready for the next call, ready to cut it off again. None came.

"Well?" Kate asked when she returned.

I looked at her wearily, like a beaten fighter no longer able to defend himself but still unwilling to fall.

"Was there a call?"

She must have read the answer in my face. We stared at each other. I had the sense of an unseen weight moving. Then Kate strode across the room as though she had already begun to edge me out of her life.

"You needn't lie to me," she said bitterly. She selected a CD, put on a headset, and settled back in the chair with her eyes closed. Her face was pale, strained, and I could hear the music as if from a great distance.

"Vivaldi?" I asked.

"Corelli."

I shrugged.

After a few minutes I walked across the room and turned down the volume. Her eyes shot open; they were angry and distressed.

"I have a confession to make," I began.

"Don't bother. I don't need to know. And take that self-pity out of your face. It's too late now to start feeling guilty."

The phone rang. I jumped as if it had been wired directly to my nerves.

"Aren't you going to answer it?"

I stood in an agony of indecision.

"Well?"

I snatched it up. "Yes?"

"Alan," Iris said, "come to me now. I'm waiting here for you. Please. This time I'm begging."

"Hold on."

I turned to Kate and held out the phone to her. She turned away and increased the volume of the CD. Patterns whispered in her headset.

I put the phone down, strode across the room, and pulled Kate out of the chair. As I dragged her across the carpet the headset lead stretched taut, and then the jackplug flew from its socket and whipped across the floor in a ragged arc. She twisted from my grip but I caught her wrist again with one hand and held up the phone with the other.

Kate took it from me as if it had been contaminated. I was dimly aware I could never recover from such a scene.

"Speak to her," I ordered.

She looked at me. Perhaps she believed she was seeing me for the first time.

"Yes," she said flatly.

I heard the click of the broken connection. Kate handed the phone back to me, her face rigid.

My fingers were still digging into her wrist. Guilty, slightly ashamed, I let go. She returned to her chair with a measured step. It was a demonstration that my actions would never intimidate her.

I put down the phone, lifted it up again, and dialled my old number. I expected the whine of a disconnection, but instead the number rang out, rhythmically firm.

I hung up. "I have to go," I said.

Kate did not answer, but lifted the headset like a monarch about to crown herself.

I walked across to her and put a hand on her wrist, gently this time, halting the action. She was momentarily startled, but then her face hardened again.

"Come with me," I asked her.

Still she did not reply.

"I have things I must tell you."

"You should have told me a long time ago. It's obvious what game you're playing. We should each live our own lives, Alan. It would be better for us both."

"If I can find her, I'll call you. *She* can explain it."

"I don't want to speak to anyone. Don't ring."

"Please."

She placed the headset over her ears, then leaned back and closed her eyes.

The evening was unnaturally dark and heavy. An oppressive gloom was settling over everything, and the last remnants of light were vanishing into the darkness like a snail withdrawing into its shell. I checked the clock in the car. I was surprised that it was so early; the quietness and dark made it seem like a much later hour. Around Kate's house the lanes had become narrower and more tortuous.

When I reached the main road I had to switch the headlights on to full beam. Cars came towards me through a grainy fog.

I reached my old home as quickly as I could. As I drew up outside I saw that there was a light in the window. Sick with anticipation, I stepped from the car and walked to the front door. My hand shook, and it took three or four attempts before I could fit my key into the lock. There was no need. The door had been left open.

The hallway light was on. As I pushed open the door I could look down its entire length. The telephone had been moved, and I could hear a bulky, indeterminate noise, like something being dragged across a floor.

"Iris?" I asked.

The noise stopped.

"Iris?"

I heard rapid footsteps. My heart constricted. A man appeared in the doorway to the living-room. A woman followed him. I had never seen either of them before in my life.

We stared at each other, dumbfounded.

"Yes?" the man said at last.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" the man asked, and at the same time the woman spoke.

"We own it. It's our house."

I continued to stare at them.

"We own it," she repeated.

They were both in old jeans and shirts, and the woman had a carpet knife in her hand. "You bought it from me," I said stupidly, and saw them relax.

"How long have you been here?"

"We move next week. But your solicitor let us have the key. He said you'd said it would be all right."

"Right," I said, and could not keep myself from asking the next question. "Did you have the phone reconnected?"

"Just today, yes. It's the same number."

"Have there been any phone calls for me?"

"It rang thirty minutes ago, but whoever it was hung up before I could answer."

I nodded. My head was aching.

"Do you want anything?" the man asked edgily, and I knew that in his own way he was asking me to leave.

"Has there been a woman here?"

They glanced at each other, suspicious and a little frightened.

"No," the man said.

"Just us," his wife added.

"Listen," I said, "if one should call –" I stopped. "I'm sorry," I went on, "I shouldn't have bothered you."

I turned and walked out into the night. The man tried to tell me something else but I scarcely heard him.

I stood beside my car and looked out into the sky. There were no stars. Night pressed down heavily on the earth. I shook like a fever victim.

I got into the car and closed the door. Small particles clung to the outside of the windscreen. I pressed the washers and turned on the wipers while I steadied my hands on the driving wheel. Greyness smeared the glass before it was swept clean. I started the car and drove away.

After a while I began to realise that the engine was labouring and that the tyres were not gripping the surface as they should. In the headlights I saw that the road was scabbed with shallow patches of greyish material, scored with wheelmarks.

I had turned off the main road now, and was driving slowly along the maze of lanes that led to Kate's house. Darkness distorted everything. I became less and less certain that I had taken the right road. Flecks like grey snow were falling thickly on the windscreen.

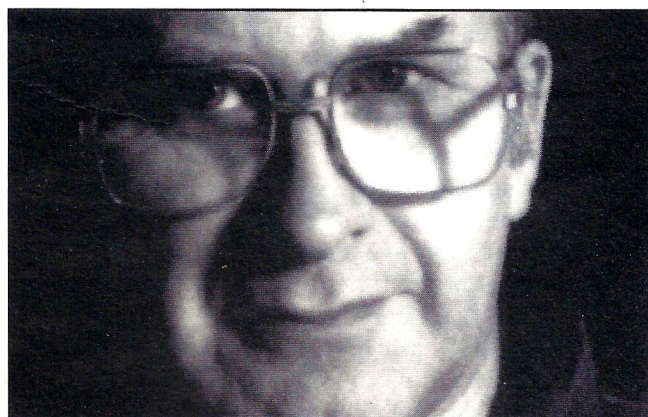
I stopped the car at a fork in the road. The engine shuddered as if it had drawn breath. There was no signpost and I had no idea where I was. Everything around me was blanketed by an eerie silence.

I got out of the car. Greyness sifted the headlight beams. I looked around. I was completely lost. I did not know which way to go. I did not know what to do.

The darkness was heavy and choking, and a sulphurous smell hung in the thickening air. Feathery particles touched my face, hair, hands. When I walked in front of the car I stirred up clouds of grey dust which hung suspended, like sand disturbed beneath the sea. Ash fell all around me, covering the car, the road, the fields and, somewhere unseen, Kate's house.

The engine stalled and died. The headlights dimmed further. I looked upwards and saw nothing but blackness. Out of it the ash fell, softly and without cease.

Christopher Burns' latest novel is *Dust Raising*, forthcoming in Sceptre paperback, and he too, like M John Harrison, was a contributor to *Interzone* in the early days: his stories "John's Return to Liverpool" and "Fogged Plates" appeared in issues 11 and 12. These two pieces, along with his two others for *Interzone* and several other stories, made up his 1988 collection *About the Body*. Prior to *Dust Raising*, Christopher Burns' novels include *In the Houses of the West* and *The Condition of Ice*. Married with children, Christopher Burns lives in Whitehaven, Cumbria.



Planet of Shit

Nicholas Lezard

“For an isolated individual there is no social feed-back, no way in which to test the reality of his perceptions.”

– Anthony Stevens and John Spice, “Spacing Disorders”, *Evolutionary Psychiatry*

I landed on the planet of shit about thirty years ago, when I smashed into the dark side of a large, unnamed asteroid that loomed out of the void before I knew what was happening and completely bugged up my left thruster. I am a poor pilot, I have to admit it, a menace to others and to myself, given to botching slingshot orbits and overtaking on the inside, and to make matters worse, I had been drinking. That’s how I ended up on the planet of shit.

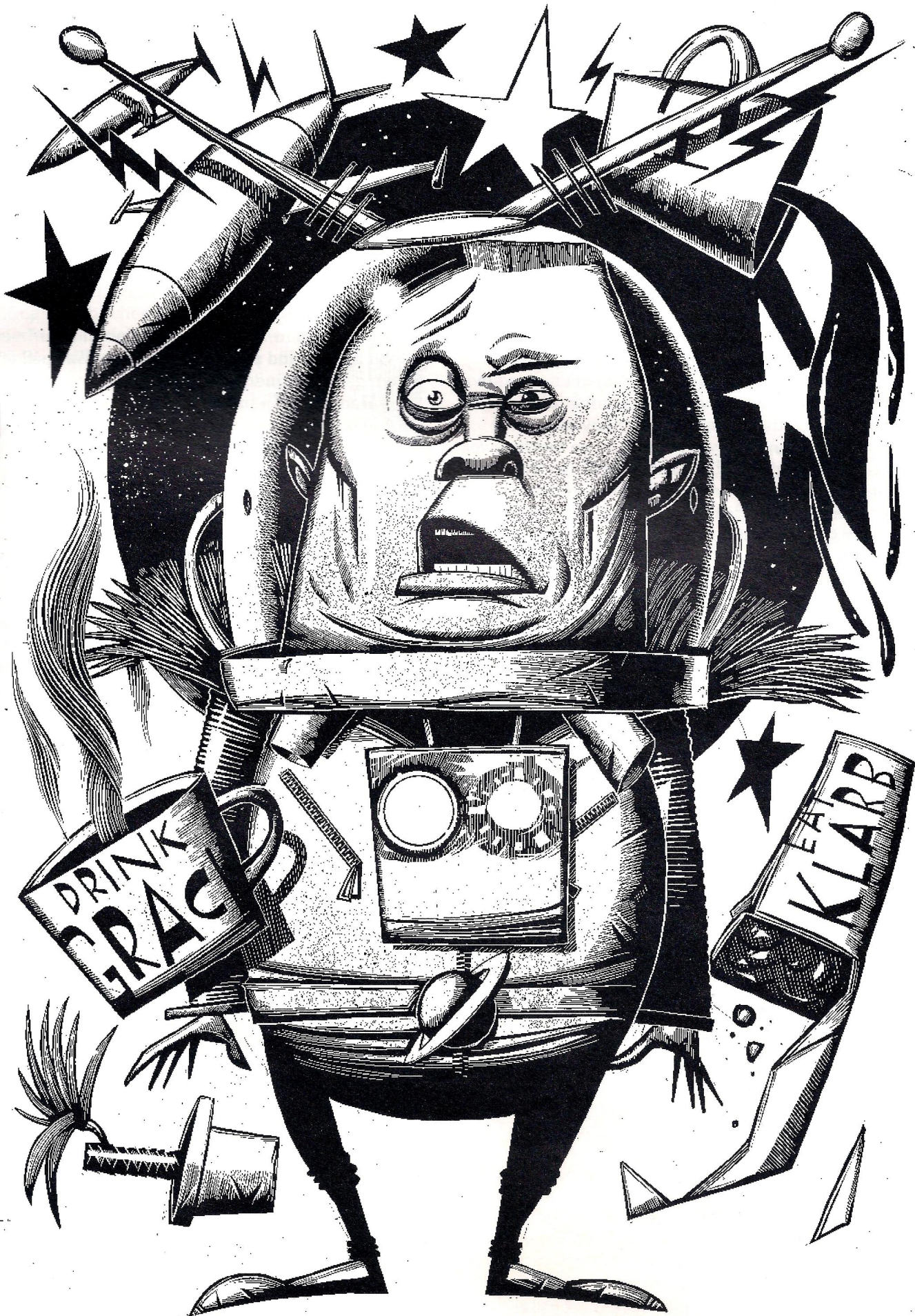
Did I say thirty years? I don’t know, that figure is a guess. Sometimes I have a go at computing the exact time and can never come up with an annual total of greater than five. Sometimes it feels like ten thousand. Most of the time it just feels like five hundred, but I don’t live that long, unless there is something in the water here, which I can’t discount, or the air, which I can’t discount either, or the all too numerable varieties of boiled and tasteless matter

they shove down their maws and call food here, no, I can’t even discount that. But I look about thirty years older than the picture on my licence, so that’s how long I’ll say I’ve been here.

I didn’t start by calling it the planet of shit. The natives have another name for it. I had another name for it too, once. Deliverance, perhaps. I wouldn’t be alive if it hadn’t been where it was. Oh, I was grateful. The odds against its having been there were – there is no other word – astronomical. Later on, my gratitude began to pall, so I called it Forbearance, or some such. And I can swear that there was a period when Despair seemed to fit the bill pretty well. But planet of shit seems to have stuck.

It’s not that there’s that much shit *per se* lying around in the first place. I mean no more than there is anywhere else not specifically devoted to the substance. If there had been then it would have been planet of shit straight away and no fancy detours. No, it took me a while to get there. To completely immerd myself.

No, when I landed there was nothing much out of the ordinary to alert me to the misery to come. I hauled myself out of my fuming, mangled craft



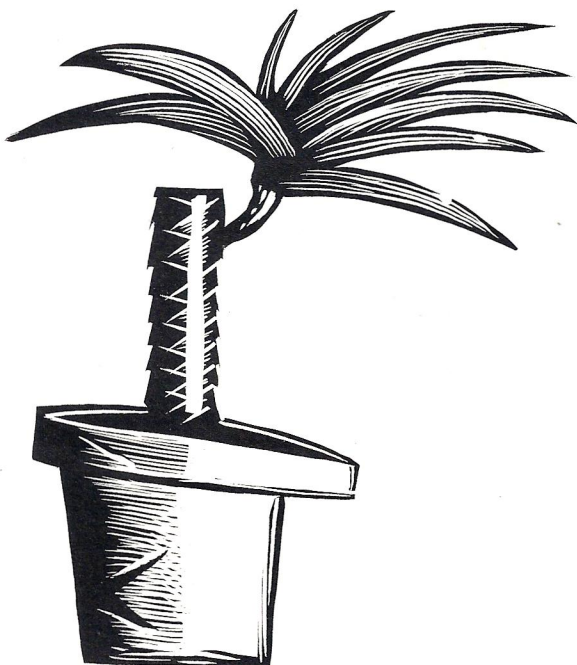
DAVID LYTTLETON

without even bothering to look back – I heard it collapse in a screaming heap of tortured biotronics before I had taken fifty paces. Knackered: another write-off. Time to find a radio, scare up a lift and fuck off before the locals clocked me and did their nuts. (I knew they were primitives: no spaceports or even orbital junk circling their spheroid.)

About me the ground rose and fell in lazy contours. Vegetation unremarkable and verging on the sparse. A paved surface promised to direct me to a centre of habitation. I was alive and a mostly water-based precipitate soaked me from a dead and level sky. I should have begun to suspect something.

A few self-propelled vehicles of bland and uniform design swished past me as I walked through the moisture. I was, as I said, worried that the superevolved chimps or lemurs or whatever had claimed the head of the food chain on this rock might find the sight of a six-foot-tall alien biped in a polyester tracksuit somewhat alarming. I knew I was not worrying enough. Before they hand over your space licence they give you a huge fucking lecture on the prime directive and you have to sign a statement swearing on your mother's eyeballs that you won't eat any sentient creatures or set yourself up as a God or ministerial candidate if you find yourself in this kind of a jam. But my forced landing must have scrambled my brains and, as I have admitted, I had been drinking heavily the night before – discussing, I am convinced, the validity of sensory information with a particularly obtuse set-designer from Hull – and, indeed, the morning after. There had been a row, probably. (Needless to say you are not meant to be drunk in charge of a spaceship. They take a dim view of it. Now I know why. You might end up on a midden like this.)

Anyway, I carried on walking and after a little while one of the vehicles stopped a little way up from me and opened its hatch. I considered the possibilities. A lifeform with the nerves of a gazelle



and the teeth of a piranha would rip my throat out. A highly intelligent wasp would force its sting down my mouth and deposit a ravenous pupa into my frozen body. A swarthy-faced warrior with hairy eyelids would satisfy his ancestral yearnings by bursting my head like a grape and thrusting a curiously carved dagger up my fundament before emitting a savage ululating cry of triumph. But frankly I was too wet and tired to care. So I walked up to the open hatch and peered in. The being sat behind a steering column, its whiskery antennae waving lazily in my direction. A single iridescent eye blinked at me. It was like a giant, monocular beetle, I think. It pointed a bristly proboscis in my direction.

– Need a lift? it asked.

– Why not, I said.

– Well, hop in, then, I haven't got all day.

So I got in and pulled the hatch to. We sped off with a gentle whine.

– Had a bit of a prang, have you?

I looked at myself. I was a little dishevelled, as one tends to be after crashing into a planet at thirty-six thousand kilometres per second.

– Er, yes, I said.

– I tell you, (said the insect) that corner back there is a disgrace. I've passed that spot a thousand times, and every time I've thought to myself – Clive – 'cos that's my name –

– Delighted –

– Yes, Clive, I say to myself, someone's going to come a cropper on that bend one of these days. I've thought of writing to the council about it, put a sign up, something like that. But you know what? I've never got round to it.

– You don't say.

A pause.

– So, where you going, then? asked my chauffeur.

– Oh, wherever you're going, I said.

He named some hole.

– Fine by me, I said. Do you have a radio?

– It's on, he said, and now he mentioned it I did notice a strange kind of noise, an anaesthetic ambient warble. I must have made a face.

– What's the matter, don't you like it?

– It suits me fine, I said.

I stole glances at him while he manoeuvred. I looked for signs of nervousness and surprise. There were none. Which was astonishing, given the considerable physical differences between us. I had fewer antennae, fewer legs, and more eyes, which seemed to have evolved on a different track to his. I had landed either among one of the most blasé races in the entire universe, or among one of the most cretinous. I decided to play it cool. But conversation was awkward. At least on my part. Clive relieved his tedium if not mine by maintaining an incessant stream of chat about his wife Jean, his eggs, his job as a marketing executive engaged in promoting a new flavour of *grach* ("it's not so much a new flavour as such, it's just that we're selling it under a different concept"), and more stuff too tiresome to

recall at a distance of so many years. But I do remember one thing. At one point – he had temporarily run out of things to say about his wife’s sister, by a strange coincidence also called Jean, and I was mesmerised by the motion of the shield wipers battling against the driving condensation – I asked him if it was always this wet this time of year.

Clive’s body suddenly went rigid. He snapped his head up so sharply it banged against the roof of the vehicle. He stared at me so long I nearly told him to keep his antennae on the road. Then he started shaking all over and making a terrifying hissing sound. Uh-oh, I thought. Eventually I realized he was laughing.

– I tell you, he said, I’ve never regretted picking up a hitcher. They always say something to brighten one’s journey. Hss! Hss! Wait till I tell the lads in the office!

He let me out at the centre of a conurbation with a cheery wave of his foreleg.

– Mind how you go! he said. Always this wet this time of year, he repeated, hissing again. Priceless! Priceless!

And that was it. He swished off and I was left to take in my surroundings. Buildings of stark utility and drabness. Vehicles – shaped rather like the Volkswagen Passats of my home planet – indistinguishable from the ones I had left. Shops selling a lumpy, brownish substance. And everywhere the large monocular beetles scurrying around, and all of them – every single one – carrying an umbrella. And no one there seemed to give a flying fuck about me.

I did eventually succeed in attracting attention. A beetle wearing a badge of some sort tapped me on the shoulder.

– Where’s your umbrella? it asked.

I said I didn’t have one.

– Don’t have one? it asked. We can’t have that. You’d better come with me.

And he took me to a building slightly drabber than the rest where another beetle with the same kind of badge sat behind a desk, reading a newspaper.

– Got a comedian here, said my companion. Says he doesn’t have an umbrella.

The desk beetle looked at me, rolled his eye, and pulled out a pad of paper and a pen from underneath his tabloid.

– Name? he sighed.

I told him. He sighed again.

– Let’s just call you Clive, okay? Save everyone the fucking bother. From?

This is never an easy question to answer in circumstances like this. There is, as I said, all that crap about the prime directive. They even put it in the fucking manual after all the specs about matter/antimatter ratios and tyre pressures. But these people – these insects – seemed to have a

remarkably robust way of coping with the unexpected. So I thought, Fuck the prime directive, fuck them too, and threw it all at them.

– I am a native of the planet Earth in the gamma 6 sector of the galaxy, about six hundred light years away from where I am now. I have crashed my spaceship irreparably and am hungry, hungover, tired, wet, I have been stuck for what seems like hours in a vehicle with a very boring insectoid entity called Clive and I really, really want to go home.

He paused before saying something which sounded remarkably like “Middlesbrough, then,” and wrote something down in his pad.

– Clive, he said to the arresting beetle. Nip off to the canteen and fetch us all a nice cup of *grach*, could you? Now, let’s see if we can’t rustle you up a spare umbrella from somewhere. We can’t have you going anywhere without your umbrella, can we? You’ll catch your death.

I looked at the picture of a beetle in his newspaper.

– Bit of all right, that, isn’t she? Look at the thorax on her, eh? Phwoar!

Clive brought me a cup of *grach*. It looked and tasted something like stewed tea, with too much sugar in it.

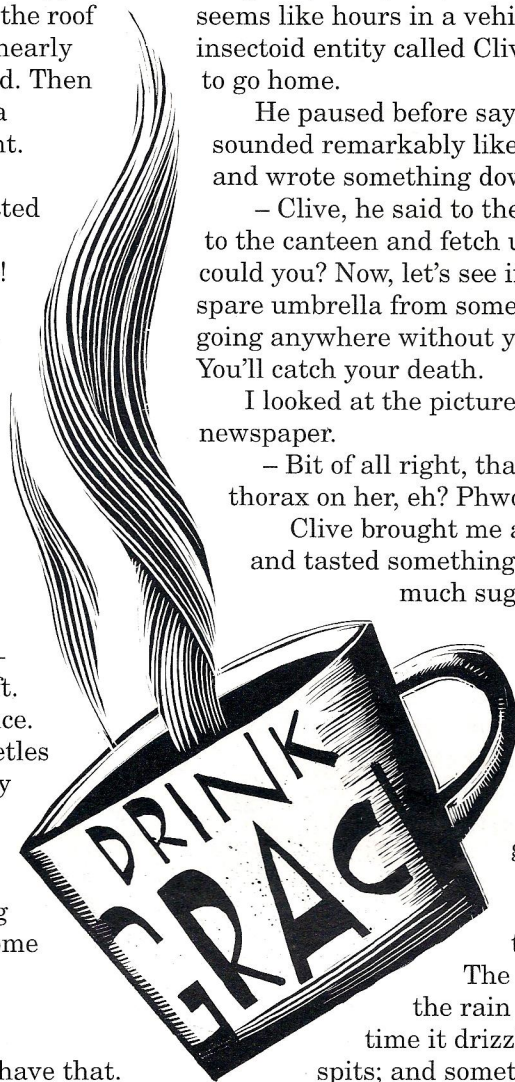
– Ooh, smashing, said Clive. You can’t beat a nice cup of *grach*.

* * *

It took a while for me to get it. What the matter was with this place. The matter was: it is like this. It is always like this.

The cloud cover is permanent, the rain unending. Some of the time it drizzles, and sometimes it spits; and sometimes it rains fairly normally and sometimes it absolutely pisses down. And when it drizzles or spits the beetles say “lovely day” and when it rains fairly normally they say “nice day” and when it absolutely pisses down they say “nice weather for *glips*.” The *glip*, you will probably not be amazed to hear, is a small, duck-like animal which lives in aquatic environments, in which this planet abounds.

It is important to stress how malignantly insidious mere weather can be. For when I say the cloud cover is permanent, and the rain unending, I mean a permanence and infinity of cloud and rain. The cloud does not admit of any individuation of cloud, nor the rain of discretionary intervals. A shroud next to it would be antic. The cloud is the blank unending grey of celestial static, a low metallic sheen with neither shade nor shape. When you look up at it your sense of distance goes, all you see in it are what your despairing fancy takes for the faintly shimmering pixels of your eyeball’s rods



and cones, waving like ears of wheat in a gelatinous wind, generated at the far, still cusp of vision, your eyeball's very rods and cones. There are no clouds: it is *cloud*, as if a lid has been put upon the world.

And the rain? Well, as it had been pointed out to me, the rain it raineth every day.

I do not know whether it is the constant rain that has produced a race of such bovine complacency, or whether it is the permanent cloud cover that has made for such a complete lack of spark. An incredible conspiracy. I'm not joking. To say that the conscious inhabitants of this planet have a group mind would be to malign the concept of mind. It is as if – no, they *are* – in the grip of a peculiar delusion which denies the existence of anything other than the familiar component elements of their own world. They hardly even have a concept of world, for the clouds never part, and they do not see the stars. To ask them if the firmament of heaven is ever visible is to ask them if the ground beneath their feet ever tears itself apart and reveals a strange and luminous mystery to their uncomprehending gaze.

For a while I took notes. I was never much of a one for field anthropology, but I had little else to do with my time. I noted that they were a kindly people, or who thought they were kindly, their kindness never having been tested by the demands of strangers, fond of imagining that they had a mischievous sense of humour and always gave each other the benefit of the doubt. They indulged stray *glips* and treated them kindly, leaving them little snacks of dried *klarb* when they remembered. They got on with their parents and worried about their eggs, agonizing over the relative merits of state and private education. Many of them were actively concerned with local politics and analyzed the minutiae of their rulers' speeches and personal lives. Every couple of weeks they checked out a movie, and remembered to repeat their favourite lines of dialogue when they had friends round. In spite of this excitement I got bored, my notes revolted me, I tossed them away. I drank my *grach* and chewed my *klarb*. Each sip of the former and nibble of the latter more uninteresting than its predecessor. During my grimmest stretches I would find a stray *glip* and strangle it. Once I made a small fire and roasted one. It tasted worse than *klarb*. I pulled their wings off and jumped on them. Even that eventually palled. Everything palled. There was a pall over everything.

After who knows how long I began to habituate myself to my surroundings, in the way that the brain learns to turn the upside-down signals from the eye the right way round. Slowly I made allowances, accepted the strangeness of their appearance, so

militantly at odds with the familiarity of their discourse (I discovered that they have a staggeringly impoverished vocabulary, their conversation a pitiful string of nostrums and clichés). Their spindly insect limbs dropped off and fleshed out, so to speak, in my head, so that I saw four humanoid limbs; where once the single, iridescent eye gleamed from its central orbit, now two mammalian peepers peeped from either side of a snout no different in type or style from mine; the quivering mandibles resolved themselves into fleshy lips. What wondrous life was this I led. In my mind, I clothed them in variegated suits and twin-sets, coiffed them with a range of fairly unadventurous hairstyles. I even arbitrarily

assigned them different characters, by way of amusement. It was either do this or go mad. And, if I put my hand on my heart, I have to admit that my success in coming to terms with their otherness was so complete in this respect, that I cannot even be sure that they ever were as I once described them. But it is better this way.

Eventually I found a job in a *klarb*-packing plant. If I say that this job was as dull as it sounds I think you will understand what I mean thereby. Still, none of my co-workers seemed to think so, and indeed they took the greatest delight in the tiniest vagaries of their *klarb*-packing existence. Ooh, look, said one, this one's got a corner sort of sticking out. They would cluster round it, cooing and rustling with amazement, before someone would tell everyone to get back to work, because Gnab wasn't built in a day, you know. Occasionally I revolted. Do you know who I am, I said, I'm not from here, I don't belong here. It's not me who's alien around here, it's you, this is terrible. They didn't seem to notice. Even when I became violent they just held me in their arms until my fit passed.

I pass over my long period of incarceration in silence.

In time I became friendly with one of their females, who was called Jean, and as so often happens, I fell in love with her and asked her to be mine. She was marking time while studying for her accountancy exams. I thought you'd never ask, she said, and took me to meet her parents. I sat in their mildly offensive house, slowly swirling the thick and sticky *grach* in my mug, while they made coy references to grandchildren. Where are you from, they asked. I said I was from a small and much nicer planet than theirs, about six hundred light years away, but that I had crash-landed my ship here some time ago, and despite all my efforts, had never been able to return, but that I had settled here for a life of extraordinary complacency and perpetual exasperation. Jean's mother, who was also



called Jean, asked me if it was nice up there, and can they do a nice cup of *grach*? Jean's father, Clive, took me for a little walk round his garden – there was a pond, he said, where sometimes *glips* would dabble and splash – and then coyly pressed a nugatory sum of cash in my hand – To get you young folks off to a good start, he said. I felt like turning my face to the skies and crying. Maybe I would be facing the right direction and the race I could truly call my own would hear me.

Jean and I moved into a slightly repellent apartment much plagued by damp in the suburbs of the town I had first come to – and from where I had never bothered to stray, in the conviction, which I hardly needed to confirm, that anywhere else on this planet would be as shitty as where I was now. (I would ask, What's — like, and they would say, Oh, much the same as here, really. I wouldn't know, never been there myself.)

Life had its savours. I was promoted on my return to a supervisory capacity at the *klarb*-packing plant – their employers are notably enlightened and forgiving – and was able to buy myself a second-hand vehicle from Honest Clive's second-hand dealership. Jean got a job in a *grach* distributor's – having finally, at the third attempt, passed her accountancy exams. And then, somewhat contrary to what I expected could conceivably happen – she conceived. I'm going to have eggs, she said, or something like that. I asked what we were going to call them when they hatched. She said, well, we could call the boys Clive and the girls Jean, I've always liked those names, and I said, Sounds great to me.

And all went well. The years passed – I assume they did, for the sun was never visible and the seasons indistinguishable – and our little Clives and Jeans grew up. How I loved their little faces, and the questions they would ask – like where *glips* came from and why the sky was grey. We had the neighbours round for a parties, with young Clive and Jean handing round trays of *klarb* canapés on cocktail sticks.

And then, one day, all fell apart. I was walking through the town with young Clivey, umbrella furled (it was a gorgeous day, with only scattered spots of rain to mar it), his little hand in mine, on the way to buy him a treat, a toy *glip* perhaps, or a fun-sized *klarb* bar, when a man came up to me. He looked twitchy, distressed, different. Very different. His eyes shifted frantically in their sockets, one side to the other, one side to the other. His clothes were tattered, falling off him like rags.

– You, he hissed at me. His voice had a most unpleasant ring to it. It sounded harsh, inhuman.

– You, he hissed again. I turned to face him, my expression blank.

– You. You're not like them – are you?

There was something unpleasant on his breath.

– Come again? I said.

– You're not like them, are you? You're not like all those... all those fucking *beetles*.

He waved his hand at my fellow-shoppers, skittering gaily through the precinct with their umbrellas rolled, although many had them still up from force of habit and experience.

– I don't know what you mean, I said. He grabbed me by the shoulders.

– Look at them all – are you mad? Look at all those fucking *beetles*. They're running around, they're so blind, they don't see a fucking thing, they don't see it when it's right under their fucking faces, they can't see that anything's different, nothing ever changes here, it's always the same, today is like yesterday and tomorrow will be like today and the day after will be the same as everything else, you eat this, you drink that, again and again and again, can't you see? Have you gone mad like them too? Your mind has turned to shit, like everything on this planet. Look at it! Everything is like shit, their food, their thoughts, nothing happens in their heads, they excrete their dung and then cram it in their jaws again, their very sky is an ordure. Look at the sky, look at the fucking *sky*!

But why should I look up? There was nothing there that I wanted to see.

I turned and walked back with a mutely querulous Clive at my side. I left him at home, and then walked out again. I looked back at my wife and I cannot tell you what I saw. She called out to me but I didn't stop. I got in my car and drove off. I knew where I had to go, to the place where I had crashed all that time ago.

* * *

What did I hope to find? That my craft, abandoned and junked all those aeons ago, would still be there, the red-and-white incident tape put up by the police still flapping in the smirr?

Fragments remained. Circuitboards poked through the ragged flora. There was something to salvage after all. There so often is. I began to sift the ruins. A diode here, a transistor there. As I worked, my wife and two of our children arrived. What are you doing? she asked. Trying to contact my home planet, I said. She closed her eyes. This is your home planet, she said, don't start all that again. You don't understand, I said, I have to send a signal, I have to leave. I shouted into my jerry-rigged mike, hello, hello, can you read me. I have landed on a planet of shit and need rescue; over. You can't leave, she said. You have Clive and Jean to think of. And Clive and Jean and Jean and Jean and Clive and Clive and Jean.

And she was right, you know, I did.



Nicholas Lezard reviews paperbacks for the *Guardian*; he also writes for *GQ*, the *Sunday Times* and the *TLS*. The above is his second published short story, his first, "The Beautiful Game", having appeared in *A Book of Two Halves* (Victor Gollancz). He lives in west London.

The Canon Elizabeth Young

.....re THE CANON.
IMAGO DEPT

6/2/2097

dear prof. vsynctime,

I found the enclosed – a mysteriously undischarged jelicard. It had slipped behind the infoslivs and nanochips in Central. It holds what I suppose we must call a “story” although it later purports to be fact – a “diary”? Most of it is easy enough to follow although I can’t scan many of the names. I think I may recall the incident – some embarrassment, an indiscretion... interminable legal wrangles. Long before your time ’though. Ancient histrumour. See what you think. Of no value save neuroflirt. It’s either not credible or not creditable! systems to all, mac.

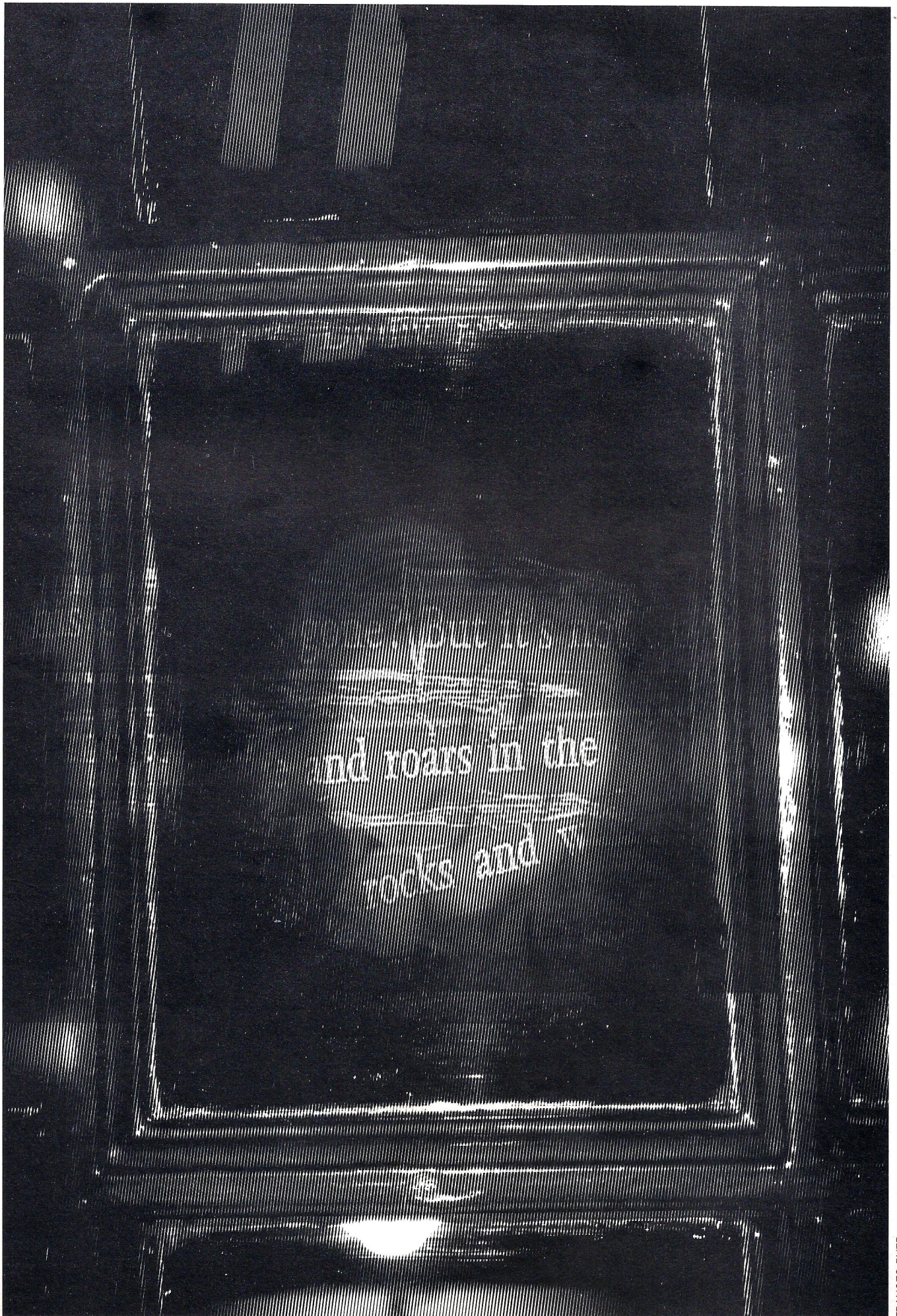
“THE CANON”

After Zee had scrolled through about twenty essays she felt ready to disembowel her students, one by one, with her teeth. Every single one of them had managed to ditch the second half of *Wuthering Heights*. Most of them concluded their papers with the marriage of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw in Haworth Church – a haze of rural bliss, fecund bowers of spring blossom. Several of them stipulated the designer of the wedding dress and the make of car that was to carry the happy couple from the reception. One, stymied by the imponderables of fact and fiction, had a rehabilitated, born-again Branwell Bronte presiding at the ceremony. The most original student, vaguely troubled by exigencies of plot allowed Edgar and Catherine Linton a sparkling

showbiz career, unaware that chart-busting pop duos had yet to be invented.

Zee sighed. Zee despaired. Her hair was black and her contact lenses were brown and, as her metal wristband proclaimed, she functioned as Dr Zuleika Dee, a worker ant in the vast consolidated conglomerate that was the University of the South. Students – ripe, multi-coloured and hormonal – were fed to her via complex bureaucratic pipelines of ineffable intricacy which linked a multitude of higher educational establishments, from the most august and ancient to the most recent, doltish and upstart.

The diskettes that caused Zee such anguish were part of a routine assignment for first-year students. “Read the selected text in the usual manner and provide a written commentary. If amendments are made please reproduce them and



provide an extensive, explanation." The wording of the assignment was a feeble attempt to deflect students from what they knew of as "the usual manner." Classic texts for academic study were always available on disk. Built into the programs from the start – and sanctioned by decades of consumer choice – were opportunities to retrieve further information, read critical studies, make notes and amend texts as one wished. In practice this democracy allowed brain-dead interference with art that had caused genius to writhe and sweat. It encouraged coltish clods to obey the most primitive and ignorant impulses and smear away the glorious second arc of *Wuthering Heights*. Just bin all the hard-won redemption of the next generation. As for the final, heart-breakingly beautiful paragraph of the book, which wrests peace and harmony from turbulence and decay – cut, delete, discard. Hit one key for a waste dump icon.

And so Zee wept for all the mutilated texts. She wept despite her own careful training, despite her knowledge that no text was inviolate. Even the most reactionary of literary critics, going right back to the second half of the twentieth century, agreed that there was no one truth, no certain interpretation. They had assured Zee that the authors themselves did not know what they meant; that the principle of cut 'n' paste, conscious and unconscious, ruled the acts of creation, exegesis and analysis. And now it ruled the endeavours of Lit.Opt.1.004 Year 1. In their omniscience Zee's literary mentors had forgotten that they themselves had known the canon, shining and complete, before they dismantled it. And they forgot that future students would not approach it with that knowledge, nor with professional subtlety when they came in their turn with blind gaze and filthy fingers to wrench open its golden parts.

Zee laid her head on her moulded desk in that dead room, next to the comforting thrum of her machine. Outside the cell-like window, high on the wall, the sky darkened but only a little. It couldn't darken much. Technically, outside there was nothing – or rather Zee didn't know what there was. It might be a corridor or the blank façade of another soaring building like her own, inches away in the open air – that was, the sub-dome, air-conditioned air. It didn't matter. Zee had chosen that it be night in her study always. The options available to academics were few. Some things never change and intellectuals remained very far down the consumer ladder. She could have 1.1 Sunshine (relentless, blaring, reducing the brightest, dimpled young skin to the colours of ashes and clay, the tones of grubs and tunnel dwellers). She could have 1.2 Starry Night (Rain Optional), 1.3 Rural Sky (Plain), 1.4 Rural Sky (Disney), the latter banned for ever since a trio of coy bluebirds with false eyelashes had cooed and flirted through a reading of Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est". So now she optioned rain for ever, blotting out the starry stars.

Zee tried to stop crying. She tried to feel

grateful. She knew that she was lucky to be able to teach the canon of Western Literature at all. Many institutes had long since discarded it in its entirety as overly dogmatic, patriarchal and privileged; a 2,000-year blip, an aberration, to many an abomination. In practice, its invaluable parts were plundered to service an entire spectrum of fashionable cultural values, to shore up the opinions of warring departments worldwide. Fems. and Seps. ran away with Plath, Sexton and bags of post-1970 feminist swag, with strutting dyke detectives and dykes in space. Battalions of fabulists and fantasists from Anthropology departments plundered the primitive, the gothic, the surreal and magic real. Adolescents deep in Decadent Studies grew dreamy over Baudelaire and Symons, Crim. Psych. checked out Dostoevski, Burroughs and Patrick Hamilton, Punk majors glanced – quickly – at Rimbaud and Verlaine. The canon remained infinitely ambiguous, infinitely adaptable, infinitely graceful.

Zee knew too how lucky she was to be allowed to use plain text. Only the cleverest students were allowed to approach the complexity of the written word. Only the most gifted could face the tedium of the unadorned page. God, she shuddered to think what the others must be like. The majority of "literature" courses were restricted to visuals – old and new films, tele-dramas or sensurround virtualities of Shakespeare, Austen, Joyce, Forster. Each had their fashion moments and their seasons and of course they were so much sexier, so much more appealing, so much less enigmatic than the plain page. How many colours could her computer produce? Millions upon millions. And not a single one appeared on a page of poetry.

No wonder students stampeded to avoid that which at first promised total boredom and at closer range resulted in pure puzzlement. These were the children of infotainment. While the sticky chemical hues of blood and blue and violet washed over them from their screens they personified grace and glamour, lounging around, forever soaking up the "what" and never the "why". They were bland as butter, their brains an infinite cross-hatching of visual delights freed from any source. Imagery which filmic generations ago had its origins in Conan Doyle, Barrie or Stevenson, in battles, in murders, in the appalling transgressions of history, was now abandoned to roam their stunted neural pathways, multi-coloured gobbets endlessly refracting, endlessly refashioned, prompting only the most trite and primal of responses – lust, fear, longing. No wonder they couldn't understand anything, thought Zee.

She pressed the touchpad for Lo-Cal Liq.Nur. The inevitable white powder flaked like dust mites into the inevitable paper cup – would *anything* ever succeed the paper cup? – followed by the inevitable listless stream of lukewarm water. She stirred it with her finger. She didn't like to leave her antique Biros, let alone pencils, lying around although she still wrote, clandestinely, by

hand at times. They would be snatched and sold.

Zee thought she might as well do a bit more marking. Well, she would stick to third-years this time.

But, four massacres of *Lolita* later, she popped out her contacts, ground her fingers into her eye-sockets, saw streaky-red and screamed.

The first two had made the marriage of Humbert Humbert and Charlotte Haze a great success. Creatively, they reduced Lolita's age to about five, so that touched by her tender years Humbert would straighten up and fly right. Aided by fine professional counselling the future looked bright for the little family.

The other two had done better. They lasted until Humbert re-encounters Lolita, seventeen years old and hugely pregnant. But they crashed and bled at the final, agonising hurdle when Humbert realises that "... there she was (my Lolita!), hopelessly worn at seventeen... and I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth." Promptly they had him renounce his paedophile instincts, marry the divorced Lolita and live happily etc etc. All the explanatory commentaries featured the words "nice" or "nicer".

So these kids understood Humbert, a man of notoriously flawed perceptions, better than he did himself? As for Nabokov – who he?

Had Zee herself ever been so stupid? Probably. They were very young, their brains had been drenched with a lifetime of cliché. Words unnerved them, caused them to stammer, become inept and twisted. Their own teen demotic was monosyllabic, fast-changing, as stark and expressive as the cries of parrots.

It's normal for lecturers to gripe about their students, Zee thought, trying to calm herself as she restored her sight, switched off her machine, locked the dark office and passed along the deserted corridor to the elevator, flaking and groaning with age that took her to her apartment three floors down, on the eightieth.

Hers was, by choice, a lonely life, as circumscribed as that of any medieval anchorite. Despite her porcelain appearance she was one of the oldest in the faculty – although no-one aged much beyond forty in appearance until the smart nanoguns implanted in the bloodstream could no longer repair internal damage. Uremia, cardiac blow-out, collapse and death followed swiftly. Precautionary euthanasia – at any age – was discreetly encouraged.

So Zee could remember different times, when newspapers were still on paper and new bookshops existed until print publishing stopped and shut them down altogether. It had not been dramatically different back then, merely that those who commented on public life still shared an intellectual base and a rough knowledge of the canon. Then it had all splintered. Books and learning became the exclusive property of the academy, style wars

consumed the populace until everybody ended up in uniform chic; soft soap and sentiment slid across all screens and religious cults took increasing advantage of this void wherein ignorance and longing entwined like flowers on a gallows. It seemed that as technology dragged people forward, intellectually and emotionally they regressed towards primitivism and impulse.

Zee's parents had been artisans, simultaneously bewildered and dogmatic. Green overalls for a transport worker, red and white for hospital orderly. Population demographics were disregarded for too long and Zee never knew a London, sealed off from the chaos of weather and stars by its vast dome, which didn't cover the entire southern half of the country. She grew up in a cliff-face building, very similar to the one she now inhabited. The tops of these thousand-floor mountains were wreathed in condensation and their crusty sides dotted with doors for the worker ants. She was ferried to school in a similar building by microlite taxi. In her teens she spent some time on the streets where the red glow and reverb of hyperaesthetic rhythm gave an illusion of danger. Passing through the dense, grid-locked crowds of kids and masked stylists she found that the most interesting conversations merely reached conclusions anticipated centuries before in literature or philosophy. Bored, she retreated to university. The professions tended to function like mediaeval guilds, occupying many miles of cliff-hangar buildings where workers were stashed according to status in cool, blue mirrored penthouses, pin-pricked by artificial lighting or stacked like cordwood in grimy student dormitories.

There was no real need to go out, apart from to find a mate. Malls, pools, restaurants and even football pitches were found near the ground floors. Zee had been married to another academic, Markie, who taught Arabic, for a while. They took a larger apartment, had a docile social life but decided against children blended in or out the womb, even though they wouldn't have had to see much of them. Eventually they separated geographically, with no regrets and Zee entered the long, apathetic twilight of her life.

The proximity to a library and real books had always made her days endurable. The heft of them, the cool, dry scent of paper, the bright, irrelevant covers and the arcana of dates and presses continued to exert a hypnotic, faintly erotic pull. There was no need for the authorities to discourage reading – very few wanted to do it. Students had been draining away into Media Studs. and Pop. Cult. for decades. *In media res*, thought Zee spitefully.

As a child, pessimistic and none too imaginative she had always mistrusted the chattering optimism of science fiction. Change was slow and the future had unfolded very much as she expected. Gravity and the speed of light retained their grip, the brain remained cryptic, death still occurred and human nature did not vary at all.



FRANCES BYER

Still Zee had not quite foreseen the narrowing down, the limitation of life that would result as the years inched on. A vast civil service swathed the city in intricate and dilatory bureaucracy. Travel was all but impossible. She had long forgotten the cottony slide of a cat's stomach or the rippled furze of a flower stem; there were only humans and dead things in the city now. Her colleagues were less than dynamic in the academic way, fussing and scratching up dust like chickens as they posted yet more research papers. Did anyone create original work any more? She didn't know. Her students were destined to become academics themselves. In theory, four to six years' post-graduate study would dispel their fog of mundane response. Actually students stuck to a smaller and smaller pool of set books all the time and year by year more of the world's literature vanished from memory, its troubling sentiments safely relegated to the far away and long ago. The canon they continually broke apart was becoming a miniature, a kitschy brass ornament from the depressingly adaptable Franklin Mint Company.

The lives of most ordinary people, like Zee's, were safe and drab, suicidally monotonous. This was a democracy of the average; to the statistically normal, the 100 IQ, everything was given. Creative talent laboured to froth up their entertainments, analytical minds pondered the limits of pharmacopology and medicine. Such professionals were well paid too, much better than arts academics, for who cared about the past now? Who even wanted to remember it apart from dress designers?

Bleak fragments of a circumscribed existence: broken glass, black feathers and shadows crowded Zee's mind as she surveyed her own apartment. Work, play, work, play workplay workplaywork. She switched on her holo-cat, Dinkins, and automatically applauded his verisimilitude. Tail like a bottle brush, pink, puckered bottom preceded her; virtual hunger sought her virtual kitchen. Zee inhaled some MDMA-opiate compound from a bottle in her all-too-legal pharmacopeia. Since the brain's addiction receptors had been isolated and the corresponding opiate molecules excised there was no risk of reprisal. It wasn't much fun any more 'though. She picked up a postgrad. essay on Boyd O'Dowd's 2012 classic *A Hungry Fuck Is An Angry Fuck*, saw that the word "zeitgeist" occurred in the first sentence and put it down again. She put on her headset and dialled up ex-husband Markie at the University of the West Orient. He too was grading papers, another docile, if sweatier, worker ant grinding away in a remote cell. They attempted a desultory sex act, but academic funding being what it always is, the elderly Tele-Tactile went down in a whine of geosynchronous static long before their clumsy negotiations had even initiated lubrication.

Zee lay down unhappily on her mid-air mattress. The Hova-Flota duvet accommodated itself to her every angry twist and turn, maintaining

its discreet distance from her naked flesh. She fretted. Fury and boredom made her reluctant to carry out the conventionally approved act of suicide. After so long she *did* have a few other resources. She began to plan.

*

It took Zee only two phone calls. One was to her brother, a Civil Service lifer, Curator of the Police Museum, the other to an elderly fellow academic, ex-anarchist and Style War commando, now a downtrodden bio-chemist with silver-grey dreadlocks. She quietly took receipt of their packages in the department mailroom, then designed and posted an unremarkable invitation on the department screens.

All her personal tutorial students, first years and onwards were invited to an end-of term party on the 100th-floor garden. Such events were traditional throughout the university at this time of year. Zee's party theme was to be a surprise. Her guests were told only that it was an art event, a celebration of their mutual deep love of serious literature and that it would be filmed. They were to dress creatively and drugs and drink would be free from 9 until midnight, an unusually generous offer which, Zee considered, should ensure their wholesale attention and attendance.

Her next preparations were somewhat more arcane. She obtained – not without difficulty – some fifty sheets of A4 paper. For each sheet she selected a different quotation from the literary canon and printed it twice, on both sides of each page. Her memory never faltered. These fading invocations had once been mass currency; they had comforted the dying and brought solace to those condemned to life. She selected the brief fragments that had conjured tears from the most barren and disparate hearts; the last lines of *Ozymandias*, the end of *The Great Gatsby* – "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." She used the bitter sadism of Kipling, the terrible truths of Pascal, the eerie sentiment of Housman; lines from Eliot's lapidary maps of pain, festering lilies, Yeats' heavenly cloths, Dickens and Dickinson: rare as angel spit, the distilled wisdom and poetry of centuries glowed on the pages, each quotation correctly attributed. Every sheet was then laminated in gold so that they were as unyielding as board.

Amongst the futile diversions of the ground-floor mall was an innovative gift-wrapping service. Presents could be baked into ceramics or confectionery, or erupt from fireworks. One of the cheapest options was to have your gift encased, fully visible, inside a transparent helium balloon. Zee saw that each of her quotation-bearing cards was thus enshrined and left the shop, trying to control her bright bouquet of tough silken ropes that twitched and jerked in her damp hand as the aphoristic clouds above bobbed and fainted playfully,

all too eager to break free and seed the world again.

The 100th-floor roof garden abutted, like a huge balcony from one side of the towering, labyrinthine Gormenghast that was the university. Thus, technically, it was in the open air. Always temperate, never rainy, artificially perfumed, with velvety sub-grass and banks of holo-flowers that pulsed and span in ever changing candy configurations of wild roses, peach lilies, and tumbling pearls of gypsophila, the garden was a popular social venue. It was also something of a dumping ground. Sets from forgotten dramas and dances might loom up – cardboard battlements, a mirrored lake, the eerie angles of a rural cemetery rustling with simulated spanish moss. Old large-scale sculptures, now wildly unfashionable, also rested here. Couples could nestle in the random holes drilled through massive fertility figures or marvel at the spectacle of decaying flesh twisting and shredding within old tanks of blurry formaldehyde.

*

The last night of term. Zee's students are spilling out the elevators, shrill and raucous with festive spirit, already infected with the annual madness and evil of Christmashop. Many wore the currently fashionable mirrored skin suits on which exaggerated sexual characteristics were shiningly moulded. The more adventurous had reversed them, leading with a sequined spine and huge flashing buttocks. Others, mainly girls, were equally innovative, opting en masse for this season's omnipresent waterfall dresses which gave the glowing illusion of plummeting brine, spray and spume. They nearly all wore antique jewellery, random arrangements of mysterious, forgotten artifacts, long-vanished litter – tea-strainers, sponges, rags of socks and ties, thermometers, postcards, diaphragms, spectacles, paint-brushes, bulbs, watches, plastics, begrimed hairbands – the incomprehensible detritus of some too cluttered past. Their masks, whether warty horrors or black dominoes, were hired from the costumiers who catered to such dress-up occasions.

Zee, unadorned and glowing like a silkworm in a plain white shift, stood behind a small desk before the double doors leading to the garden. Behind her, ice lights, spotlights, strobes and scent lamps shivered seductively in the darkness and the hungry, relentless throb of primitive drumming could be heard. She explained briefly and calmly to each giggling group that the event – and film – was to express the essence of their joyful enslavement to literary studies. Thus, for a short time they were going to be manacled, living symbols – and she pulled out a box full of antique steel handcuffs. To each pair of handcuffs was attached a quotation balloon, the sturdy wire inside of their silken strings now firmly affixed to the interior mechanism of the cuffs.

The students joked and jostled, intrigued by the game and the naughty sub-textual tinge of bondage. Lovers clamoured to be padlocked together and tipsy lads to be linked in chain gangs.

"Now," continued Zee, briskly sneaking locks, "as you're masked, for a bit you are to imagine that the quotation – the writing in your balloon – is you, your personality. When you've learnt it off by heart and can interpret it, I'll free you and we'll unmask for the finale – another surprise!" Zee saw the standard frowns and moues of dismay at this tiny pedagogical task and shrugged. "It's nothing. Just a game, not a test. You can dance your interpretation – do a strip-tease – whatever you want. You don't even have to participate in that. Just learn your quotes and have a good time. It's like fancy dress. It's showbiz. Everyone thinks lit. is such a crusty, fusty, drone-zone subject. Show them it's not. And remember the film is running. If it comes out OK I'll submit it to the virtuality festivals."

As Zee repeated variations on this speech, each successive group, reassured, clowning and tugging on their restraints, squinting at the wording in their balloons, tumbling and squealing, was sucked in a strident clot towards the maelstrom of epileptic dancing and hyperaesthesia, scented light bombs and fevered drums.

The usual party hell, thought Zee when the corridor was finally empty. How did I ever get so... tired? No one had noticed that her azure contact lenses floated on a film of tears nor that they failed to extinguish the red spark of nightmare disassociation deep within her pupils.

A latecomer, Pedek, a Harvard postgrad. about to ascend to teaching assistant, ambled up dressed in grubby white duck trousers and swinging a bottle of gin.

"I thought this was a fancy dress party, Zee. I'm under the volcano."

"Well, it is sort of. Not exactly." She outlined the theme. "People could come in fancy dress if they wanted."

"Who are you then – the woman in white? You look totally different from usual."

Zee sighed. "I'm, um, the Cumaen Sybil."

"And I with mine own eyes have seen the Sybil at Cumae hanging in a jar," quoted Pedek, slurringly. "And the boys said, 'Sybil, what do you want?' And the Sybil replied 'I want to die.'"

Zee almost smiled. "Tenure awarded. But then your dissdisk was on Eliot." She pushed the box under the desk with her foot. "I seem to have run out of cuffs. Let's just grab a couple of balloons and go in. Here, have Housman, the land of lost content." She stressed ironically, incorrectly, the first syllable of "content" but Pedek, bounding ahead didn't get it. She wondered if it was too late to retrieve some cuffs for him after all.

Holding her obligatory glass of frothing colours, achingly sweet alcoholic candy-floss – with fat long vanished from food, gustatory indulgence was a widespread diversion – Zee wandered quietly among

the revellers, shielded by their anonymity. A soft, simulated breeze stirred her hair as she stood looking over the parapet. She could see threads of light far below. Dingy micro-cabs blundered through the air like mutant moths. It was very dark, here on the fringes of frenzy. In the interests of the economy and mass psychology, the illusion of day and night was maintained. Her balloons swayed proudly above the crowds. They looked like giant spores or amiable aliens in conference. Pure, transparent membranes, each with its own illuminated embryo, the page of a manuscript, the page of a book.

"Dr. Dee! Dr. Dee!" A young couple, still masked, were holding out their hands, conjoined at the wrists by steel. Behind the slits their eyes were red and raw with excess. Sweat silvered their limbs.

"We know it's not the end yet and thank you..." It was the boy who muttered at Zee. She found it hard to concentrate. "See, I promised to take Chess home before eleven and we've got to get right out to Asheham and could you undo us please?"

"Oh, of course. Wait here." Zee flickered away towards the largest, most gaudy and vociferous group. There were no keys. They were long gone, perhaps a century back. The cuffs were museum bargain-basement leftovers, spare stock, waiting for disposal.

The crowd surged around Zee ablaze with chatter and goodwill. "Is it time? Do we do our acts now? My wrist hurts... I can't hear... What's that? Did I pass? She's been sick again... I can't remember my name, let alone poetry... What's the other thing you said would happen? You said a surprise? Is it giant fire? Bet it is..."

Zee pressed her stud and the time glowed briefly under the skin of her wrist. An early faux-watch. "Yes, you're right," she said, speaking slowly, answering the last questioner. She turned to the others.

"OK. Can we have some quiet please!" The drumming sank to an insidious whisper, suggestive of malign ritual. "I might as well tell you 'cos we're going to unmask in a minute and then you can look out for the giant fire starting." Giant fire was merely huge scale, techie superstunt fireworks, computer coordinated to reproduce any scene on a scale of miles.

"Look to the West after we've done our balloons and you'll see them march right over London. They'll be perfect repro twentieth century cheer-leaders, nearly dome-high –" Zee began to giggle, while unrelated tears slid in liquid crystals down her cheeks – "and they'll have nose-cone tits and ra-ra skirts and they'll do the splits with pink pom-pom pyrotechnics and their streamers will pour down diamante dust and letters outlined in liquid flame, and, uh... a mountain walked or stumbled... and they'll all be chanting 'Auden, Auden, he's our man, If he can't do it Bataille can' and they'll go right through the alphabet and they're on OUR team –"

A huge blat of gelid blood flew into Zee's face as a benediction of bone fragments roared through the

crowd. The explosive, carefully packed into one random set of handcuffs by Zee's ageing agitator, had blown up with a hideous whining blast which set the air to singing like wires. Screaming, twisting, tangled, hands blocking ears or frantically wiping at gobs of gore, the kids panicked and kicked out maniacally, like hysterical ponies.

One poor boy had copped it. Unrecognizable, eviscerated, disassembled, deconstructed he was lavishly distributed amongst his coevals in quivering clumps of unknown origin. His balloon spiralled off indifferently. Its card was Kipling's "The Wind that blows between the Worlds/It cut him like a knife."

Zee walked away unnoticed. She climbed on to the parapet, slipping a little in the gouts of blood that wrapped her. She read her balloon and jumped off into that dead night. She was thinking how strange it was that both fatalities had borne the work of those academic also-rans, populist poets.

But there was only one fatality that night. Zee's balloon, which read "The last and lingering troubadour to whom the bird has sung/That once went singing southwards when all the world was young," bore her stubbornly upwards. She burst through the fabric of the dome and flew straight into the living air where Captain Ahab dances his manic hornpipe in the amniotic fluids of lost mammals, where Kurtz slams another flyblown head on a stick, where Christ's blood streams forever in the firmament, and sanctuary can only be found in the city of Io whose terraces are the colour of stars.

The end.

For I with mine own eyes have seen Zuleika Dee hanging in mid-air. She told me everything just before we went into the party and suggested I write it up as a story. She thought it would be a useful exercise for me. Of course I've had to make up some bits. You will be able to tell which ones because I'm not really too good with words. Zee thought we were all illiterate. She was right.

Dr. Pedek Lovebourne. Lecturer Grade 1.

The real end.

**WIPE DOCUMENT (THE CANON:
12/2/2097.vsynctime)**



Elizabeth Young's collected criticism and essays are due from *Serpent's Tail* as *Pandora's Handbag*. She has had short stories published in *Darklands 2*, *Cold Comfort*, *Psychoactive Sinc* and elsewhere, and has completed a novel; with "The Canon" she appears in *Interzone* for the first time. Elizabeth Young lives in London.



Alone Alarm Jona

And they lived happily ever after. Damn it, that was what was *supposed* to happen! They met, talked, fell in love, he asked her to marry him, she said yes... and that was supposed to be that.

But there are no rules, even if we keep hoping there are. What's worse, we try to obey what doesn't exist and end up like him: sitting in an empty apartment, wondering where she is, what she's doing now now now, sure whatever it is would be sexy, exciting, and nothing she'd ever done with him.

He'd seen the other man. That's right. saw her holding hands in public with a guy wearing a Van Dyke beard and a tattoo! He looked like a biker, or a long-haul truck driver who wore ventilated baseball caps.

She hated tattoos! At least that's what she'd said. He remembered her exact words. "Tattoos are icky." Well, now she was holding hands with Mr Icky while her husband sat in their living room looking at the floor.

What's worse, he missed everything about her. even the things he hated. Her long black hairs like odd calligraphy stuck to the rim of the white bathroom sink. Her messy jumble of cosmetics

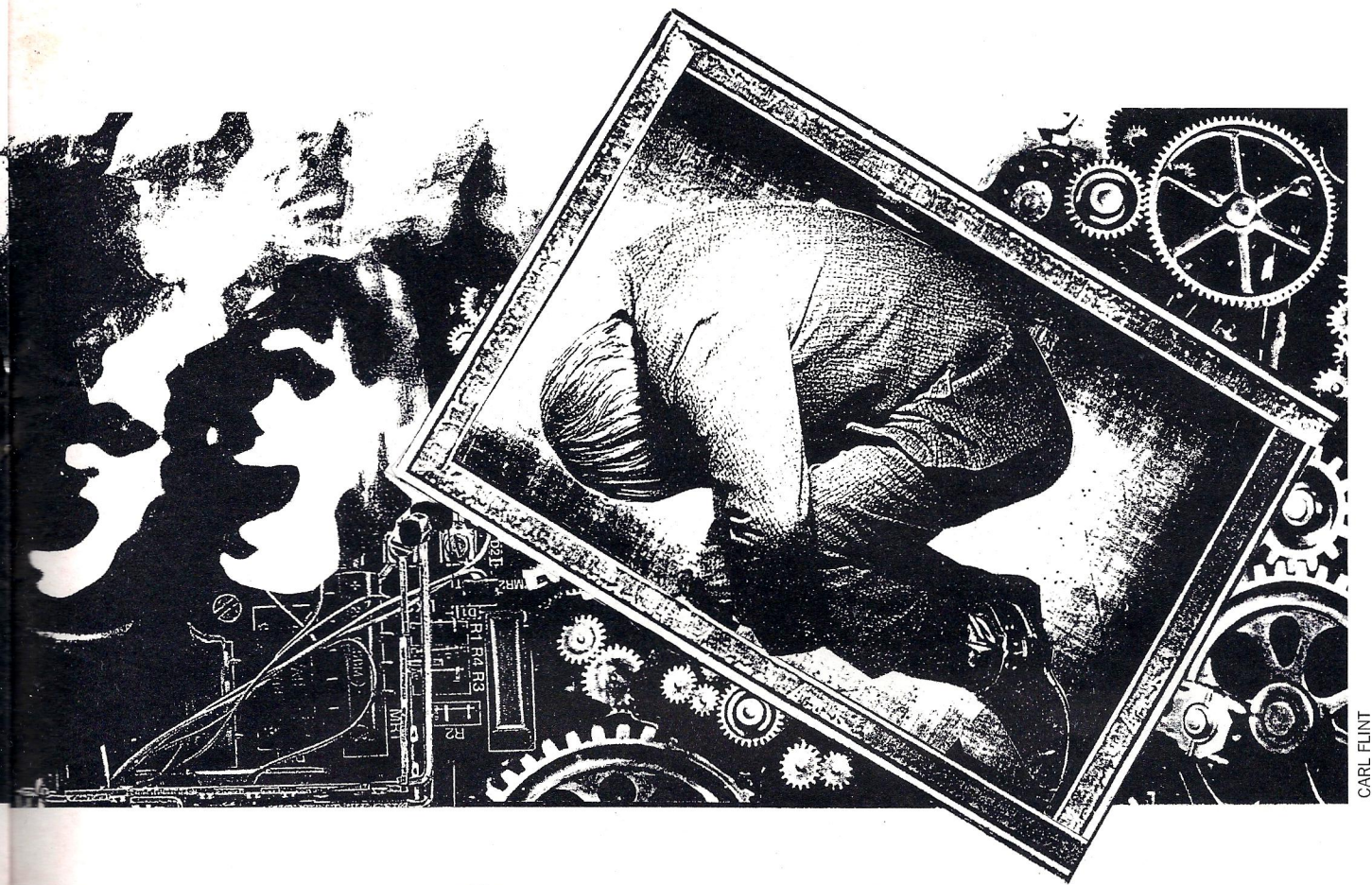
taking up three-quarters of the medicine cabinet. Her stubbornness. That unbearably cute voice when she spoke to the cat. He missed it all.

He tried everything to get over her: Bali, expensive vodka, dating services, the story of Job. The trouble was, he didn't *want* to get over her. Didn't want to stop thinking about her smile, her long fingers, the way she whistled when she worked in the kitchen. He wasn't through with her yet.

And today was their anniversary. Four years of connubial bliss. He would have taken her out to dinner and toasted her again and again. He would have bought her a present – something way beyond their budget, but so what? Love is more important than a bank balance. Maybe even a trip. He would have put two plane tickets on the small dining room table and said triumphantly "Tomorrow we're off to London!"

The apartment grew bigger and bigger around him as he thought about all this. Soon it felt like he was sitting in the middle of an empty railroad station. All aboard to nowhere! Train leaving on every track!

Sighing, he stood up and decided to go out for a drink. He'd sit at a bar and watch a game on



CARL FLINT

than Carroll

television. Anything to take his mind off her, while hopefully somewhere in his skull his machines worked overtime to figure out just what the hell he should do with the rest of his life.

It was very cold outside and his car wouldn't start. Luga-luga-lug – it turned over and over. Nothing. He gripped the steering wheel through the fine leather gloves she had given him for his last birthday. "Come on, you bastard, don't do this to me! Not tonight." Luga-lug... Nothing.

Whenever the engine wouldn't start before, she would invariably say "Maybe you flooded it." Which was the only thing she knew about automobiles – if you pumped the gas pedal too much, you flooded the motor. So any time there was trouble, it must be flooded. He used to kid her about it till she pinched his arm to stop. Once the electric window wouldn't go down. Very seriously he asked her if she thought it was flooded...

Now he lowered his head to the top of the steering wheel. The plastic was ice cold against his forehead. With no hope at all, he turned the key one more time and the engine sparked to life, Thank God!

As he drove out of the apartment complex, he

saw the nasty neighbour she used to call Mean Mr Mustard. Was his wife going to follow him everywhere tonight? Her nicknames for neighbours, "Maybe it's flooded," when he drove past the places she'd shopped would her voice call out Yoo Hoo! Were they all going to ride along and torment him?

No. The bar he chose was cosy and friendly. For a few hours he felt like he'd landed back on earth again. A big blond named Cora sat next to him and flirted. Her boyfriend Auggie kept the drinks coming and the three laughed themselves into a night's friendship. This was the way things were supposed to be! People toasting each other, telling stories, jokes funny enough to make you laugh so hard your eyes closed. He wouldn't have touched Cora in a million years, but was so grateful to her for saying three times he was her type.

When it was his turn to go to the bathroom, he rose from the stool just as a man's voice from behind him said "Hi Cora." The sly tone and intimate timbre said whoever it was had spent some time in bed with big Cora.

Turning, he was appalled to see Mr Van Dyke Tattoo standing right there.

"Hi, You! Where ya been? What kind of naughty you been up to these days?" Cora said with delight and longing.

Even as they were being introduced, The Wife Stealer didn't look at him but rather at Cora's chest. "Hi. How you doing?" He said in a voice that clearly stated he didn't give one shit how the other man was doing.

All right, this was the moment! The moment to rise up against the swine, against his own wimpy nature, against everything he'd ever been and not done. Stand fast! Grab the fucker by the shirt, drag him to the middle of the floor and Jackie Chan his ass into oblivion. *Do something!*

Fat chance. There was no Jackie Chan in him, not one chromosome. No Jackie, no John Wayne, no guts, no *grandezza* or Good Stuff. No bad stuff either – only grey and useless. Buy it by the ton and use it for land-fill. He was only himself, capable of only held breath, flushed cheeks and two clenched fists in the face of the man who had stolen his wife.

He couldn't get out of there fast enough. All the alcohol he'd had that night burned away and its welcome effects were gone before he was halfway out of the building. He would get in his car and drive. That was a good thing to do. Drive through the pain and humiliation, past road signs and gas stations that kept him going towards the nowhere he needed to go on a night like this.

He'd had his big chance, been this far away from the villain but all he did was huff and puff and blow his own house down. So now he would drive and if he felt like driving all night, alone in a car that wouldn't start and reminded him of his wife, then all right. He would drive down the night and watch tomorrow rise through the windshield. A tomorrow always brought some kind of hope.

Outside the bar, the parking lot was full of cars although it was half past one in the morning. He envied those happy drinkers inside. That stopped him in his tracks! To his bitter dismay, he realized he envied just about every person on earth right then who was not him.

Before he had a chance to suffer the full effect of that thought, he heard someone come up behind him. He heard a thud and then felt like something had bitten into the back of his head. He collapsed.

There were no dreams. He went straight from registering the first vicious pain, to bright wide awake "Where the hell am I?" But he wasn't able to actually say the words because something tight was across his mouth and his hands were bound behind him.

Everything was blackness, but he knew he was in something and it was moving. He could hear a car. He was in a car. It took only a few seconds to realize it was the *trunk* of a car. He was bound and gagged and riding in the trunk of a car after being hit on the head and kidnapped!

He panicked. He shook and twisted and screamed against the tape that covered his mouth. He'd never been more alive in his life. Nothing had

ever meant more than getting free of everything that bound him – the tape, the rope, the trunk. If he didn't get out that instant he'd go mad. But he *was* reacting – not just sitting there like a worm and taking it. He was kicking and screaming and flopping around as hard as he could.

Nothing happened. He kept squirming, the car kept moving, but nothing he tried made any difference. Luckily that first tidal wave of panic passed, at least for a short time.

He wondered who the hell would want to kidnap *him*? He had nothing, knew no one, held no power. What Red Brigades, Aryan Brotherhoods, Shining Paths, cutthroats in general even knew he existed? Should he feel flattered?

Maybe they were angry Arabs set on revenge, and any hapless American would do. Or sadists! They'd take him into a forest along with a suitcase full of... *things* and when his body was found, even his rescuers would turn away, sick from the carnage. That started him flopping again.

For better or worse, soon after the second fear hit him, the car stopped abruptly. Two doors closed. He could hear no one speaking. He heard footsteps. A key turning in a lock somewhere very near and then the trunk door above him sprung up. His face was flooded with blinding light.

"Get outta there!"

"He can't get out – he's tied up!"

"Uh, oh yeah."

Both American voices. Familiar.

A moment passed. Then he was yanked to his knees and, rough hands under his armpits, out of the car. Light in his face the whole time, he still wasn't able to see his abductors.

They laid him on the ground. He was petrified of what was next. One of them kicked him in the side. A hard kick but not a killer.

"Cut it out. Don't do that."

"Why? Did you see how he blew it back there?"

Again, familiar voices. More than the pain and his fear, his brain overrode everything else by asking "How do I know those voices?"

The light went out. He blinked fast and hard, trying to regain his burned sight. He made out two, then three sets of feet. One was wearing sneakers. Sneakers like he'd used to have as a teen – high top, black and white Converse brand.

"Take off the tape. Let him talk. It doesn't matter now if anyone hears him." Someone laughed meanly.

Sneakers stepped forward and, bending down, tore the tape off his mouth in one short brutal pull.

The first thing the man did was scream, but not because of the tape. He screamed because the person who pulled it off was himself.

At seventeen. Seventeen-year-old him in those Converse sneakers, tired jeans with patches sewn on by his mother, and screaming orange polo shirt his girlfriend had given him for his seventeenth birthday.

"Surprise, Asshole. Welcome home." Seventeen stood up and put his hands on his thin hips.

He'd gained a lot of weight since that time. He remembered buying trousers with a 32 inch waist and 32 inch length. Those were the days.

"Look at me," a deeper voice said, and now he recognized that voice was his own too. How surprised we always are to hear our voices played back on a tape recorder. In the space of thirty seconds he'd heard himself twice – past and present.

Fearfully, he looked up and saw another him staring at him. He placed this self immediately. A few years back he'd worn his hair like that. And the hideous red plaid blazer. His wife had insisted it looked sharp.

"Do you know who we are?"

Stunned as he was, he couldn't believe the stupidity of the question. But he didn't want to piss himself off, so he only nodded. The other nodded back.

"That's good, because I *didn't*. It took me a long time to understand."

"I got it in a second," Seventeen announced proudly.

"Shut up, willya? If you're so smart, how come you're here?"

From the ground, he watched these two earlier versions of himself glare at each other. It was clear their hatred was mutual.

"And what the fuck are *you* looking at?" Seventeen growled at him with as much menace as he could muster.

But the man on the ground knew it was all bluff. He remembered how, at seventeen, he had tried so hard to be tough. He hung with a violent crowd who were as prickly as cactus and dangerous as hand grenades. He wasn't courageous, but he *was* clever and learned how to fool others into believing he belonged with them, which was enough to get him through those years.

He'd always been clever, but sitting there on the ground in that unthinkable situation, he realized something for the first time in his life – clever tricks you into believing it's enough, but it isn't. For all the shrewd planning and scheming, lying and pretending he'd done through the years, what had it brought him finally? A lost wife, a mid-level white-collar job that sounded a lot more interesting than it was, an apartment that looked out on a cut-rate carpet outlet. He'd once worked with a sassy woman who'd said in passing "I fucked my way to the middle." When he first heard it, he thought the line was just witty. Now he knew in one of those crippling life insights that it was true. He had clevered his way to the middle and that's where his life was going to stay. For ever.

"Hallelujah! Our boy sees the light." Seventeen said.

Older him reached down and helped the man to his feet. His knees clicked loudly. "Welcome to the club."

His vision was now back to normal and what he saw surrounding him on the dark country road was chilling.



There were so many of them. Wearing sneakers and T-shirts, double-breasted suits, Bermuda shorts and Birkenstock sandals. Their hair was cut in many different ways, their faces went from very thin to almost fat.

But they were all him.

Speechless, he stared at all these different versions of himself. It was like looking at a living photo album. There he was at seven, twelve, seventeen, nineteen. Bell bottoms, long fingernails from the time he had seriously tried to learn to play the guitar after college. There was the arm with the glisteningly fresh cut he'd gotten after falling off his bicycle when he was what, eleven?

All of them were there on that narrow country road at two in the morning, all the versions of this man were watching him or talking quietly amongst themselves. He couldn't hear what they were saying but knew it was about him. Their expressions ranged from joy to utter disgust.

Using all the power he had left, he whispered to whoever might know the answer "What is this? Why am I here?"

"Because you're *finished*. Your time is up. And now you know it," Seventeen said with a snicker. "Because now you're like the rest of us: used up and flicked away like a cigarette butt."

The older one put a hand tenderly on his shoulder. "It's true. We're all one person, but that person grows up or older or whatever you want to call it. Each of us here were only one stage. When that stage was over —"

Seventeen shoved him aside and went up nose-to-nose with the confused newcomer. "Let me explain, Dufus. You're too technical. One life is like a pack of cigarettes, like I said. It's that simple. There are twenty in a pack, right? You smoke one, there are nineteen left. What do you do with the butt? Drop it on the ground and forget it 'cause you know it'll burn itself out. Only *we* don't burn out. But nobody knows that till they're here. Like you now. That's the big secret to life.

"All of us —" the obnoxious boy threw his arm out in a wide arc meant to include everyone nearby "— were in one pack. One life. One man. But not till you've been used and thrown away do you get it. Then it's too late."

"Well am I dead? I mean, is *he* dead?"

"Hell no! Don't be so egotistical. He just lit a new cig from your old butt," Seventeen and some others loved that line and laughed like ninnies.

He had nowhere else to turn but to the man who had touched him kindly before. To his dismay, that one only nodded sadly that the kid's version was true.

He looked at the crowd. There he was across all those years and so it had to be true. There was no other explanation. "What will happen to me, to *him*, I mean?"

Someone in the shadows called out angrily "Who knows, man? We're just supposed to sit around here waiting for the next one to join us. Groovy, huh?"

Groovy? God Almighty, when was the last time

he had used *that* stupid word? The seventies? Feelin' Groovy. A Groovy Kind of Love. Groovin' on a summer's afternoon...

Help!

This first night of the rest of his life went on but it didn't end badly. A boy in a Cub Scout uniform, *him*, started a campfire. Another (in pyjamas) brought out boxes of hot dogs and rolls. Seventeen used his switchblade to open everything. Many of them sat around the campfire talking and eating. Some fell asleep, particularly the young ones. Someone tried to get the rest to sing his favourite old songs but another said shut up — not *all* of us know those songs.

The good part was it felt like the greatest class reunion anyone ever attended. Someone there knew every detail of their one life. The man who had been kidnapped a few hours before had a million questions because naturally he had forgotten so much. They knew the answers to every one of those questions. It was like finding all the little treasures again he had lost along the way.

After hours together, he had his favourites amongst them but that was only logical. Who likes himself all the time? He had always feared death, but if *this* was the end of the line it didn't sound so bad. Having cookouts and reminiscing with the boys...

No! It was horrible, terrible! It was *Waiting for Godot*, only there was no Godot or God to wait for, only another version of him and how much of himself could he *take*?

That's when they sprang the last surprise on him, and not a moment too soon! As the first rays of sun shone through the dense forest, they told him to get into the car. He was so exhausted and empty by then he would have done anything they said.

This time different ones drove him back to town. Seventeen had disappeared into the woods hours before and the other kidnapper held a sleeping baby-him on his lap.

They drove in silence into the familiar town. He sat in the front passenger's seat looking dully out at the place that, until last night, had been *his* life. They passed his apartment, the building where he had worked, the lanes where he had bowled, the church where he had married.

He didn't say a word until they pulled up in front of the house where he knew his wife lived with Van Dyke Tattoo. "No, I don't want to —"

"Sssh! Just watch," the driver said and lapsed back into silence.

A few minutes later a metallic blue Toyota Corolla pulled up and Van Dyke stumbled out. He was clearly drunk and the lewd smile on his face said he'd been a very bad boy that night. With Cora from the bar? What difference did it make? He struggled towards the front door.

Despite the night's astonishing revelations, the man in the front seat got so mad again that he cried out "Cocksucker!"

Instantly an amazing thing happened: Van Dyke stopped in his tracks and put a hand to the back of his neck, as if sensing something wrong and strange

was very near. He was facing away but slowly turned in their direction.

When the cuckolded man saw Van Dyke's face, he gasped. Because it was his own face; they were the same person. The only difference was one had a beard, a tattoo, and an attitude. Somewhere along the line he changed and became an outlaw or an asshole or something in between. How had that happened? He couldn't begin to fathom how he would have ever ended up like *that*. But living proof was thirty feet away with a hand on his neck and big doubt in his drunken eyes.

For better or worse, the cuckold realized his wife had neither betrayed nor left him. She just loved him as Mr Bad now. Was she nuts? Everything about this other guy reeked of dirty jokes, cowboy boots, cheap beer and a broken remote control. What's worse, it was likely he'd spent the night betraying the only woman he had ever loved. How often had this happened? How could he do this to her?

The man in the front seat ground his teeth in fury and, without thinking, started to get out. The driver grabbed his arm and held him back.

"You can't do that. It's not allowed. We only brought you here because we thought you'd like to see she didn't really leave you. Well, she *did*, but —"

"How come I didn't know it before, when I saw him in the bar tonight? Why didn't I recognize him then?"

"You can't until you've been with us and learnt the truth."

He was outraged, heartbroken, yet oddly reassured. It was true — she hadn't left him, she'd only moved on when he had.

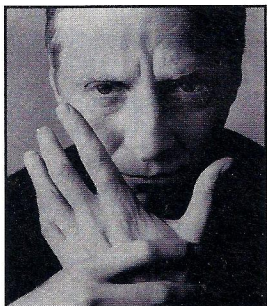
He stared at the lucky drunk on the street and hated him as much as he had ever hated anyone in his life. Even though it was himself, he hated him.

But then something delicious dawned on him and his face lit up like the morning sun outside the car windows. Turning to the driver, he asked "Sooner or later *he'll* be used up too, huh?" He pointed to Van Dyke who had turned and was again walking toward the door.

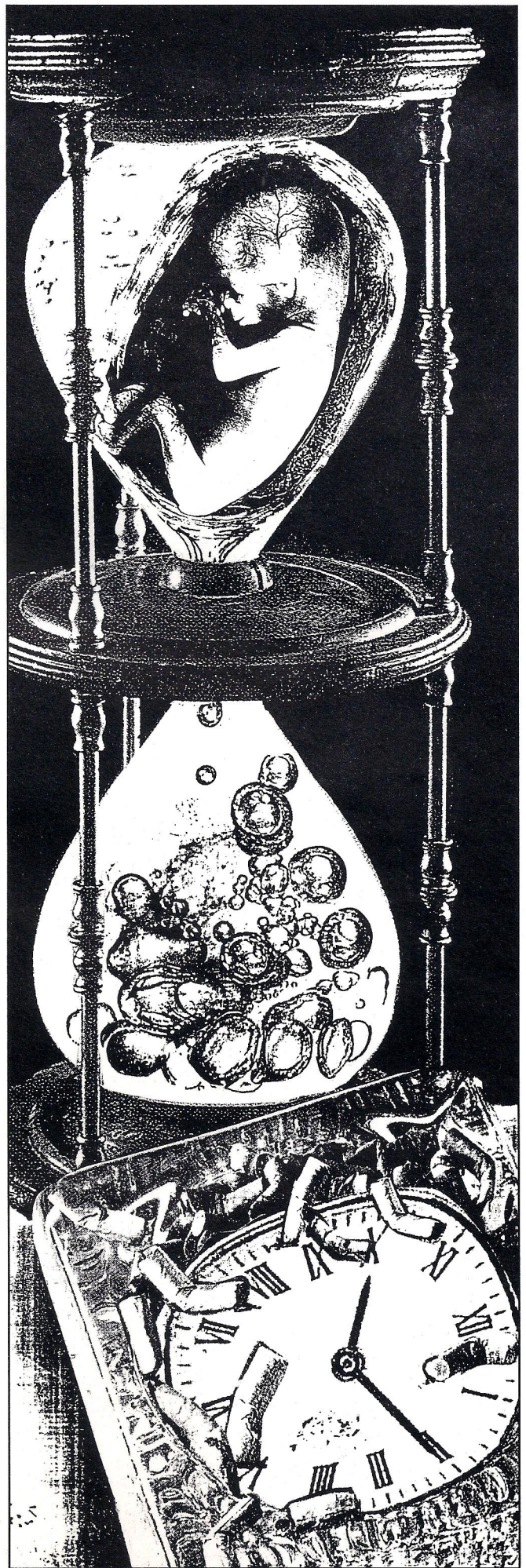
The driver smiled knowingly, that old clever smile, the one he had used all his life. "That's right, and if you want, you can go get the cocksucker when the time comes."

"Right on!" shouted the one in the back seat, raising his clenched fist in the old 1960s Black Panther salute.

Embarrassed, the two men in the front looked away.



A resident of Vienna, **Jonathan Carroll**'s novels include *The Land of Laughs*, *After Silence*, *From the Teeth of Angels*, *Outside the Dog Museum* and *Voice of our Shadow*. His collection, *The Panic Hand*, was published in 1995; his first story for *Interzone*, which became the title story of that collection, appeared in issue 33 in January 1990.



Toby Litt Zips

From the room next door to his came the sound of zips being unzipped, zipped back up, unzipped again, then rezipped. This went on all night. It made him nervous and he slept badly.

Twice he got up, to check his gun was still okay.

*

In the morning he checked out of the motel and drove on into Iowa.

He went for a walk round that evening's motel, staring out into the desert.

The sound of the zips hadn't left him.

He bought a soda from a dispensing machine and felt very glad that he was still only halfway across the country.

He went back into the motel room and tried to focus on it, but it just wasn't there.

When he sat down at the desk (a desk was his only demand of any motel room) he wrote:

No one seemed to know how the first of the Letter Crazes – the Craze for the Letter D – began, or where, or who started it, or why they did it. Some people thought the craze was to do with hip-hop music. Others, that children as young as four were involved. Others, that literacy rates were now so low that it was nothing to do with the alphabet as such. Others still, that it was a sign from God. What is known for certain is that by September 9th 2008 the letter had disappeared from every building, utility, sign or noticeboard on which it occurred. Some were so inaccessible that the thieves must have mountain-climbed up to them or abseiled down to them. Some (the HOLLYWOOD sign, for example) were so

large that trucks must have been required.

He couldn't do any more, so he went to lie on the bed. He really wanted to get some sleep.

This night, though, he missed the sound of the zips. In the whole of his journey across the States, it was the only sound that had in any way interested him. He hadn't heard a zip since, when? – 2004? When zips had gone, they'd gone fast. You saw a few crackheads wearing zip-fastened garments, and they appeared in documentaries about aboriginals and technology, and there was a brief fashion for wearing them as jewellery, but then they'd gone. That sound had gone with them as well. It was a sound he could remember from his childhood. Zip: it had led into childish spaces – the schoolbag, the pencil-case. Zip: it had been the two-part music of a million trips to the washroom. Unzip. Zip. With Unzip coming before Zip, in a paradoxical way. Zip: and, hello, here is your cock. Zip: and, gee, here's her cunt. Fifty years ago. He started to feel nostalgic.

*

In the morning, he drove out of the motel and started back east. It was a break in his schedule, but he could afford it.

He tried to think about the Craze for the Letter D, but he couldn't. It had already gone.

He stopped the car in the dust of the hard shoulder and wrote:

In my house in Milan there is a tub of double-chocolate ice-cream with one scoop taken out of it sitting in the freezer. This has been bothering me for two months now. What particularly bothers me is

that I'm sure I left the top off and the spoon in. The tour has been on for two months and we won't be getting to Milan for another two at least. We're on the Pacific Basin leg: Taiwan, Thailand, Japan, Beijing. I've been trying to think about what the most extravagant way of getting that ice-cream to me would be. I could always send a roadie, but that's too obvious. I could send a roadie in my private jet, but that's not extravagant enough. What I really want is something that destroys everything in the apartment – no, everything in that apartment building – except the double-chocolate ice-cream with the spoon in it. But I don't think science has advanced quite that far, yet. So, what I've been thinking, seeing as it's Milan, is that I hire the Mafia to do a hit on the housekeeper – and, as a rider, ask one of them to charter a jet and bring the ice-cream to me. Pretty crazy, huh? I never liked that housekeeper. She smells of piss and leaves cigarette butts in the toilet.

He drove on.

*

When he got back to the motel, he tried to book the same room as before. The check-in guy didn't even recognize him.

"Which room is that?"

He didn't know, and had to take him there.

"Sorry, sir. That's occupied."

He asked about the one on the other side of the Zip Room.

"That's occupied, too."

Nothing for it, he asked about the Zip Room as well.

"Oh, that one's vacant. You want it?"

He said he'd have to think for a moment.

The check-in guy walked off across the courtyard.

"Hey," he said, after him. "Who was in that room night before last?"

"Which room?"

"The one in the middle."

"Folks."

"More than one?"

"Guess so."

"Did you see their baggage?"

"Their what?"

"They have any zips on?"

The man was old enough to remember zips.

"I didn't see any baggage."

"Tell me all you remember, I'll buy you something."

"Are you a cop?"

"No, I'm just interested, that's all."

"How much interested?"

"What's the biggest tip you've ever had?"

The guy picked what in a small town passed for a big figure.

"I'm twice as interested as that."

"Come back into the reception, friend."

He followed the check-in guy back to the drive-thru cubicle.

"They was called Cassady and it was a man and a woman and I saw no baggage or nothing."

"Cassady. In a car?"

"Big car."

"Model?"

"Nope."

"Colour?"



“Dark, I’d say.”

“Headed east or west?”

“Didn’t say.”

“I’ll take the room. If you remember anything else, tell me in the morning. We can settle up then.”

*

The room was identical to the one he’d stayed in when he’d stayed in this motel before. Even the painting of the happy cat and dog up above the bed was the same.

He put his stuff on the desk and opened the drawer. The Gideon was there, as always. He sat down.

It was a habit of his to hack the Gideon and add a letter – just one letter – right in the middle – right where no one would ever notice. The letter was an S, and he used to put it in front of the word He. A long time ago, he’d heard about a Gideon with a mistake like that which had to be destroyed by order of the Church.

He wondered whether he should rewrite the Craze for the Letter D as the Craze for the Letter S.

The Ice-Cream Rock Star thing wasn’t any good. Historical stuff didn’t sell. Not unless it was full of sex. He deleted the file.

Then, of course, he felt like writing something really unsaleable. So, he wrote:

She began with the Camera Series – huge, neo-realist, post-Ironic canvases depicting everything from Box Brownies to Canon SLRs. A year or so later, the Television Series began; and about eighteen months after that, Radio. Critics began to say she

was repeating herself. After a period of seclusion on the West Coast near Big Sur, she returned for a One Woman Show at the Whitney. A complete change of direction had occurred. She presented, instead of her usual canvases, plans for 3 Epic Series:

1. The Guggenheim
2. Jonah
3. Suggestions on a Postcard

1. A massive exhibition of photos documenting every single work of art – from Picasso to Picasso postcard, from fridge-magnets to kinetic sculpture – in the houses and gardens of every single employee of the Guggenheim Museum. Each employee was to have a section of the exhibit specially dedicated to themselves.

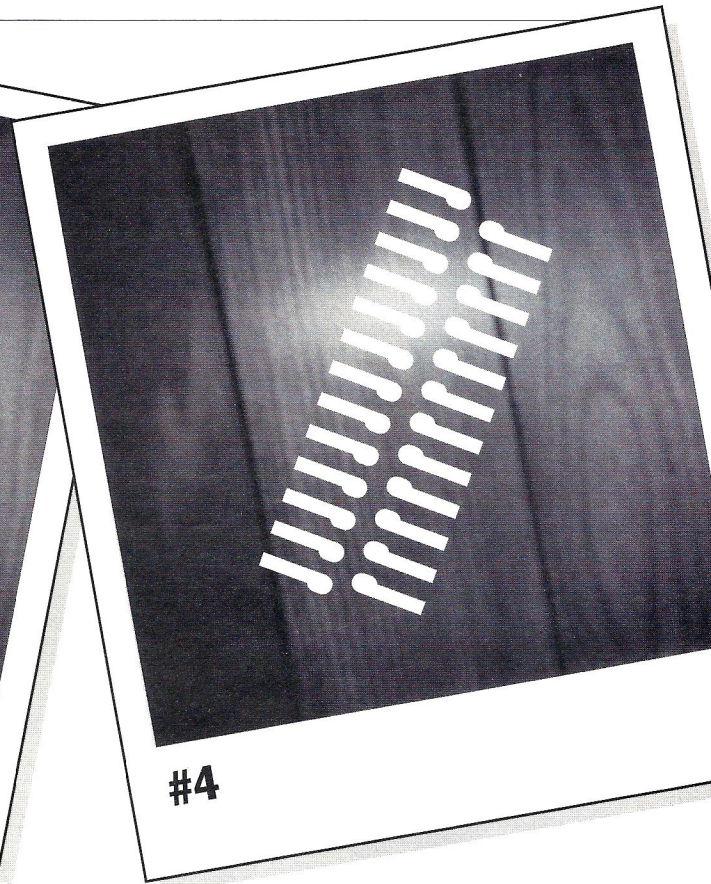
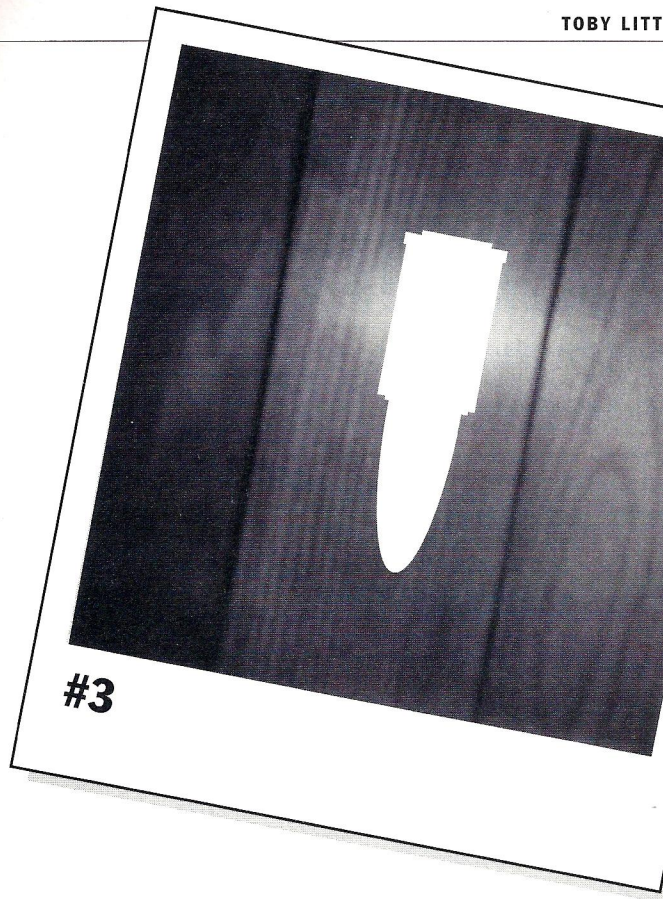
2. A blue whale to be delivered, whole, to a major gallery. The artist to live inside it until it had fully decomposed. Photographs to be taken and interviews given.

3. On postcard provided, members of the public attending the exhibition to be asked to suggest art projects. The first ten non-lethal ones to be put into practice. The ten suggesters to gather together with the artist for a group photograph and a soccer match against the Brazilian national squad.

These projects, she estimated, would keep her going well into the next millennium.

The critics, of course, absolutely slayed her.

He looked up, rubbing his eyes. This was getting way too autobiographical.



He realised that he'd forgotten even to search the room. Not that he expected to find anything. So, he searched the room and found nothing.

*

Driving to a nearby diner, he had what he thought was an idea. Once he'd ordered his food, eaten it and gotten a refill, he started writing:

I was never a great fan of ghost stories, whilst alive, but, in the few years since I died, I have come to find them quite amusing.

God, was he losing it or what?

He switched the damn thing off and called for his check.

*

Back at the motel, he couldn't go to sleep. He kept thinking that he could hear the zips, only they were now in the room he'd been in the night before.

When, eventually, he did get to sleep, he dreamt that he walked round to the room where the zipping sounds were coming from. He was wearing nothing but shorts and it was the middle of the night. The sky was bright with stars in arrangements that should have meant something. He knocked on the door. A big hairy man answered, a wrecked-looking woman behind him. "Hello, son," he said. "Welcome home."

This woke him up, so he went over to the desk and checked his gun was still there.

He had some more dreams afterwards, none of which were any use either.

Waking up, something came to him.

He immediately sat down at the desk and wrote:

She had the kind of walk that could get you arrested in any state of the Union – and her hips would never make parole.

Dolores Deluxe was her stage-name, a stripper.

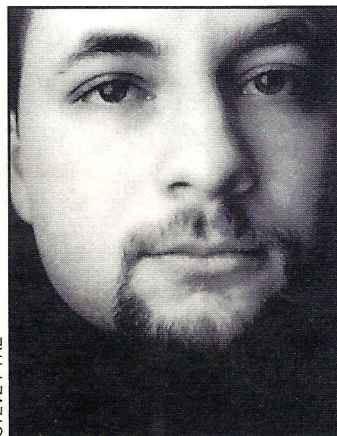
That was better. Now he was hitting it. At least he'd have gotten something out of the journey.

He shaved.

*

Driving through reception, on his way back on to the highway, he shot the check-in guy twice in the belly.

Shit, the way he was going, he couldn't afford even small town big figures.



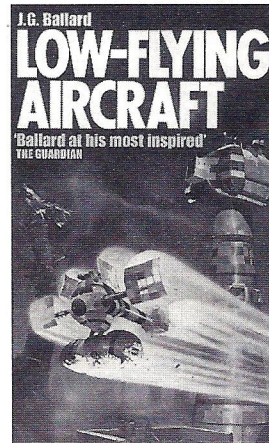
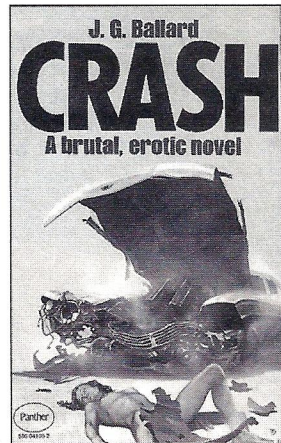
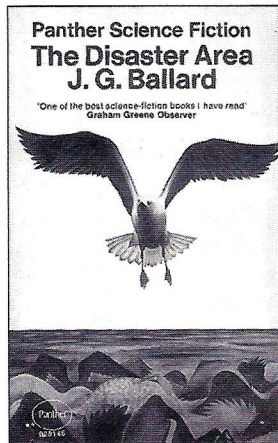
STEVE PYKE

Toby Litt's debut collection of short stories, *Adventures in Capitalism*, is published by Secker & Warburg. "Zips" is his first story for *Interzone*, but not his first foray into science fiction: his sf novel Ω is being published in instalments on the Internet by *Shiftcontrol* – log on to <http://www.shiftcontrol.com>. Born in 1968, Toby Litt lives in London.



Millennial dreamer

With each new novel and film adaptation, JG Ballard continues to enrich and subvert our national culture. Profile by *Nicholas Royle*.



Writing about the Belgian surrealist Paul Delvaux in the *Time Out Brussels Guide*, Ballard could almost be describing himself: “Unlike Dalí, Ernst and Tanguy who travelled ceaselessly, he rarely left his native city, took almost no part in the surrealists’ group activities and spent his life working quietly in his studio, content to embark each day on his solo voyage into his imagination.” Shepperton may not be Ballard’s native town (he was born in Shanghai in 1930), but over the past 35 years he has made it his adopted home, an island of Modernist buildings and suburban tranquillity sandwiched between the Thames and the M3. He rarely leaves it today, unless it’s to travel to Cannes, where this year he witnessed a standing ovation for the première of David Cronenberg’s film of *Crash*, the Ballard novel which most people considered unfilmable. “There are people,” Ballard has said, “who are constantly rediscovering the world on a second-by-second basis, for whom every minute is a new excitement. Whether it’s a sort of naiveté or not I don’t know, but I’ve always been one of those. I wake up in the morning and look out at Shepperton and I’m always amazed and think, What is this?”

The arrival of a new Ballard novel, once cause for excitement among a clique of sf fans, has become a literary event. Just as Delvaux took no part in surrealists’ group activities, however, Ballard is unlikely to be joining the “literary worthies sent

jetting around the world by the British Council” (a reference to “career novelists” taken from Ballard’s review of Burroughs’ letters for the *Guardian* three years ago). *Empire of the Sun* (1984) won the *Guardian* Fiction Prize and was short-listed for the Booker. *Cocaine Nights* (Flamingo, £16.99), which deserved to become Ballard’s second Booker short-listed novel, is narrated by Charles Prentice, an English travel writer who has flown to the Costa del Sol to try to free his brother Frank from gaol. Charged with the murders of five victims of an arson attack, Frank, the manager of the Club Nautico in the British-dominated resort of Estrella de Mar, signs a confession despite the fact that no one, including the police, believes him to be guilty. Unable to get any sense out of Frank, Charles digs around in Estrella de Mar and finds that beneath the calm surface of the sun-drenched resort, with its amateur theatrical productions, tennis lessons and pottery classes, seethes a nest of criminal vipers. Charles is forced to alter his initial view of the resort when hidden perspectives turn Estrella de Mar into “a huge riddle. *Trompe-l’oeil* corridors beckoned but led nowhere.” Classic Ballard territory, in other words; all the usual tics and obsessions are represented in Estrella de Mar, from drained swimming-pools to drowned worlds and visions of the future, described by one character as rushing towards us “like a tennis player charging the net.”

To suggest, as did Lynn Barber in the *Independent on Sunday* in 1991, that Ballard didn’t start writing about his own life until *Empire of the Sun* (“Ballard wrote for a quarter of a century before mining his memories”) is demonstrably not true. The recurrent emblems and symbols of his early apocalyptic fictions are scattered throughout the 1984 bestseller, as a quick glance down the chapter headings will confirm – “The Abandoned Aerodrome”, “The Drained Swimming-Pool”, “The Stranded Freighter” et cetera. Ballard fans will recognize in these images the obsessions that drove the author of *The Drought*, *The Voices of Time* and *The Drowned World*.

That *Cocaine Nights* is laced with the same imagery is one of the new novel’s many strengths. Only a few pages in, we drive by a “half-completed Aquapark, its excavated lakes like lunar craters, and a disused nightclub on an artificial hill.” The Hollinger house, the scene of the murders, having been consumed by fire and doused by hoses, is likened to a marine world: “the silt-covered state-room of a sunken liner... the decor of a drowned realm...” There was even a Club Nautico in the title story of the 1976 collection *Low-Flying Aircraft*, set in another invented Spanish resort populated, albeit sparsely, by ex-pat Brits. Far from being a new departure for Ballard, then, Estrella de Mar has been in his thoughts in one guise or another since he started writing. His first short story to see print, “Prima Belladonna” was set in the desert resort of Vermilion Sands, located “somewhere between Arizona and Ipanema Beach,” but also “in sections of the 3,000-mile-long linear city that stretches from Gibraltar to Glyfada Beach along the northern shores of the Mediterranean, and where each summer Europe lies on its back in the sun. That posture, of course,” Ballard continues in the preface to a 1973 collection, “is the hallmark of Vermilion Sands and, I hope, of the future – not merely that no one has to work, but that work is the ultimate play, and play the

ultimate work." He could have been writing about Estrella de Mar where, following the Hollinger tragedy, the "tapas bars and seafood restaurants along the harbour were packed with residents relaxing after their day's work at the sculpture table and potter's wheel."

It's in the fact that the town is buzzing with life immediately after the arson attack that the novel does indeed explore new territory. Ballard may have unrolled his beach towel on the Mediterranean littoral many times before, but he has never covered quite the same moral ground. Why should Frank admit guilt for a crime no one believes him capable of committing? What kind of community gathers to watch an attempted rape and the torching of a speedboat as if they were spectator events? Are we merely looking at a case of voyeuristic fetishism (hardly a new Ballard subject) or is there some more profound moral dimension to the community's need for deviance in its midst? Clearly the latter, but to dig around for answers here would strip the book of some of its entertainment value, for *Cocaine Nights* represents Ballard at a new peak in his considerable storytelling powers.

Out of a gallery of compelling characters, any number have motives for lighting the fire at the Hollinger house, and Charles's investigations take him deep into the heart of one possible conspiracy after another. Does Dr Sanger, the silver-haired psychiatrist, sleep with his young female patients? Is there more to Paula Hamilton, the bruises on her face just beginning to fade, than meets the eye? As for Bobby Crawford, the tennis pro and charismatic evangelist of the leisure society, he joins a long line of Ballard obsessives, stretching back to crash-fetishist Vaughan and beyond.

Ballard's work has always challenged the preconceptions of science fiction readers and often stretched the genre boundaries so far that fans thought he was writing mainstream. In *A User's Guide to the Millennium* (due in paperback from HarperCollins early in 1997), his

collection of journalism published over the last 34 years, the author acknowledges the assistance of David Pringle, editor of *Interzone*. Again and again he talks up the genre. In 1977 he wrote in *Time Out*: "I firmly believe that science fiction is the true literature of the twentieth century." Ten years later, in *American Film*, he wrote of his "long held belief that science fiction defines the popular imagination of the twentieth century."

Ballard, however, has never been an sf writer like other sf writers, if indeed he's been one at all. In a 1962 piece for *New Worlds*, he wrote, "it is inner space, not outer, that needs to be explored. The only truly alien planet is Earth." While most science fiction authors were orbiting distant globes, Ballard focused his gaze closer to home and invented worlds far stranger. The argument over whether

"This author is beyond psychiatric help."

Ballard is or ever was actually an sf writer or a mainstream author is meaningless – no more than a distinction between different shelves in the bookstore – and need not detain us, except to make the point that whatever he is now, so has he always been. He's one of the few genuine surrealists this country has produced, the possessor of a terrifying and exhilarating imagination, a national treasure. Which makes it especially frustrating, for us and for him, that David Cronenberg's film version of *Crash* – the novel of which a publisher's reader wrote "This author is beyond psychiatric help. Do not publish" – is no nearer to gaining a British distributor than the day it won the Jury Prize at Cannes. Distributors are anxious about what the BBFC might do to the film. Anyone who did take it on would be met with further fist-shaking from *Evening Standard* film critic Alexander Walker who has described *Crash* as "movie pornography". Walker has since reportedly suffered a minor car accident – must be

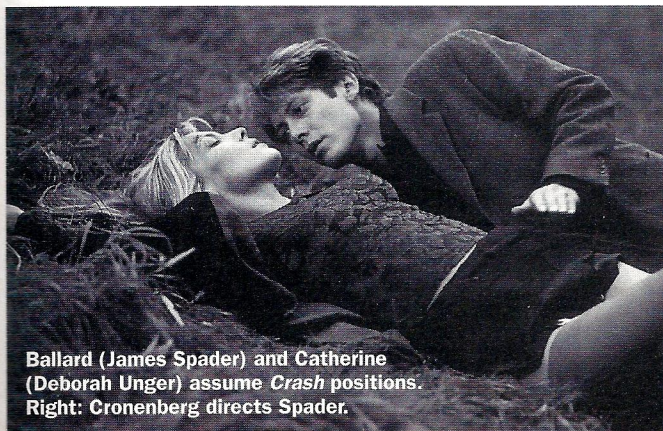
something to do with all those mad road-ragers coming off Le Shuttle after day trips to Paris to see the film.

Not wanting to risk falling victim to the same cruel irony, I took the train from Waterloo to the Gare du Nord. Ballard would love Eurostar, the sleek, tapered snout of the engine giving it the look of something filed down by time as, at 186 mph, it rushes towards us from the future, otherwise known as France.

Crash, the novel, reread today, becomes virtually a shooting script for the film. Only a relaxation of the rule prohibiting on-screen display of erect penises and jets of semen across instrument panels could render the film a more faithful adaptation of the book. If anything, Cronenberg's vision is colder and even more stylized than Ballard's, meaning that the erotic content rarely titillates. It is a very fine film version of one of the twentieth century's most outstanding and enduring novels, and should be shown here without being cut. Ballard has endorsed the film as a success, and given that the film contains nothing more extreme than already exists in the novel, or in the imagination of any of its readers, there is no justification for it not being distributed in this country.

Paul Delvaux is neglected in this country as he has been in his own. He died in 1994 at the age of 97. The retrospective to be held next year in Brussels to mark his centenary would have been better organized as a tribute while the artist was alive. But tributes pour in – and rightly so – to Ballard's Shepperton semi which the author shares with two fake Delvaux paintings, copies of originals lost in the war. As long as Ballard is content to embark each day on his solo voyage into his imagination, our literature will continue to be enriched.

This is the full-length version of an article that appeared in the Guardian on 19 September 1996. Since then, a screening of Crash has been scheduled for 9 November in the London Film Festival, and a UK distribution deal was thought to be within reach as Interzone went to press.

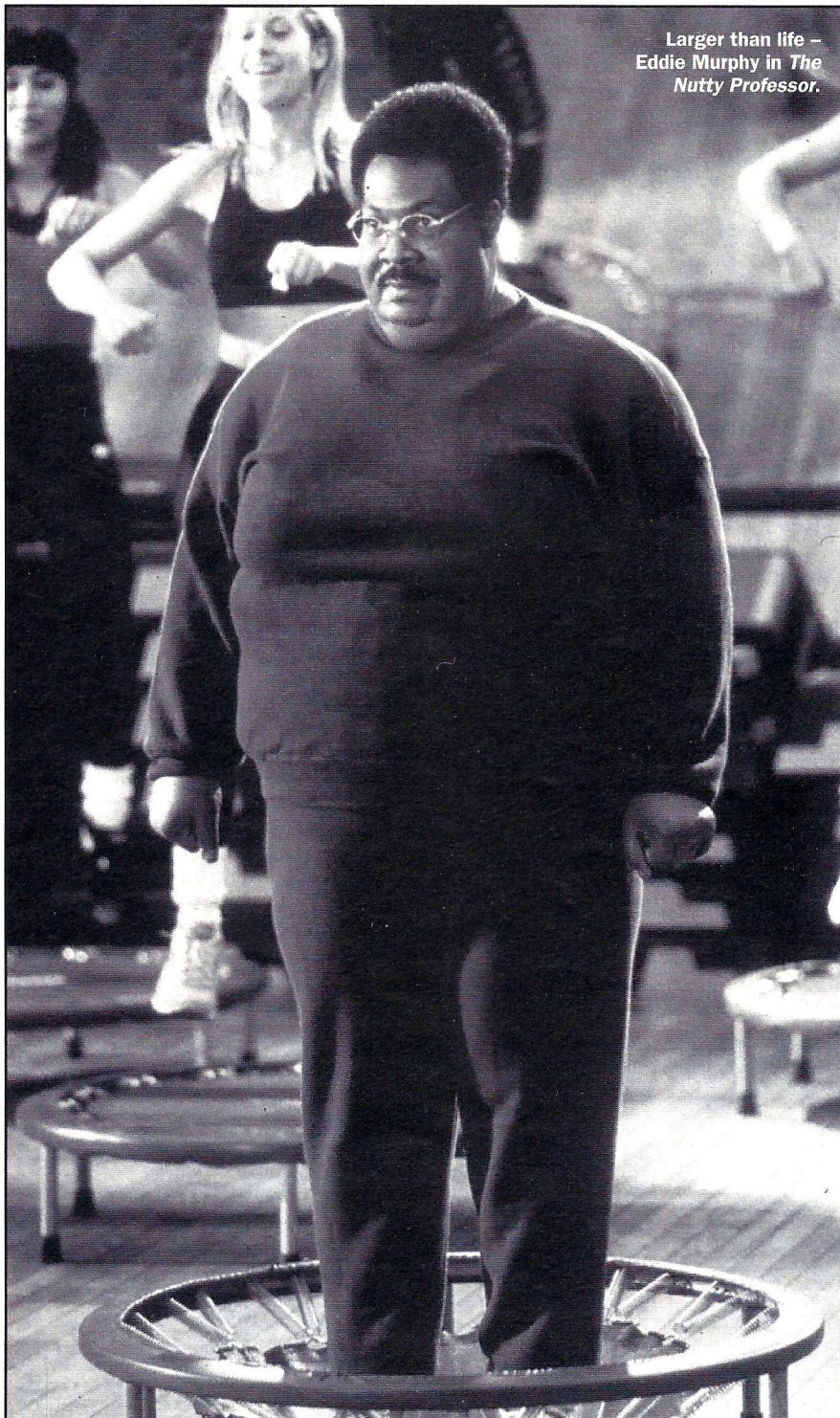


Ballard (James Spader) and Catherine (Deborah Unger) assume *Crash* positions. Right: Cronenberg directs Spader.



Mutant popcorn

Nick Lowe



Larger than life –
Eddie Murphy in *The
Nutty Professor*.

The single most determinative fact about Hollywood in the 90s is that most of the people on those dreary annual power-lists are actors or the agents of actors. Not only are stars, even fading stars, the most expensive thing in most films, but they're also the ones with the biggest say over what gets written for them and how. But writing for stars in an age of performer control can be a tricky tightrope to walk. It's particularly awkward that most stars feel that what they do well is act, and that the world will respect them more if they do as much of it as possible. In the old days, particularly around the season when the leaves start to brown and thoughts begin to turn to the springtime and the Academy, it used to be OK just to demonstrate the star's range and versatility by designing roles with a maximum of emoting and/or disability. But in these competitive days that's not enough, and a leading person nowadays is looking for scenarii that will allow them to play their character in the maximum number of different ways: twin movies, doppelgangers, Jekyll/Hyde and Rashomon retreads, and anything else that desperate lackeys can devise to give the star the chance to strut lots of different stuff while spreading the salary investment as widely as possible. And all this goes double for former A-list figures who need badly to show off their resilience and continuing employability in a time of shrinking opportunity and ever more restrictive casting.

Take Eddie Murphy. Murphy is a man who has always liked to put it about onscreen, combatting the foul slur that he only has one actual character by popping himself up in a rib-tickling assortment of supporting cameos — in *The Nutty Professor*, four family members and a white guy in addition to his central Fattie Jekyll/Skinny Hyde twofer. It's a strange kind of performance that isn't quite acting in anyone else's sense, using vast exosuits of makeup and prosthetics to obliterate the operator

inside and render something more like a standup impressionist's routine than an actorly reading of a character. It judges its success by evading detection, revealing triumphantly in the final credits that figures you just thought were a bit strange-looking and plasticky were further avatars of Murphy's demiurgic Vishnu. (To ensure the audience lingers long enough to appreciate such fun, a "Nutty To The End!" sticker has been added to the posters: "Don't Miss The OUTTAKES In The End Credits," in which we not only see the polymorphous star emerging from under his disguises but watch the cast breaking up repeatedly at the hilarity he radiates at all times.)

What makes *The Nutty Professor* remarkable is the way it not only deconstructs the process of acting and the phenomenon of stardom, but puts the Murphy way of performing at the centre of the film's quite sophisticated paradoxes of identity. For Murphy is an oddity in a number of ways: not only the first African American to be able to open a film at blockbuster level, but an actor whose screen persona is still so tightly-defined that the only way he gets to play a different character is by walling himself up in a different body. It's tempting to suspect that these facts are related, and that the system coped with Murphy's success by containing his range, so that the "Eddie Murphy type" satirized in Robert Townsend's *Hollywood Shuffle* was the only black lead 80s Hollywood would tolerate. (Things have improved, obviously, which is one reason Murphy was so tide-stranded before Professor.)

At any rate, *The Nutty Professor* turns all this on its head by inverting the relation between the Murphys we thought we knew. Klump (as Jerry Lewis's Kelp has been fattened up) is, for all Rick Baker's efforts, visibly a

thin actor in rubber jowls and belly. When he drinks the potion that allows the thin person inside every lardbutt to emerge, he reverts to what we know is his real body, and starts to play an amphetaminated-up version of the old Eddie Murphy character we know and used to love. But the film gives to understand that this is not the real Prof but a sinister usurper, vapid, self-obsessed, and heartless, who merely happens to possess instant and universal star appeal; and the message is underlined by the unexpected warmth and humanity of Murphy's performance as the roly-poly Klump, who is carefully made as appealing as Buddy Love is tiresome and repellent.

"It's the only film you've ever seen about a middle-class black guy with an eating disorder."

As a career manifesto, this could hardly be clearer: as our hero confesses, "Buddy's who I thought the whole world wanted me to be — he was who I thought I wanted to be." In other words, Murphy's professional identity is a battleground between Murphy the star and Murphy the actor, and the pressure to let the star take over has at times been irresistible even for Murphy himself. As Klump confides to his assistant earlier, "You have no idea what it feels like to be Buddy Love — the way people look at him..." But here at last we see the Buddy Eddie for what he is: a shallow, unlovely persona we can't wait to see the back of so that all the bigness and warmth of Eddie the human being can fill the screen with his immensity instead.

If you can take this stuff, the film has considerable rewards. As a

remake, it's an unusually complex and interesting spin on its source: affectionate and respectful to the point of retaining the signifying character names and now-meaningless title, but radically rebuilt in two key ways for which Murphy himself is acknowledgedly responsible. First, what even by 1963 standards was a very white movie has become the most uncompromisingly African-American blockbuster in years, with some unexpectedly sharp incidental satire about the awkward historical baggage of class and culture that even successful black professionals carry about. Watching the two family-dinner scenes with a white audience is a fascinating experience: uneasy silences as rapid nigger repartee goes straight over their heads, alternating with gales of laughter at the fart routines that completely drown out the (actually rather funny) dialogue. It's hardly a subtle, intelligent, or particularly well-crafted film, but one of the many disarming things about it is that it's the only film you've ever seen about a middle-class black guy with an eating disorder.

And that's the second thing. Kelp's 1963 problem was one of personal geekiness, the fact that he was a Jerry Lewis character, and his transformation, though supposedly physical after the Charles Atlas culture of the day, was manifested solely by a change of clothing and hair-oil. But Sherman Klump's problem is purely physical: he has no detectable personality problems, and the film is careful to insist that the low self-esteem that keeps him bingeing is itself simply created by his bodily grossness. In 1963, you built personality by building muscles, putting more body on your outside to beef up the 98-pound weedling within. In 1996, it's the inner body you build, and the millions of overconsuming underpeople who want to be Oprah are taught to shed their excess flesh by feeling comfortable within it. What isn't explained is how you do this if you're not already, like Sherman Klump or Eddie Murphy, a phenomenally-talented achiever whom the world and the opposite sex is quite capable of adoring through whatever lardy packaging may enfold it. That's not a world on which even the most brilliant stars are bright enough to shed light.

More polythespian bravura in the equally-actorly *Multiplicity*: a truly horrid little film about a self-obsessed LA male attempting to manage himself in a world that wants too much of him. For a few brief minutes, it looks as if it's going to be quite close to the



Cardboard cutout and keep — Andie MacDowell in *Multiplicity*.

knuckle, evoking the grim reality of trying to sustain a traditional family life under an extreme late-Western capitalist system where free-market competition forces the male employee into escalating insecurity, overwork and dissociation from family, while the female suffers all this plus an additional enforced either/or choice between motherhood and career. But even this much is quickly soft-pedalled: for Michael Keaton's character, the point where the pressure becomes intolerable is where he's threatened with either having to work weekends or allowing his homemaking wife to re-enter the labour market herself. In *Multiplicity's* world, both nightmare scenes are so unthinkable that Keaton resorts to the obvious fallback: a trio of clones to take over the three essential strands of modern man's life — work, family and goofing about — while he goes off to do what guys really want to do, namely watching the ball game and learning to sail.

In real countries, or what LA man prefers to call "the third world," this is a true story, except that women don't get even the illusion of a choice, and cloning takes several years and is called having children. Certainly anyone who's actually experienced Keaton's predicament, which effectively means everyone in the world outside Malibu, will find little sympathy for his self-abusing angst, and particularly the late arrival of his stone-me realization that where he really wants to be is with the family ("it's all quality time"). Any sense that economic survival might be the driving force behind the pressure to overwork quickly dissipates as Keaton proves more than able to support three extra adults on a single salary without noticeable inconvenience — raising the interesting question of what precise ideological inhibitors blocked him from the lo-budget option of simply hiring a childminder and a couple of Hispanics.

Keaton is, as usual, rather good at the acting and comedics, but disastrous at the charming and disarming, and no amount of clowning clones can prevent sympathies flying all the more to the Andie MacDowell cutout, so obligatory in these androcentric movies about what guys really want and what they want women to want. (Answers, by the way: A. their own business; B. their dream home.) This is one of those doubly-unwelcome films that make you look with newly critical eyes at the predecessor it's trying to clone — in this case, Harold Ramis's previous thought-experiment fantasy *Groundhog Day* — in the uneasy knowledge that the genes of this degenerate mutation were all



Hey, you're Snake Plissken, and this is John Carpenter's *Escape From LA*.

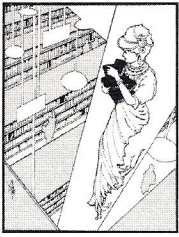
there in the original. It would be comforting to continue to think that the hitherto-wonderful *Groundhog Day* is the top copy and this is the faded carbon, and that a new viewing of the original won't expose an underlying narcissism and sexism as deep as here. But who can be sure when they look so very alike?

At least the multiply ironically-titled *John Carpenter's Escape from LA* isn't troubled by any aspirations on the part of its producing star to be able or willing to act. It may be too charitable to the erratic Carpenter to allege that this is mostly Kurt Russell's film, though Russell's claim of a script co-credit encourages the belief that at least some of the embarrassments aren't wholly Carpenter's doing. No Carpenter film is completely worthless, but this one comes the closest for some years. There are things to enjoy in the broad-brush satire of fundamentalist politics, and the director's score is trademark chord-changes-are-for-wimps stuff; but anyone expecting the kind of loony brilliance that marks Carpenter's personal projects like *Prince of Darkness*, *In the Mouth of Madness* and (especially) *They Live* is in for a dispiriting ride with this feeble, incoherent attempt at what Hollywood people think is dangerous fun. It would be interesting to know who to blame for the serially-moronic set pieces, which include a surfing car-chase, basketball practice to the death, and a hang-gliding action climax (theorem: all films with hang-gliding action climaxes are past redemption); or for the lame sendups of pre-apocalyptic LA life, like fleshnapping cosmetic-surgery junkies and a very guarded shootout in the Magic Kingdom that for legal reasons can't actually identify it by either name or appearance. If you

find wickedly hilarious the idea that Beverly Hills is a bad neighbourhood, or chuckle at insert closeups of vaguely-familiar Hollywood street names in shots of stock future barrio, then strap your corset on well for this one. If, on the other hand, you're even faintly offended by the sight of dangling plot innards, or by an instructional scene on the plot-device gadgetry that includes all of the lines "But you can only use it once," "Better save it for when it counts," and "Never know when you might need 'em," you may want to consider leaving yourself at home.

Still, what Carpenter's failed *Escape* does illumine in an unexpectedly entertaining way is the Hollywood star's unique take on the hero. Snake Plissken, as reconstituted by his loving player, is a guy who makes bladders empty and ovaries ping at the mere sight of his strapping, leatherclad frame and unfeasibly large handgun. (Literally: you really wouldn't be able to lift one that size, let alone aim it and take the recoil.) What's it like being a psychopathic misanthrope on the run from the whole world? Well, turns out it's a lot like being an ageing movie star, only with stubble and an eyepatch. Wherever you go, people recognize you, though you've been out of the public eye for years. "Hey!" they say, thrilled: "You're Snake Plissken!", and (twice, so it becomes a mirthful running gag) "I thought you'd be taller." And the best of it is, you don't even need to do anything; you just walk around the place being legendary and filling the screen with presence. It's hard to think of a better portrayal of a posturing Hollywood male attempting to look like a hardbitten outlaw. Real stars don't need to act; they can just be themselves.

Nick Lowe



Books reviewed

Promised Lands *Paul J. McAuley*

With *Exodus from the Long Sun* (Tor, \$23.95; Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99), Gene Wolfe brings to a close his excellent and very long four-part science-fiction novel *The Book of the Long Sun*, and we can begin to think about his purpose and his achievement. Its title echoes that of his masterwork, *The Book of the New Sun*, of course, and there is a tenuous link between the two, for the builder of the multi-generation starship in *The Book of the Long Sun* may be identified as Typhon, the two-headed tyrant who tried to kill Severian in *The Book of the New Sun*, but the present work is on a smaller scale: it is set in an enclosed and artificial world with a limited history, not a dying Urth millions of years hence; its hero, Silk, seeks at first only to save the manteion, a kind of temple and school, of which he is priest, and finds himself leading his chosen people to a new world; although canny, brave and scrupulously honest, Silk is a servant of the gods and not, like Severian, a Christ figure who will redeem the world and all its peoples. And while the narrative is complex and multi-layered, Wolfe's touch is relaxed and assured; there are jokes. But this does not mean that Wolfe has stunted his ambition, and in working to a smaller scale he has produced a more finely detailed world, with a cast at least as large as that of *The Book of the New Sun* (the final list runs to some 120 characters).

To recap: Silk, priest of a lowly manteion in the poorest quarter of the city of Viron, is vouchsafed a revelation from a God, and charged with saving the manteion from purchase by a rich rogue, Blood. He not only saves his manteion, but becomes cald e of the city and leader of the civil war which overthrows the corrupt Ayuntamiento which has earned the Gods' displeasure by taking all power to itself. Viron is one of many cities scattered on the inner surface of the Whorl, a vast hollow multi-generation starship crewed by humans and Chems, or artificial beings, and ruled by Gods of the ship's mainframe computer, the downloaded personalities of the ship's builder, his wife and his children, who have to fight amongst each other for control of the starship.

It is not so much a story of the

getting of power, but of the pragmatic problems of holding it, and wielding it for the best possible good of the largest number of people. In the fourth and final volume, the citizens of Viron must finally defeat the Ayuntamiento and come to terms with their allies, and Silk learns which of the quarrelling Gods he has been serving, and of the way to lead his people out of the Whorl to the new worlds it has found, for the ship has already reached its destination. It focuses not only on Silk, but in equal measure on the tribulations of Maytera Mint, an associate of Silk who has become a general leading the people of Viron against their oppressors, and upon the genial thief, Auk, who at the end must assume Silk's mantle, for Silk, like Moses, sees but does not enter the promised land. There are battles and various alarms and excursions, a long flight in an airship that discloses much about the structure of the world, and a number of critical revelations that recast the events of the previous volumes and the relationships of a number of the players, and the true narrator of the story finally reveals himself and his circumstances.

The Book of the New Sun was a confessional narrative dominated by the voice of its author (who was not Gene Wolfe). In *The Book of the Long Sun*, Wolfe stands behind many voices, not one. Much of the explication of the tale, and much of the working of the world, is embedded within the conversational speech of its characters; action is often not shown but reported, with all the attendant confusion, by those caught up in it. In this Wolfe has set himself a hard task, and it is a mark of his assurance and skill that he has succeeded in managing, through his characters, to convey to the reader more than his characters could know. In doing so, as in *The Book of the New Sun*, he has transformed a familiar trope (rebellion in a degenerating multi-generation starship dates back at least to Heinlein's 1941 novella "Universe") into something new and compelling. If you have been following this series, be assured that all of the plot threads are woven together, and that there are surprises; if you have not yet begun, do so at once. Right now, Wolfe may be the best science-fiction writer in the world.

Twelve years on from *Neuromancer*, William Gibson has escaped the constricting label of science fiction, and his recent works are infused with a wry, cosmopolitan sense of the workings of the world that agreeably contrasts with the sulky snarl and outsider's grudging attitude of much genre fiction. Like Gibson's previous novel, *Virtual Light*, *Idoru* (Viking, £16) has a more relaxed, lighter feel than the clenched genre muscle of his Sprawl fictions. It lightly skates the world it knowingly reflects; it does not attempt to mark or melt it. It is, though, something of a compendium of Gibson stylistic tics; it is welcome, but it is neither new nor unexpected.

Set in the same near future as *Virtual Light* (whose protagonist, Rydell, makes a guest appearance as a night security man; his career has apparently been on a downward spiral), *Idoru* is a slight caper story revolving around the plan of a pop star to marry a virtual-reality idoru, or idol singer, a synthetic Japanese equivalent of, say, Dannii Minogue or Lulu. There are two strands, which slowly converge. In one, Chia, a fan of the pop star, arrives in Tokyo to check out the rumours of the impending nuptials, and gets involved more deeply than she has bargained for; in the other, Laney, an infotech worker with a talent for spotting "nodal points" in the welter of electronic information that tracks each person's life, is on the run from his previous



employers and is recruited by the pop star's management to find out who has got to him.

We know by now that we do not read Gibson for his plots (just as well in this case, as the whole thing is pretty much a McGuffin), and as if to acknowledge that, Gibson echoes several of his other novels here. Thus, Laney is in trouble not just because he betrayed his firm in a futile attempt to try and prevent a girl committing suicide, but because his case was picked up and dropped by an investigative TV show from the makers of the TV show which likewise picked up and dropped Rydell in *Virtual Light*. The double-tracked plot of uniquely talented technologist and naive but resourceful girl echoes that of just about everything Gibson has ever written (and Chia and her virtual guide echo the gangster's daughter, Kumiko, with her virtual guide in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, the former an alien in Tokyo, the later, a native of Tokyo, an alien in London), and he still can't seem to help having his novels climax by making the various protagonists meet up in some effectively sealed-off room which those chasing them somehow fail to penetrate so that they can fit their parts of the puzzle together (the room above the department store in *Count Zero*; the room above the workshops in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*; Skinner's room in *Virtual Light*; here, a hotel room barricaded by thousands of fans). To cap it all, the final payoff echoes not a little that of *Neuromancer*.

But Gibson's compressed prose, salted with a nicely judged laconic humour, still imparts the rush of the future, and he's at his best in distilling the crazed mirror of Japanese urban culture into a series of tableaux of telling images (he doesn't need to invent much of the strangeness of his futuristic post-earthquake Tokyo; there really is a soft drink called "Pocari Sweat," and a vodka called "Come Back Salmon"). The slight plot is crowded with grotesque yet plausible and vivid characters (the best of them is Blackwell, the courteous and efficiently brutal Australian bodyguard), and equally vivid settings (one treasures the image of a bar whose counter is carved from frozen piss), while the central theme, of how to inhabit the demands of fame, is something about which Mr Gibson knows more than a little. It is neither ground-breaking nor even startling, but if you want more of the kind of thing Gibson is famous for delivering, it won't disappoint.

Lisa Tuttle is perhaps best known for her short stories, but in her powerful, subtle and deeply felt fantasy novel *The Pillow Friend*

(White Wolf, \$21.99), she sustains a singular portrayal of a self-willed descent into delusion. At the heart of the book is the folk-saying "Be careful what you wish for, for you might get it," of how the getting of a wish changes and burdens the recipient. For a wish is an ideal against which the world is measured and found wanting, and Tuttle's hapless heroine's yearning for unrealizable dreams slowly traps her in a maze of her own making.

Agnes Grey enjoys what seems like an ordinary suburban childhood in Texas in the early 1960s, occasionally interrupted by the appearance of her mother's flamboyant twin, who gives Agnes what she most desires, a pillow friend with whom she can confide her deepest secrets, in the form of an antique doll called Myles. Agnes believes Myles to be alive and to be instructing her in tests that will deepen their relationship, but the tests get Agnes into trouble, and turn her against her mother, who, Agnes thinks, seeks to kill Myles. Later, at age 13, Agnes is sent to live with her aunt in a primitive cabin in the woods, where she discovers her aunt has her own pillow friend, a mysterious lover who seems to live in the cellar. Agnes's own wish for a horse comes true, and with it responsibility for the creature's life: it wastes away when she leaves; tries to kill her when she wishes she were dead; and vanishes when she wishes it gone.

Slowly, we realize the truth of her aunt's identity (which Tuttle has carefully folded into the narrative), and the reason for Agnes's over-ripe fantasy life, which persists through adolescence, where she imagines a passionate affair with a classmate who in reality is as clumsy, shy and unsure as any adolescent boy. Grown up, Agnes's dreams of seducing an English poet, Graham Storey, come true, and for the first time she must face the consequences of her actions. She dreams of a cottage with honeysuckle around the door; reality is a cramped terrace house with traffic thundering past. Storey is by turns charming, sensitive, and romantic, and selfish, self-absorbed, and cold. They marry, and Storey's wedding gift to his new wife, a book she fondly remembers reading as a child, begins to unpick the elaborate fantasies of her childhood with chilling consequences.

Tuttle provides a sympathetic and unsettling portrait of a woman who, as she grows up, entangles herself deeper and deeper within her own fantasies, from febrile childhood imagination through hypersensitive adolescence, to the claustrophobia of two adults who have caught themselves in a lacerating

relationship in which neither can make the other happy. *The Pillow Friend* is a knotty, complex and satisfying book, its scrupulously detailed realism shot through with unsettling and vivid disjunctions, which takes a strong and unsettlingly direct gaze on the misuses of fantasy. It is recommended.

It is the mid-19th century. A man flees to America from persecution in Poland, finds a woman of his own kind, marries her and sets to pioneer farming on the Missouri frontier. He and his wife are killed by superstitious rednecks, and their daughter flees across the prairies to California, where she finds her promised land. It is the story of the American West in a nutshell, but here the persecuted are werewolves, for in *Nadya: The Wolf Chronicles* (Tor, \$23.95), Pat Murphy skilfully weaves a tough-minded fantasy into the history of America.

Nadya is the teenage daughter of Dmitri and Marietta, werewolves of the traditional kind who transform at each full moon. Nadya's parents are killed when the boy who takes her virginity betrays her; she kills him and flees westward. Disguised as a man, she comes to the aid of two survivors, a little girl and a young woman, of an Indian attack on a small straggling wagon train. She is a strong, well-portrayed character, self-sufficient, fierce, resourceful, but lonely, seeking others of her kind.

Nadya has an affair with the woman and, echoing Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs Miller*, they and the orphaned little girl struggle across the Rockies to the haven of California. The affair ends as abruptly as the adventure, and Nadya voyages along the northwest coast until she finds an eccentric community which will accept her, and a husband. Her descendants live there still.

As in a number of her short stories, Murphy deals with transformation between human and animal in a naturalistic, unforced manner. The first description of Nadya's change takes less than a page, and concentrates on the effects of her senses rather than the bone-cracking bodily changes familiar from the rubber-bladder and stop-motion special effects of recent lycanthropy movies. Thereafter, she simply Changes. There is no guilt, no horror, and above all, no dichotomy between beast and human; she assumes her other guise willingly and happily, for it is a good thing to be a wolf, and it enriches her human apprehension of the wilderness; she is a natural ally of the Indians, who understand and accept her nature. In this, *Nadya* has an elegiac quality, a paean for the lost

richness of the American wilderness (while the British have countryside, the Americans have wilderness: this is at the root of our differences). After crossing the Rockies, Nadya remembers "...the prairie dogs barking as we passed and the wolves singing in the night... The sun shone on the grass and the wind carried the scent of buffalo"; but her merely human lover remembers only being tired and dirty and hungry, the bites of vermin and the threat of Indians.

Well, we know that humans triumphed over Nature in the end, but Murphy contrives a plausible ending (albeit with some knockabout routines that lie aslant the tone of the rest of the book) in which Nadya and her new friends drive a squalid family of potential loggers from their paradise, and all live happily ever after. It's a fantasy, of course, but it has a poignant resonance.

NLee Wood's *Faraday's Orphans* (Gollancz, £16.99) is a post-ecodisaster novel in which reversal of Earth's magnetic field has destroyed the ozone layer



Books reviewed

A Glorious Stylist *Chris Gilmore*

Jack Vance is the richest of stylists, but the same opulence doesn't extend to his ranges of plot or character. To some that may be a disadvantage, but to those of us who know and love his work the echoes of earlier books offer familiarity among his endless linguistic and descriptive inventions.

So it is with *Night Lamp* (Tor/Underwood, \$23.95). The hero, Jaro Dath, is recognizably different from Kirth Gersen, Glawen Clattuck and Gual of Sfera, but the differences are minor, reflecting only the effects of differing backgrounds on young men who are all clever, good-natured, highly sexed and rather cynical by temperament. Much the same is true of the young women who attract him: one is vivacious, but superficial and amoral; the other brave, demure and strong of will and principle. Both excite by their vulnerability as much as their beauty (in which both are confident), and I have met both under many names.

Vance's personal philosophy seems to have emerged, along with his unique style, fully formed from the crucible of Hitler's War. For five decades both have served him well in the production of the baroquely decorated planetary romances which are his speciality. *Night Lamp* is typical, and ranks with

and the Van Allen Belts. Civilization has retreated to a few domed cities, surrounded by a ravaged wilderness inhabited by savages and the ghosts of history. It is hardly a novel scenario (and very mid-1980s), and as if recognizing this Wood imbues it with a gritty intensity. The problem is that the more realistic she makes it, the more miserable her characters become, and her hero, Berk Nielsen, although a satisfyingly complex character, is also extraordinarily bitter and oddly passive.

Nielsen is a helicopter pilot who works out of the domed city of Pittsburgh, searching for caches of oil and pre-catastrophe technology, chaffing at the claustrophobia of the domed city's society and of his marriage, and trying to live up to his dead father's legendary exploits. When he is ambushed in the wilderness and his helicopter is destroyed, Nielsen must make his way back through the anarchy of the wilderness; and, in a book where no one is particularly likeable, he becomes less and less likeable as his

suffering is piled on. He is taken in by a wild teenage girl, Sadonya, who treats his wounds but subdues him using pharmacological trickery. Like Nielsen's wife, whom Lee Wood depicts as a splendidly manipulative bitch, Sadonya appears to be viciously amoral and completely selfish, and their bickering mistrustful relationship and Nielsen's gradual realization of her vulnerable humanity after they are both captured by cannibalistic Rangers is the best thing in the book.

But the plot staggers on after Nielsen comes home. He is briefly a hero, becomes an embittered serf in the employ of his enemy, and then is allowed to bootstrap himself to redemption. It's a grace note that comes out of nowhere, unearned by the sulky Nielsen who does little throughout the novel but suffer and complain about suffering. Perhaps he's meant to be the antithesis of the competent hero, but like Brando's Wild One, he, and this book, is against everything and for nothing.

Paul J. McAuley

his very best; indeed, it seems at times that he has deliberately set out to write the quintessential Vance novel. The opening recalls *Marune*; the quest, *Ecce and Old Earth*; some minor characters, *Space Opera*; some ornamentation, *The Last Castle*.

The story is the classic Vance *Bildungsroman*, in which a young man grows up somewhat at odds with his home culture, in this case more obviously so than is usual. Not only is Jaro a waif of unknown provenance, adopted out of pity onto the world Gallingle, far removed from his origins — his new parents are themselves mugwumps and misfits (the local terms is "nimps"), pursuing a lifestyle of arcane scholarship conspicuously removed from the "striving" (institutionalized social climbing) which dominates life on that world, and espousing a pacifist philosophy to which Jaro, as a Vance-style man of action, is wholly unsympathetic.

The tensions arising from this are brought out effectively, and although the book has the two-part structure typical of Vance's longer works (*The Anome*, *Araminta Station*), with the boy's struggles which dominate the first part giving place to the more deadly threats the young man must face in the

second, there is a tighter unifying theme than he usually provides. In this case the follies which stem from the cultivation of status to the neglect of virtue are displayed in structurally contrasting forms on three worlds, for each of which Vance has coined its own word: "comporture," "tamsour" and "rashudo" all represent the malign decadence of what had originally been a healthy desire for psychological reassurance and social recognition, the baleful effects of each preying on the characteristic weaknesses of a particular society.

The story itself proceeds rather slowly in the first half, with a long section of flashback before Jaro and his party leave Gallingle, but builds suspense towards two nail-biting climaxes in the closing chapters. Vance has lost none of his touch, and his ornamentation is as rich and as witty as ever, including almost as a throwaway an entirely original form of ritualized non-penetrative eroticism (oh all right, safe sex) which will doubtless appear on the tariffs of the more *raffiniert* Californian massage parlours ere long. They should really pay him a royalty, but as they surely won't ... do yourself and him a favour — rush out and buy this glorious book.

It's no less true for being a cliché that reviewers of short-story collections are always hampered by having read them the wrong way. Instead of dipping into the book now and again over a period of weeks, we swallow the lot in a day or so. Then we complain of indigestion. Thus, perforce, did I approach Chris Kenworthy's ten-story collection *Will You Hold Me?* (Do-Not Press, £6.99), and only the naturally sunny disposition on which so many have remarked has kept me from suicide. Chagrin, pique, ennui and umbrage (what Ursula Le Guin called "the French diseases of the soul") have been staples of the short-story writer since at least the time of Saki, but Kenworthy concentrates on the fifth and worst — anomie.

He is a writer of mood pieces somewhat in the style of Robert Aickman, but his principal strength is in the character-study and his principal theme is how what is already an unsatisfactory sexual relationship may be made worse by incursions of the supernatural or malign Fate. Dysfunctional characters with dysfunctional or downright inoperative sex-lives are generally more interesting to read about than demigods having a whale of a time, but even so there were times when I wished Kenworthy could lighten up a little. In "Them Belgiums," for instance, a bad relationship is described with grace and precision, apparently by way of contrast to the good one which succeeds it; but we never learn about that, as the tale ends the moment it begins. Likewise in "Covering Up," there's a good straight relationship sketched in, but the focus is all on a lugubrious gay who can neither enjoy his condition nor rid himself of it.

As Kenworthy's observation of the all-too-human is extremely good, the supernatural element (when present) can hit a jarring note, as happens in "Something About Tomorrow." There the principal interest lies in a homosexual's inept courtship of a younger colleague, who is too

embarrassed to come out with a blunt refusal of what has only been offered by implication, and thus gives the impression of stringing him along. The inexplicable appearance of birds in a locked room comes across as a side issue.

"The Mathematics of Night" works better, because the confusion of reality, dream and hallucination chimes perfectly with the chronic insecurity of a man with an eating disorder trapped in both a stale relationship and a foreign city where he doesn't speak the language.

And so forth. This is an elegant and perceptive collection, but not to be taken in large doses. I commend it to depressives everywhere — whatever your troubles, Kenworthy knows someone who has worse.

I have mentioned before that while Robert Rankin offers many new and original jokes, often building them into running gags, he mainly presents older ones with an aplomb to match their venerable status. So it is with *Nostradamus Ate My Hamster* (Doubleday, £15.99). It's one of the minor loose ends in my life that I've never tracked down and read the story that goes with that infamous headline — I mean, Freddie Starr couldn't really have ... could he? Surely not alive — he still works in television! On the other hand, perhaps no one else has tracked it down either ... Avaunt! Thither madness lies.

On this occasion the first joke is the rather grim one invented by Poe for "The Man That Was Used Up," and elaborated by Thomas Pynchon in *V*. It segues into another which started life with Lovecraft as "The Whisperer in Darkness," was dramatized in *The Twilight Zone* from a story by Richard Matheson and now recurs with increasing frequency as the prospect of downloading your entire personality becomes ever less fanciful. Those have all been straight treatments; Rankin's is not, but the humour is distinctly *Grand Guignol*, as he thoughtfully warns the more sensitive reader.

None of this has anything much to do with the main plot, which is a take-off of Jack Williamson's *Legion of Time*. A triumphant Nazi regime, defeated in our own time-stream, is attempting to bootstrap itself back into reality via time-travel to Brentford (where else?). Only Russell Nice, dogsbody at a clapped-out set-hire firm, can thwart their dastardly plans, nor is he helped by those of his fellow employees who are much enamoured of the wealth and fame that 21st-century Nazi electronic know-how might earn in the 1990s. As accomplices he has Omally and Pooley from the *Brentford Trilogy*, assets somewhat devalued by his suspicion that they may be fictitious

characters; but then, so may he, a reflection that mirrors a plotline shaped much like a Klein flask.

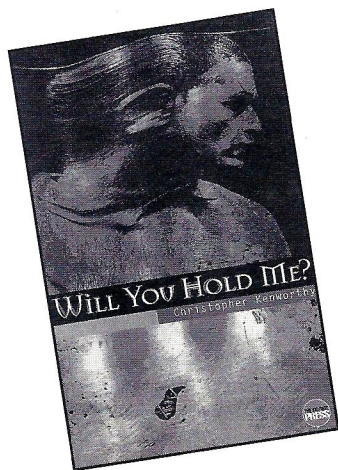
All good clean fun, and it ends with the loose ends tied up as neatly as usual, but I felt a certain lack. Some of Rankin's mannerisms, notably his habit of discussing the progress of the book with the reader, are wearing a bit thin, and the book itself likewise. It looks much the same length as his excellent *Garden of Unearthly Delights*, but there are fewer lines to the page, and fewer words to the line. It's Rankin's sixth book in the three years since I reviewed the Brentford trilogy in *Interzone 72*, and while I wouldn't accuse him of marking time there's been more productivity than progress and the strain is beginning to show; not that badly, it's well above his worst — but it's not there with his best. Let's have another, at full length and strength, sometime about mid-1998.

Like Rankin, Michael Moorcock likes to forge (or force) connections between the elements of his oeuvre, not always to best effect as I commented at some length when reviewing his *Fabulous Harbours* in *Interzone 102*, to which *The War Amongst the Angels* (Orion, £16.99) is described as a sequel. It's more obviously a sequel to *Blood* (reviewed by Dave Kendall in issue 92) and presents in exaggerated form the two major problems which affect all recent Moorcock.

The first is that the writing, always a bit camp, has now become self-referential to the point of solipsism; by page 18 Moorcock had dropped the names of Beck (in three variants), Cornelius, Hawkmoon, Quelch, Ariocho and Sporting Club Square. The reader is supposed to latch on to these and recognize their significance, though in truth they signify nothing except that Moorcock is the author. And his first-person heroine's own name? Rose Moorcock.

The second is that Moorcock's "multiverse" is too large and too arbitrary for anything that takes place there to matter very much. Rose herself has supernatural acquaintances (mainly angelic) and, being an "eternal," is able to move through the "Second Ether" forwards, backwards and sideways in time so that, as she says herself, "... there are so many realities in the multiverse, each only a shade apart, and the failure of one, identical in almost every detail to another, was not much to mourn ..." Quite. The adventures of a character who combines virtually unlimited resources with little sense of purpose and no moral imperatives, and in any case looks forward to endless reincarnation, can offer only limited excitement.

Moorcock further muddies the waters

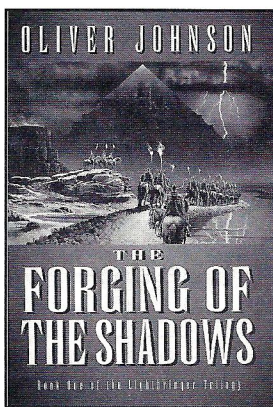


by his perverse decision to write sections from two first-person viewpoints, the other being Jack Karaquazian the Egyptian gambler, as well as some in the third; but whoever's driving, he makes heavy use of flashback throughout. As any flashback may be into a different timestream (or previous life — the distinction is unimportant), to make sense of the narrative becomes ever more unrewarding as his characters inhabit one picturesque milieu after another, constantly reassuring each other that, yes, they are all *very* dashing. When that palls they dive into the literally interminable and terminally unfunny pastiche of 1950s space opera which he began in *New Worlds*, and of which Kendall wrote (with notable restraint): "It's hard to engage with characters of other reality."

Altogether, this is a self-indulgent work. Moorcock has a café-society vision of a universe where everyone who matters has plenty of money and servants, and the sordid has no place — and nor have the squalid, bureaucratic, banausic, banal, dull (make your own list, with or without benefit of thesaurus). In fact he evokes it rather well, supplementing his descriptive powers with a fine ear for the evocative word, but his application is slapdash. I noted "ex-patriots" for "expatriates", "alternation" for "alteration" and several inconsistencies when using the historic present. Except for Moorcock's ritual obeisances to Krug-Champagne socialism, the cumulative effect is more like being guided by Peter Simple through a museum of classic film-sets than a novel. So if you have ambitions as a set-designer ... otherwise, I'd pass.

Oh, yeah. Forgot to mention. It's all dead post-modern.

Because so many inappropriate or inadequate talents write it, the lower tiers of Sword-&-Sorcery/heroic fantasy display a greater range of stylistic and structural ineptitude than any other mode. There are exceptions, however; all the curses,



prophesies, geases, wyrds, singular natures etc. with which the form permits the principals to be afflicted, have rendered idiot plotting unnecessary, and thus rare — but not in Oliver Johnson's *The Forging of the Shadows* (Legend, £5.99).

As the book opens the city of Thrull is in a bad way. The legitimate rulers have been ousted, the death-cult of Iss has replaced the worship of the Sun-god Reh as the dominant religion, vampires haunt the streets by night and plague is raging. Thither come Urthred, a youthful warrior priest, and Jayal, scion of the old regime, on secret missions. Urthred has a hideously mutilated face, so how does he seek anonymity? He dons a mask of horror, and uses his elbows indiscriminately among the crowded populace. Unsurprisingly, he is bonked on the head well before page 40, but not, alas, fatally. He is dragged before a renegade priest who dismisses the guard so as to question him alone, and whom (of course) he overpowers and kills to make his escape.

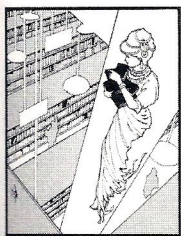
As for Jayal, he dons the robes of a pilgrim which he wears over his cuirass — which just happens to be emblazoned with his family arms. Things get no better over the next 500 pages: an old eunuch who has a fine falsetto voice was castrated only seven years ago; despite the depressed economy, a high-class

brothel is blazing away like the palmiest days of Napoleon III; Manichee, a saintly scholar who has responsibility for many young boys, places them in the charge of a moronic, sadistic drunk and never gives a thought for their well-being; a girl of 13, raped and sold into the brothel, retains possession of a gem-encrusted prayer book; the madam, from pure perversity, denies her services to a wealthy gangster; and so forth. When, after over 250 pages heavily encumbered with data-dumping flashback, all these absurdities contrive a passage of suspense, one notices only the contrivance.

The writing is generally workmanlike, with some good descriptive passages, but marred by lapses into the oafish: "Jayal might not have remembered him if it hadn't been for the fact that Weebil had served in his very own company ..." or hyper-Victorian mawkishness: "... youth, beauty and hope; all those daughters of Innocence, which, when their dam dies, struggle to live off the bitter milk of human nature alone." Johnson's grammar is patchy, especially with strong verbs.

Perhaps everyone concerned reckons the public deserves no better, but if they truly despise their customers, should they not be in some other line of business? Heroic fantasy is generally classed as non-cerebral entertainment, but non-cerebral doesn't mean decerebrated; one suspends disbelief, not judgement. That a house of Legend's status should present such merchandise is a pity, and what can have induced David Gemmell to write a rave blurb defies my imagination. This is surely one to avoid, but the equally big-name houses of Pan and Gollancz have both been just as guilty this year (see *Interzone* 108). A quick glance at the small press and vanity offerings shows that their slush piles must be awash with better work than this.

Chris Gilmore



Books reviewed

Monsters of the 20th Century *Brian Stableford*

Much has been written about the manner in which 20th-century writers have repeatedly made use of the 19th century's favourite monsters, Frankenstein and Dracula. The promiscuous fashion in which such figures have extended themselves across the media landscape —

becoming household names in the process — has been as extensively documented as the processes of serial metamorphosis simultaneously forced on them by changing mores, new ironic insights and the desperate search for novelty-within-familiarity. The monsters of the 20th century

are one step behind their august predecessors, but they too are being continually repackaged and reprocessed — and with each new phase of their reiteration the depth of analysis which readers and critics must bring to bear on new versions becomes more demanding.

I have before me two new accounts of modern myth-figures, which cannot be fully appreciated without some awareness of the histories which lie behind them, and which might conceivably benefit from assessment in tandem; Ataraxia's *Il Fantasma dell'Opera* (Avantgarde Music, £10) and David Britton's *Motherfuckers: The Auschwitz of Oz* (Savoy, no price shown).

The first manifestation of *The Phantom of the Opera* was a *feuilleton* in *Le Gaulois*, one of three such daily serials that the prolific Gaston Leroux produced during 1910. It relates the history of the Opera Ghost, a mysterious figure with a face like a death's head whose career climaxes with events following his demand that a singer named Christine Daaé be promoted to leading roles. Christine's affection for Raoul, Vicomte de Chagny, results in the murder of Raoul's brother and her own abduction by the Ghost, who imprisons her in the catacombs beneath the Opera. There she discovers that her unseen singing tutor — who claimed to be the Angel of Music about which her father used to tell her stories when she was a child — is a maleficent stonemason named Erik who wears a mask to conceal his hideously disfigured face.

Although a dozen of Leroux's novels were filmed in France during his lifetime *The Phantom of the Opera* was not reckoned among his best works and it was left to Hollywood to produce a movie version in 1925, as a vehicle for Lon Chaney. Making the most of the key scenes in which the Opera chandelier crashes down on the audience, the phantom appears at a masked ball costumed as the Red Death, and Christine first snatches away the phantom's mask, the silent film became a classic. It was remade several times. The 1943 version — in which Claude Rains played the Phantom — was hijacked by Nelson Eddy, whose overblown singing performances leached the impetus from the plot, but the 1962 version starring Herbert Lom was routinely deferential to its Hollywood predecessors and the 1983 version starring Maximilian Schell was another carbon copy. The 1989 version starring Robert Englund introduced a diabolical pact, possibly under the influence of *The Phantom of the Paradise*, which was much the better of the two caricaturish homages released in 1974 (the other was *The Phantom of Hollywood*). The 1990 TV mini-series starring Charles Dance was developed from a 1983 play by Arthur Kopit.

Other dramatists eventually realized that if Nelson Eddy could use *The Phantom of the Opera* as a means of

carrying forward his Hollywood career a stage musical might be able to reclaim a little of Hollywood's glamour. Ken Hill's theatrical version employed authentic operatic set-pieces as a background to his rather tongue-in-cheek version of the story but it only reached the stage on a wave of sympathy which accrued to the author when he claimed that Andrew Lloyd Webber's extremely popular musical — first staged in 1987 — had plundered his idea.

The transfigurations which the Phantom's role underwent in the course of these adaptations were partly forced by the conventions of the new media. Whereas Leroux's Erik, deformed from birth, is frankly wicked, Hollywood preferred to represent the Phantom as a mild-mannered frustrated composer who switches from Jekyll to Hyde after his disfigurement. In the Hollywood versions the Phantom's face is ruined by acid or fire after he concludes — correctly or not — that his masterpiece has been stolen. Only the 1989 version implies that the masterpiece in question was the result of a diabolical bargain. When Lloyd Webber elected to provide his own quasi-operatic music it was entirely natural that he should re-transfigure the plot as a tragic romance of the kind which lends itself so well to operatic melodrama (although the Kopit play had earlier moved in the same direction). Although this was represented as a reversion to the original plot there is all the difference in the world between Lloyd Webber's anguished Phantom and Leroux's malevolent one, the strong note of sympathy following the modern fashion for the ironic rehabilitation of the monsters of old. Ataraxia's version takes this trend to its logical conclusion; in the wake of Lloyd Webber's weak claim to have restored the original it pretends to even greater authenticity — the sleeve notes are careful to specify which chapter each of the 12 tracks refers to — but in fact it carefully inverts Leroux's most basic assumptions while parodying both the great tradition of Italian Opera and the sentimentalized bombast of Lloyd Webber's music.

The fact that modern technology permits four people — one of them peripheral — to reproduce the sound of an entire orchestra and a whole cast of singers, not to mention a battery of cinematic sound-effects, is both a miracle of engineering and an aspect of *Il Fantasma dell'Opera's* parody. The quality of the joke is fully revealed by the shock with which the listener discovers that the song in which Christine is tutored by her unseen Angel of Music in preparation for her debut on the Opera stage — in

the track entitled "La Nuova Margherita" — is in fact Kate Bush's "Wuthering Heights," here presented as it might have been had it been an aria in a Puccini opera. Some authentic opera-music — from Gounod's *Faust* — is reprocessed in track six, this being one of three lyrics sung in French (only one is in modern Italian, although two are in Latin; the climactic song preceding the instrumental finale is the second in English).

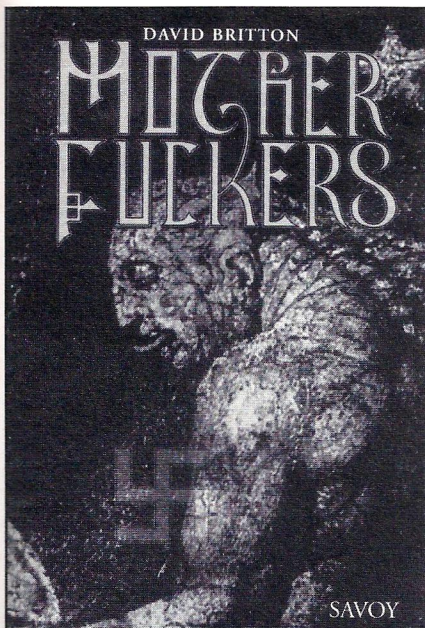
The sleeve notes provide further tongue-in-cheek commentary on the transformation which *Il Fantasma dell'Opera* has wrought, obligingly rendered into a language which is not the writer's first (and perhaps not his second):

"The Monster owns geniality [he means genius], the one that leads you towards the sublime creation from which it is not possible to come back alive; the powerful act of creating goes over the mental capacity of containing so high revelations...."

"The Phantom leaves us with a deep acquired wisdom abandoning all the ingenious inventions and day-dreams; he dies with or without a mask (it doesn't matter) 'cos he's the faceless man, the erased essence who returns to earth disintegrating his psychic substance. *Il Fantasma dell'Opera* is dedicated to all of you who feel the 'living-pain' like we do in a continuous up and down of absolute creativity and harsh tension to the end, departure, dissolution, evaporation, extinction...."

Like Dracula and Frankenstein's Monster before him Leroux's musically-gifted but socially-ostracized Phantom is fully, if ironically, rehabilitated. Here, he really is an Angel of Music, offered for hearer-identification as a purely tragic figure, the agonized victim of a loathing which is unreasoned, unreasonable and lethal. In making this point Vittorio Vandelli, Giovanni Pagliari and Francesca Nicoli — the three permanent members of Ataraxia, here supported by Lorenzo Busi as the Phantom — are careful to challenge the aesthetic presumptions underlying all the previous usurpations of the story while still producing music that is as beautiful as it is combative.

David Britton's *Motherfuckers* is combative in a far more aggressive fashion than *Il Fantasma dell'Opera*, and it makes no attempt at beauty. Quite the reverse, in fact: its sets out to be as ugly as possible. There will undoubtedly be many readers who cannot sympathize with this ambition, who will consequently find the book disgusting, but its method is not without purpose, and that purpose has to do with certain monstrous idols of the 20th century. Whereas



Ataraxia's aim is to rehabilitate that which was unjustly judged monstrous, however, Britton's aim is to protest against the manner in which that which is truly monstrous has been covertly preserved and protected.

Unlike Ataraxia's Erik, whose ugliness prevented his being recognized as an Angel of Music, Britton's essentially elusive protagonist — the spirit of the Holocaust, variously and partially incarnate in Dr Mengele, Lord Horror, and the separated Siamese twins Meng and Ecker — embodies an evil whose authentic ugliness has been sheltered and hidden, partly by virtue of a misguided sense of decency and partly to conceal and disguise its continuation into modern times and its residual infection of modern culture. Britton's purpose is to reveal the monstrosity of the ideas which brought about the Holocaust, as dramatically as he can.

As with Ataraxia's sleeve-notes, Britton takes care to make the theme of his novel explicit in several passages:

"Every monster imagined by mankind had died and was reborn a hundred times more terrifying in the concentration camps of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau." (p.65)

"Killing Jews produced its own dynamic — and could ever be policed by 'good taste'. Down that path lay a recipe for further genocide. The killing grounds were elemental and contagious — and often outrageously funny, if selectively so..." (p.86)

"People might fear Dracula and Dr Frankenstein's monster and the wayward impulses of the serial killer, but Mr Auschwitz dwarfed them all with the sheer terror of its existence.

"Lord Horror was Auschwitz made myth.

"Natural selection had produced Lord Horror. He was prime cut. Primate man. Tabula Rasa. Mussolini and Jerry Lee Lewis. Elvis on the wire." (p.223)

These explanatory passages provide the key to the decoding of the remainder of the text, although turning it within the lock is by no means unproblematic. Taken out of context, Chapter Three — in which Meng subjects a jaded audience to a torrent of racist jokes — might seem atrociously and irredeemably repulsive, but the point of the exercise is exactly that. Savoy is based in Manchester, where Bernard Manning holds court in his legendary club, still unable to see the unfunny side of his own jokes in spite of the careful analysis provided by Trevor Griffiths' excellent dramatic study *The Comedians*.

It is, admittedly, difficult to judge what effect *Motherfuckers* is most likely to have on its readers. It is difficult to believe that anyone would find it pornographic in the sense that it could be used for titillation, but there is no doubt that it is a seriously discomfiting work. Readers enthusiastic to like the books they read will not find much in it to delight them; even those ready and

willing to relate to texts in a more sophisticated fashion might find it hard going. That may qualify as a weakness in the commercial arena, but it is also a strength.

M*otherfuckers* is a sequel to *Lord Horror*, which was successfully annihilated by the Manchester police in spite of the fact that their seizure of the stock under the Obscene Publications Act was successfully appealed in the Manchester Crown Court (only a handful of copies was returned). It is also a companion-piece to the Savoy comic books featuring Meng and Ecker, whose seizure was approved by the same court of appeal in 1992.

Savoy's legal representatives are continuing the fight to have this issue laid before a jury; the magistrates who have approved the seizures and sentenced the comic books to extinction by fire remain absolutely firm in their resistance to that prospect. David Britton — who has already served two jail terms for selling books and magazines which are openly and legally on sale in every other city in the country — will presumably remain entangled in this very real game of "Spot the Monster" for the foreseeable future. According to the heirs of police chief James Anderton, Britton is the Monster; in his view, their actions can only serve to blur the image of the one 20th-century Monster that is definitely no mere bogeyman and of whose terrifying aspects we still need to be reminded.

"Ataraxia" is calmness of mind, the primary objective of Stoic philosophy; "Motherfuckers" requires no explanation.

Le Fantasma dell'Opera is distributed in the UK by Misanthropy Records, PO Box 9, Hadleigh, Suffolk IP7 5AU; *Motherfuckers* is published by Savoy, 279 Deansgate, Manchester M3 4EW.

Brian Stableford



Books reviewed

Débutantes James Lovegrove

W*hiteout*, the first novel from Sage Walker (Tor, \$23.95), is an ecopunk thriller set, as the cover blurb somewhat uninspiredly informs us, "20 minutes into the future." A team of console-jockeys known collectively as Edges earn their livings finessing the way the public perceive the actions of megacorpor-

ations. When a Japanese company, Tanaka, hires them to help effect some changes in the Antarctic Treaty so that Tanaka will be able to exploit that continent's natural resources, it would at first appear to be just another job for Edges, albeit one that raises a few questions of conscience among the team. It isn't long, though,

before the seemingly straightforward assignment has been complicated by sabotage, political intrigue and, perhaps inevitably, murder, as the members of Edges discover that they are pawns in a sinister executive game. The media manipulators are themselves being manipulated, and the successful completion of their

brief, and perhaps their very survival, depends on unmasking the identity of the dangerous businesswoman known as Evergreen, who will stop at nothing to thwart them. Will a handful of human beings be able to stand up to the might of the multinationals? This is a work of fiction — what do you think?

Whiteout is, self-consciously, a “global” novel. Not only are its principal thematic concerns environmental issues such as over-fishing, pollution and the protection of wilderness areas, but it features a variety of international settings and a multicultural cast of characters. Edges itself is made up of men and women from different nations, united by permanent electronic links that allow them instant access to one another’s thoughts and lives, in spite of the fact that they are strewn across the planet. Herein lie the novel’s greatest strength and also its greatest flaw. These disparate yet intimately bound individuals find their electronic relationships, because conducted in virtual settings (artificial and therefore controllable), much easier to deal with than those they fumble through in the awkward physicality of “Fleshtime.” However, having established this neat paradox, Walker then lets her characters — principally Signy Thomas, who is the main viewpoint of the book — fret endlessly about the friendships and sexual relationships at play within the loose structure of Edges. Page after page is frittered away on musings on the nature of love and trust which overload the plot, slowing its forward momentum. There are times, indeed, when *Whiteout* veers perilously close to becoming a kind of sf Aga Saga, which is a shame, since Walker handles action sequences well. A few more of those to replace the hand-wringing soliloquies and the ungainly, slightly embarrassing sex scenes might have served the novel better, if that is not too churlishly masculine a criticism.

This is, when all is said and done, an enjoyable book, and Walker’s zappy dialogue and descriptive eye suggest she is an author who knows what she is doing and is doing what she knows. If her subsequent novels can capitalize on the good qualities of her first, she ought to be around to entertain us for quite some time.

Lynn Flewelling’s maiden effort, *Luck in the Shadows* (Bantam, \$5.99), is a well-written piece of fiction containing sympathetic characters, believable dialogue and passages of artful description. It moves along at a fair lick and contains plenty of fights and escapes, close shaves and betrayals, turnabouts and twists. It is also, sad to say, desperately

derivative, and as a result hard to like.

The plot goes like this. Unjustly imprisoned as a spy by the despot Asengai, young orphan goat-herd Alec is sprung by a fellow prisoner, a foppish bard by the name of Rolan Silverleaf, who soon reveals himself to be a thief/spy/master-of-disguise called Serengil. Sensing latent greatness in the boy, Serengil takes him on as his apprentice. Consequently Alec gets caught up in the political skullduggery between two rival kingdoms, Skala and Plenimar, which are busy gearing themselves up for yet another war against each other. When Serengil is struck dangerously ill by a magic spell, Alec has to transport him to the port of Rhiminee, where lives a wizard, Nysander, who can cure him. In Rhiminee, Alec learns about the Lerans, a bloodline of long-lived, faerie-related royals who like nothing better than to sow civil discord and foment rebellion behind the scenes, as royals do. The rest of *Luck in the Shadows* is taken up with Alec’s and Serengil’s efforts to foil the Leran plot, but be warned: the novel ends on a suspended cadence, with a “riveting sequel,” *Stalking Darkness*, touted on the final page.

You will immediately be able to deduce from the foregoing précis that *Luck in the Shadows* contains little that is new in terms of setting, characterization or structure. Alec is the archetypal Peasant Boy With an Important Destiny, Serengil is your average, general-purpose Rogue With a Heart of Gold, and the two of them travel through a world where wizards cast enchantments and royals scheme and nearly everyone has an extremely silly name (Corruth i Glamien Yanari Meringil Bokthersa takes the prize). Imagine a cocktail of Tolkien, Moorcock, Leiber and Howard from which all the intoxicating ingredients have been removed, and you will have some idea of the flavour of *Luck in the Shadows*: sweet, but lacking any kind of kick.

It is a pity that a writer as manifestly able as Flewelling should choose to recycle traditions rather than subvert them or establish new ones, but there you go. She can at least claim to be the third most famous novelist — after a certain moderately phenomenal horror author and his wife — to reside in Bangor, Maine.

Unwisely Francine G. Woodbury appears to have ignored the advice traditionally offered to neophyte authors, namely write what you know. Her first novel, *Shade and Shadow* (Del Rey, \$4.99), is set in Oxford, England, but no Oxford you or I would recognize. Woodbury appears to have done little, if any, geographical research, and to anyone

who has spent even a few hours in the City of Dreaming Spires, her book’s sense of place is shamefully poor. The ponderous antiquity, the eccentric streets and clammy climate, are all notable by their absence. The setting might as well be any university town; more precisely, given the British cast of characters’ uniformly American habits and diction, any university town in the United States.

On the plus side, *Shade and Shadow*’s gimmick — that the practice of magic has become acceptable and widespread, a profession on a par with medicine or the law — is an unusual one, and Woodbury has fun exploring the possibilities the premise offers, although one feels at times that she might have taken things a bit further. For example, her hero, Raoul Smythe, Professor of Magic, at one point goes out to a pub and, because he is in a self-destructive mood, picks a fight, which leaves him bloodied and bruised. It would have been more interesting, perhaps, had Smythe instead found himself some bar-room adept and challenged him or her to a magical duel.

And that is why *Shade and Shadow* disappoints. It doesn’t matter too much that the plot is a bog-standard, by-the-numbers whodunnit (the body in question belonging to Smythe’s immediate superior in the Faculty of Magic, and the finger of suspicion initially pointing at Smythe himself in order to give him a motive for becoming involved in the investigation). Woodbury’s prose is fine, and the technical aspects of magic are well researched and presented. The problem is that the use of magic itself is infrequent and more often than not fails to thrill. Magic — certainly fictional magic — is exciting because of its dangerous strangeness, its unpredictable otherness, but in *Shade and Shadow* we are dealing not with earthy “magick” of the Crowleyan variety but with its emasculated, “k”-less inferior, a tamed version which, when reduced to a commonplace, is rendered doubly mundane.

This isn’t quite an irredeemable flaw, and the novel contains sufficient wit and quirkiness to keep things bubbling along nicely, but one is left at the end with the sense of an opportunity squandered. Perhaps there will be a sequel. *Shade and Shadow* gives the impression of being the first in a series.

Last but not least, Deborah Christian’s first outing, *Mainline* (Tor, \$23.95), comes bedecked with glittering testimonials from the likes of C. J. Cherryh, Nicola Griffith and Larry Niven, and for once the

solicited praise is merited.

Thanks to an alien mutation in her genes, assassin-for-hire Reva has the ability to perceive all the divergent Lines of Possibility which stem from any given moment. By entering a state of "timetrance," she can see infinite alternate Nows spread out before her "like strobe-action figures overlaid one atop the other." Once she has selected the one she wants to follow, that then becomes her Mainline, her reality.

The talent serves her well in her chosen profession. By assessing a person's likely movements, she can sneak up on even the wariest target undetected, and should it appear that a situation isn't going to turn out her way, all she has to do is shift sideways into a Line where the outcome is in her favour. The downside of this is that she cannot allow herself to form any close personal attachments, since there is always the risk that someone she has grown close to in one Line may not exist in another.

All is fine until she meets Lish, a novice smuggler and arms dealer who, for all her spirited ambition, will probably not survive long without the help of someone like Reva. Between the two women there develops a

strong mutual attraction to which Reva eventually succumbs against her better judgement, knowing that by tethering herself emotionally to one particular Mainline she is denying herself the escape route which has hitherto been essential to her survival. Bad timing, this, since Reva has just inadvertently brought extreme dishonour on an alien bodyguard called Yavobo by assassinating the employer he was sworn to protect. Yavobo belongs to the Aztrakhan, a race of eight-foot-tall warriors who abide by an aggressive code and take blows to their reputation very seriously indeed. The only way he can recover his dignity and restore his warrior pride is by tracking down and killing Reva, and this is what he attempts to do throughout the rest of the book, with increasing determination and relish.

It is a tribute to Christian's writing skills that she manages to make the reader concerned for the well-being of a central protagonist who is to all intents and purposes invulnerable. Reva's reasons for remaining with Lish, despite the fact that it compromises her safety, are plausibly developed and ring psychologically true. Both she and Yavobo are equally

deadly, and both have tied themselves to intangible absolutes — he his samurai-like code, she her feelings for Lish — which bring them inner satisfaction, but at a price. The parallels and differences between the pair, hunter and hunted, are developed well.

An sf author is not constrained by a special-effects budget, and Christian, unfortunately, falls into the trap of making the alien races in *Mainline* uniformly humanoid. Some really *alien* aliens would not have gone amiss. And while she has a good ear for hard-boiled diction and a pleasing prose style, her reach occasionally exceeds her grasp. For instance, the phrase "a week's worth of heartbeats" is a meaningless redundancy which could have been better put as, simply, "a week," while "an incisor-revealing grin" is pure tautology: unless you have forgotten to put in your dentures, your grin is by definition going to expose teeth. These minor quibbles aside, *Mainline* is gripping, inventive and eventful, all the things a good sf thriller should be, and deserves wide success and, if it hasn't earned it already, the attention of a UK publisher.

James Lovegrove



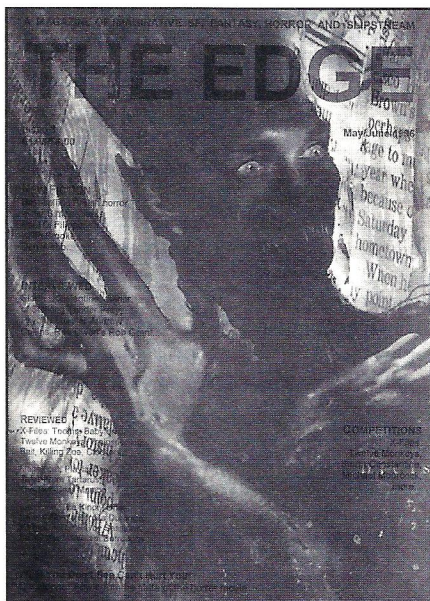
Magazines reviewed

Andy Cox

There's something not quite right with *The Edge*. You might not think it at first glance but it's there, insidious, lurking within the editor's comments about his colleagues, their magazines and their readers; it's there within letters penned by cronies, casting the kind of aspersions any responsible editor would not deem worthy of ink. There seems to be some idea here that calling other magazines "fuck-terrible rubbish" or publishing a story with the word "cunt" in it is somehow frighteningly daring, but every instinct the readers have will surely soon be telling them that none of what's said here really rings true. It's as if the editor, Graham Evans, is desperately trying to deflect attention from his own damaged reputation (this is the second incarnation of *The Edge* and it seems that some people are still seething after the first one) by attempting to sully that of others, all of whom are considerably more respected. No one is spared, from *Interzone* to the small press: "Don't get the idea that these are anything

like *The Edge*... Don't let my total disbelief in the idea that somehow a 'story' published in an A5 rag with a circulation of a hundred or two is necessarily more 'cutting edge,' adventurous or better than one published by a mainstream publisher put you off..." *The Edge* might be A4 but it's still an unglamorous cut-and-paste job, and it has few subscribers but claims to be selling thousands in the shops. Uh-huh. Elsewhere the editor says, of another magazine, "Some of the contributors have, unfortunately, been around for years."

At first glance, Vol 2 Issue 3 (A4, 40pp, £1.95 from 1 Nichols Court, Belle Vue, Chelmsford, Essex CM2 0BS) impresses with its line-up of Keith Brooke, Simon Clark, Paul Di Filippo, Don Webb and Michael Moorcock (with Storm Constantine and Christopher Fowler featuring in the non-fiction), all of whom have, incidentally, "been around for years." I thought the Brooke story badly written, the Di Filippo ("The Death of Salvador Dali") obviously dated, some of the others adequate. But where is



the alternative we are supposed to be offered here? The magazine's subtitle just about covers every eventuality: "Imaginative SF, Fantasy, Horror and Slipstream," and this, coupled with the fact that I can't recall seeing any *unknown* writers in Volume 2 of *The*

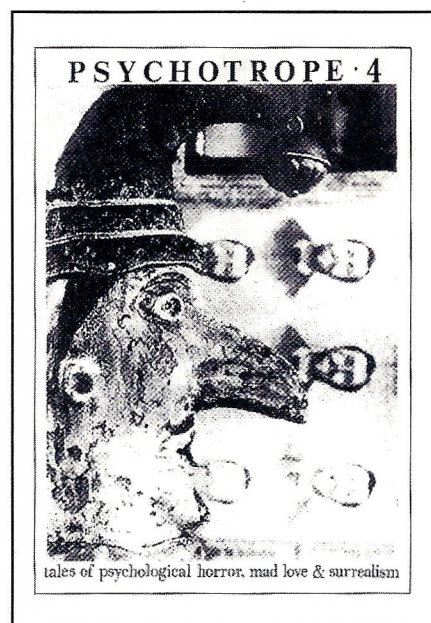
Edge, suggests to me a lack of editorial integrity. This is, in fact, itself no more than a fanzine. Of course, famous authors might well be queuing up to be published here first but, to me anyway, that doesn't quite ring true either. What isn't beyond doubt is the fact that a successful magazine is more than the sum of its parts. Some things that make a magazine likeable and believable you cannot see but you know, instinctively, that they are there. I'm afraid I neither like nor believe *The Edge*.

One of the magazines referred to in *The Edge* as "fuck-terrible" is *The Zone*. Anybody who knows anything at all about genre magazines in this country will know how insulting this is, and how far wide of the mark. If only every magazine had an editor as knowledgeable and dedicated as Tony Lee. You're left in no doubt as to the editorial policy of any of Tony's magazines, and there is no need for him to constantly butt in. *The Zone* looks better than *The Edge*, with a more imaginative layout and 20 more pages, and most importantly in the context of this column it has good attitude. Not everything published here is to my taste, of course, but I wouldn't question the editor's wisdom in selecting the material he does. In Issue 4 (A4, 60pp, £2.75 or £10/5 from 13 Hazely Combe, Arreton, Isle of Wight PO30 3AJ) the fiction is from, amongst others, Neal Asher (seems to be everywhere of late, and he's just published a novel with Tanjen, with another forthcoming from New Guild), Chris Bell, Bruce Boston, Rhys Hughes, all of whom are very talented and inventive. Rhys Hughes also displays a staggering knowledge of M. John Harrison's fiction in the "Genre Greats" article "Climbing to Viriconium." This isn't the first such article Rhys has written and I'm rapidly coming to the conclusion that he's read everything by everyone. Equally insightful, detailed and entertaining are articles in the "Making Sense of Wonder: A Serial Glossary of SF Themes" series, this time Andrew Darlington on nuclear apocalypse (a pretty potent combination, if you ask me), and part three of Steve Sneyd's "Concise History of SF Poetry," which despite its "concise" description is surely destined to become the master-work on the subject. I'm not sure if I much care about Algis Budrys's or Edward James's "Top Ten SF Novels" but it was enjoyable to compare their choices to my own nonetheless (how *Dune* can make it onto anybody's list is beyond me). All in all, fine fiction and hugely impressive non-fiction. Recommended, in other words.

Somebody else publishing fiction not quite to my taste, but who is still more than praiseworthy, is *Broadsword*, the smartest magazine mentioned so far, even though Issue 3 (A4, 40pp, £2.50 or £9/4 from Dreamscape International, 132 Longbridge Road, Barking, Essex IG11 8SL) has replaced the distinctive colour covers of the previous issues with a totally blank red card. Editor Nancy Sparling says they've gone for "impact and the dramatic." No prizes for guessing what the average cynic might think.

The fiction is, as always, in the traditional fantasy mould, some of it woefully unoriginal but some of it doubtlessly very enjoyable if you're into sword and sorcery, questing and stuff. One story even begins "Once upon a time there was a princess," swiftly followed by a tower, a forest, a village, a crystal, a castle... Elsewhere, Barbara Davies writes typically well in "Magic for Windows," though the basic premise, which you can guess from the title, is a cliché in both fantasy and sf. Throughout, druids and silly names abound in the sort of stories that could be easy targets for the literary snob, but the point is that the editor knows her audience, and you'll know immediately if you should be part of that audience. Anyway, there's nothing stopping *Broadsword* from publishing stories that fall within its remit but which are also surprising, even outstanding. There was one such story in the first issue, and there's another this issue. I wondered at first exactly what Allen Ashley was doing here, let alone being given the lead story. "The Secret Life of Fairy Tales" starts in good old-fashioned Narnia mode, but before long Allen is weaving his own brand of magic, and you realize the story is about far more than you thought it was, working contiguously on several levels. Not his very best work but even this has elements of what makes him one of the finest writers around: a deceptively simple style that is often actually quite profound, and a capability to amuse and move, often at the same time.

Finally, a magazine that does, on the whole, publish fiction very much to my taste. Issue 4 of *Psychotrope* (A5, 56pp, £2.10 or £7.50/4 from Flat 6, 17 Droitwich Road, Worcester WR3 7LG) contains some of the best new writers to emerge recently, and can in some ways be seen as a measure of their progress. Tim Lebbon, for example, with the uncompromising and disturbing "Redemption, Resurrection & the Priest" publishes easily his best story in ages. Peter Jamieson-Sinclair shows an effective

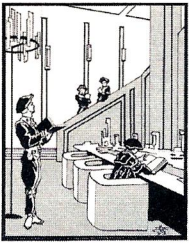


turn of phrase in "The Domino Masquerade," the story as a whole equally effective. James Miller, still only 19 but already confirmed as a major talent (profiles in *Time Out* and everything — I will be reminding him one day that I published him first), pours his vision and individual style into "The Comforts of Sleep," while Jason Gould's equally-but-differently stylized "Miracles in Ash" is further evidence that he is another potentially great writer. Closing the issue is "Straw Defences" by Gary Couzens, a simple, elegant story which is, Gary says, one of his best. He gets no argument from me.

Psychotrope isn't a startlingly good-looking magazine, yet it looks, and feels, right. It is more than the sum of its parts. I like it and I believe it.

Andy Cox

Note: Andy Cox is the editor of *Zene*, which features many more reviews of small-press, independent or semi-professional magazines and books. Available at £7 for four issues from TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcam, Ely, Cambs. CB6 2LB.



Books received September 1996

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.

Anthony, Piers. **Earth**. Severn House, ISBN 0-7278-5126-8, 205pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA as *Chthon*, 1967; this was Anthony's first published novel, and is still reckoned by many readers to be one of his best; why a title change should be deemed necessary after so many years is a mystery.) *24th October 1996*.

Asaro, Catherine. **Catch the Lightning**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86043-9, 352pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's described as "a new novel in the saga of the Skolian Empire" — a follow-up to the author's *Primary Inversion*.) *December 1996*.

Ashley, Mike, ed. **Fantasy Stories**. Introduction by Garry Kilworth. Robinson, ISBN 1-85487-452-7, xii+403pp, trade paperback, cover by Douglas Carrell, £4.99. (Juvenile fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains mainly reprinted stories by Joan Aiken, Ramsey Campbell, Lord Dunsany, Neil Gaiman, Parke Godwin, Diana Wynne Jones, Tanith Lee, C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald, E. Nesbit,

J. R. R. Tolkien, Ian Watson, Jane Yolen and others; among the original stories are pieces by Cherith Baldry, Peter Crowther, Lionel & Patricia Fanthorpe, Samantha Lee and Keith Taylor.) *26th September 1996*.

Ashley, Mike, ed. **Space Stories**. Introduction by Douglas Hill. Robinson, ISBN 1-85487-451-9, xii+402pp, trade paperback, cover by Alan Fraser, £4.99. (Juvenile sf anthology, first edition; it contains mainly reprinted stories by Piers Anthony, A. Bertram Chandler, John Christopher, Arthur C. Clarke, John Russell Fearn, Nicholas Fisk, Raymond Z. Galun, Edmond Hamilton, William F. Temple, E. C. Tubbs, Ian Watson, Donald A. Wollheim and others; among the original stories are pieces by Stephen Baxter, Stephen Bowkett, Eric Brown, Peter T. Garratt, etc; like the above volume from the same editor, this seems very good value for money.) *26th September 1996*.

Badley, Linda. **Writing Horror and the Body: The Fiction of Stephen King, Clive Barker, and Anne Rice**. "Contributions to the Study of Popular Culture, Number 51." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-29716-9, xiv+183pp, hardcover, £43.95. (Study of the horror fiction of the three named writers; first published in the USA, 1996; the author has written a previous book for the same publisher, not seen by us, entitled *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic* [1995]; this is the American first edition with a British price; it's distributed in the UK by Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., Lon-

don WC2E 8LU.) *Late entry: July 1996 publication, received in September 1996*.

Baird, Wilhelmina. **Chaos Come Again**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00369-9, 330pp, C-format paperback, cover by Bruce Jensen, \$12. (Sf novel, first edition; the author's fourth novel, following *Crashcourse*, *Clipjoint* and *Psykosis*; this one seems like very trad sf; "Wilhelmina Baird" is a pseudonym for French-resident British author Joyce Hutchinson.) *1st October 1996*.

Barnes, Steven. **Blood Brothers**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85707-1, 383pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; by one of the field's few black authors [hitherto best-known for his sf, some of it in collaboration with Niven & Pournelle], this seems to be an anti-racist tale of sorcery set in present-day Los Angeles.) *November 1996*.

Base, Graeme. **The Discovery of Dragons**. Michael Joseph, ISBN 0-7181-4198-9, 32pp, hardcover, £12. (Very large-format fantasy art portfolio, with cod text on dragon-hunting purportedly edited by "Rowland W. Greasebeam"; the full-colour paintings are pretty; the British-born artist-author [born 1958] is possibly an Australian resident.) *31st October 1996*.

Bester, Alfred. **The Demolished Man**. Introduction by Harry Harrison. Random House/Vintage, ISBN 0-679-76781-9, x+243pp, trade paperback, \$11. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1953;

winner of the first-ever Hugo Award for best novel; this attractive reprint is a "Byron Preiss Visual Publications, Inc" book.) *Late entry: 17th July publication, received in September 1996*.

Bester, Alfred. **The Stars My Destination**. Introduction by Neil Gaiman. Random House/Vintage, ISBN 0-679-76780-0, x+258pp, trade paperback, \$11. (Sf novel, first published in the UK as *Tiger! Tiger!*, 1956 [and first published in the USA under the present title, 1957]; this new edition of the classic novel is described as "compiled and edited by Alexander and Phyllis Eisenstein," which implies that the text has been restored and corrected; it's also a "Byron Preiss Visual Publications, Inc" book.) *Late entry: 17th July publication, received in September 1996*.

Bowen, Gary, ed. **Floating Worlds: Oriental Fantasies**. Obelesk Books [PO Box 1118, Elkton, MD 21922-1118, USA], ISBN 1-887666-15-X, 48pp, small-press paperback, cover by Joe Tsambiras, \$6. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains six stories by James S. Dorr, Mark Noe and other little-known writers.) *Late entry: 26th August publication, received in September 1996*.

Bradley, Marion Zimmer. **The Winds of Darkover**. Severn House, ISBN 0-7278-5191-8, 197pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1970.) *24th October 1996*.

Constantine, Storm. **Dancer for the World's Death**. Inception [44 White Way,



Books received September 1996

Kidlington, Oxon. OX5 2XA], no ISBN, 28pp, small-press chapbook, cover by Dave Mooring, £3.50. (Fantasy short story, first edition; limited to 300 numbered copies; this is the third such chapbook published by Inception, "The Storm Constantine Information Service"; the earlier titles were *An Elemental Tale: A Magical Fantasy* [1992] and *Colurastes: Poems* [1995].) September 1996.

Dann, Jack, and Gardner Dozois, eds. **Hackers**. "In the tradition of *Mirrorshades* — stories from the virtual frontier." Ace, ISBN 0-441-00375-3, xiv+239pp, A-format paperback, cover by Sharmen Liao, \$5.50. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains all-reprint stories by the authors one might expect — Greg Bear, Pat Cadigan, William Gibson, Alexander Jablokov, Tom Maddox, Neal Stephenson, Bruce Sterling and Michael Swanwick, among others; the others include Greg Egan and Paul J. McAuley, both with stories from *Interzone* ["Blood Sisters" and "Gene Wars"]; recommended.) 1st October 1996.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **Modern Classics of Fantasy**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-15173-X, xxiii+647pp, hardcover, \$29.95. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; this is an attractive anthology, with reprint stories ranging from the 1930s to the 1990s [but with the main emphasis on the most recent decades]; contributors include Poul Anderson, Peter S. Beagle, Terry Bisson, James P. Blaylock, Suzy McKee Charnas, John Crowley, Avram

Davidson, L. Sprague de Camp, Damon Knight, R. A. Lafferty, Tanith Lee, Ursula Le Guin, Fritz Leiber, Keith Roberts, Lucius Shepard, Bruce Sterling, Thomas Burnett Swann, Michael Swanwick, Jack Vance, Manly Wade Wellman, T. H. White, Gene Wolfe, Jane Yolen and Roger Zelazny; Dozois's historical introduction is interesting, and I can't resist quoting one nice simile here: "When the last Ice Age started, and the glaciers ground down from the north to cover most of the North American continent, thousands of species of plants and trees, as well as the insects, birds and animals associated with them, retreated to 'cove forests' in the south...; in those cove forests, they waited out the long domain of the Ice, eventually moving north again to re-colonize the land as the climate warmed and the glaciers retreated. Similarly, the lowly genre fantasy magazines — *Weird Tales* and *Unknown* in the 1930s and 1940s, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Fantastic*, and the *British Science Fantasy* in the 1950s and 1960s — were the 'cove forests' that sheltered fantasy during its long retreat from the glaciers of Social Realism, giving it a refuge in which to endure until the climate warmed enough to allow it to spread and repopulate again.") January 1997.

Gardner, Craig Shaw. **Dragon Burning: The Dragon Circle [Book Three]**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00365-6, 357pp, hardcover, cover by Glenn Kim, \$21.95. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition.) 1st October 1996.

Gardner, Craig Shaw. **Dragon Waking: The Dragon Circle [Book Two]**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00373-7, 360pp, A-format paperback, cover by Glenn Kim, \$5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1995.) 1st October 1996.

Gemmell, David A. **Dark Moon**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03709-X, 319pp, hardcover, cover by Jon Sullivan, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 10th October 1996.

Gemmell, David A. **The Legend of Deathwalker**. "From the *Chronicles of Druss the Axeman*." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14252-2, 413pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mike Posen, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1996; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 108.) 10th October 1996.

Gorman, Ed. **Runner in the Dark**. *Headline*, ISBN 0-7472-1683-5, 279pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in 1996.) 24th October 1996.

Gross, Philip. **Transformer**. *Point Horror*, ISBN 0-590-13382-9, 193pp, A-format paperback, £3.50. (Young-adult horror novel, first edition.) 23rd September 1996.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **Bloody Bones**. "Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter." Ace, ISBN 0-441-00374-5, 370pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee MacLeod, \$5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; this appears to be the fifth title in the author's dark fantasy/crime crossover series.) 1st October 1996.

Hartwell, David G., and Milton T. Wolf, eds. **Visions of Wonder: The Science Fiction Research Association Reading Anthology**. *Tor*, ISBN 0-312-85287-8, 798pp, trade paperback, \$24.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at \$35 [not seen]; this is another doorstep-sized anthology from Hartwell, re-permutating many well-known recentish stories by Brian Aldiss, Greg Bear, Gregory Benford, Terry Bisson, Orson Scott Card, Suzy McKee Charnas, Philip José Farmer, William Gibson, Lisa Goldstein, Gwyneth Jones, James Patrick Kelly, Nancy Kress, Ursula Le Guin, Anne McCaffrey, Andre Norton, Frederik Pohl, Joanna Russ, Fred Saberhagen, Charles Sheffield, Lucius Shepard, James Tiptree, Jr., John Varley, Kate Wilhelm, Walter Jon Williams, Jack Williamson, Gene Wolfe and others; there are also reprints of non-fiction critical pieces by Budrys, Campbell, Delany, Knight, Merril, Russ, Stableford, etc.) November 1996.

Holt, Tom. **Paint Your Dragon**. *Orbit*, ISBN 1-85723-433-2, 311pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 5th December 1996.

Jaworzyn, Stefan, ed. **Shock. "The Essential Guide to Exploitation Cinema."** *Titan*, ISBN 1-85286-707-8, 128pp, very large-format paperback, £12.99. (Illustrated collection of articles on cheap'n'nasty movies, many of them horror, sf or fantasy; first edition; contributors include



Books received September 1996

Anne Billson, Ramsey Campbell and Kim Newman; this is the first book by Jaworzyn we've seen, but apparently he has edited two earlier volumes of similar sort — all are outgrowths of his semi-underground horror-film magazine *Shock Xpress*, which seems now to be defunct.) *10th October 1996.*

Kenworthy, Christopher. **Will You Hold Me?** The Do-Not Press [PO Box 4215, London SE23 2QD], ISBN 1-899344-11-X, 182pp, small-press paperback, cover by Viresh Chopra, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy/mainstream collection, first edition; Chris Kenworthy, born 1968, used to be the publisher of the small-press Barrington Books, which featured Nicholas Royle's debut novel and three anthologies of short stories; he also used to review small-press magazines for *Interzone*; his own debut book is published by The Do-Not Press, an interesting new venture which also released Maxim Jakubowski's story-collection, *Life in the World of Women*, some months ago.) *13th September 1996.*

Keyes, J. Gregory. **The Waterborn.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40393-2, 436pp, hardcover, cover by Tom Kidd, \$22. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut book by a new American writer, born 1963, it's the first of a projected trilogy with the overall title "Children of the Changeling"; Hodder/NEL were due to publish a UK edition about now, but have not so far sent us a review copy; the Del Rey blurb is effusive: "Once in every generation, there

comes a story so resonant, a tale so remarkable, that it breaks new ground and opens new vistas of imagination..."; Piers Anthony and R. A. Salvatore commend it on the back cover.) *Late entry: 1st August publication, received in September 1996.*

Koontz, Dean. **Intensity.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4840-0, 469pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) *10th October 1996.*

Masterton, Graham. **Rook.** Severn House, ISBN 0-7278-4991-3, 246pp, hardcover, cover by Derek Colligan, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; "the first in a compelling new series of supernatural thrillers featuring Jim Rook," this one seems to be aimed at the young-adult market, and, like most of Masterton's novels, it's set in America — even though the author is a Scotsman resident in Epsom, Surrey.) *26th September 1996.*

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The Death of Chaos.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-386-7, 708pp, A-format paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; the fifth "Recluce" novel.) *3rd October 1996.*

Moorcock, Michael. **The Dancers at the End of Time.** "The Tale of the Eternal Champion, Vol. 7." Orion/Millennium, ISBN 0-75280-617-3, 664pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Reeve, £6.99. (Sf omnibus, first published in 1993; it contains: *An Alien Heat* [1972], *The Hollow Lands* [1974] and *The End of*

All Songs [1976], all slightly revised since their first appearances; the three novels previously appeared in an omnibus of the same title from Granada Publishing [1980].) *September 1996.*

Morgado, André Vilares, ed. **Non-Events on the Edge of the Empire.** Camara Municipal de Cascais [Largo 5 de Outubro, 2750 Cascais, Portugal], ISBN 972-637-039-6, 107pp + 107pp, trade paperback, no price shown. (Sf anthology, first edition; published to coincide with the first-ever sf conference held in Portugal, "On the Edge of the Empire: 1st Encounters of Science Fiction & the Fantastic," this contains eight original stories by Portuguese-based authors [one of them is actually an Englishman, David Alan Prescott], here presented in both Portuguese and English, *dos à dos*; the title is rather daftly self-deprecating, but it looks to be an interesting book, and a fuller review should follow a couple of issues from now.) *September 1996.*

Palmer, Elaine, ed. **Fission.** Pulp Faction [PO Box 12171, London N19 3HB], ISBN 1-899571-03-5, 128pp, small-press paperback, £6.99. ("Slipstream" anthology, first edition; contributors include Nicholas Royle and a host of newcomers; it's a follow-up to the same editor's and publisher's well-received *Technopagan*, published in 1995 [and now reissued, at the same price, along with this new title]; like The Do-Not Press [see above, under Kenworthy], Pulp Faction is a new

small press which produces nicely-designed and ambitious-looking books; worth a look: as a special offer to readers, these two anthologies may be ordered at a pound off the cover price, postage free, direct from the publisher [i.e. £5.99 each, payable to "Pulp Faction"] — be sure to mention *Interzone* to claim your discount.) *1st October 1996.*

Pringle, David, ed. **The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Science Fiction: The Definitive Illustrated Guide.** Carlton Books, ISBN 1-85868-188-X, 304pp, hardcover, £19.99. (Large-format copiously-illustrated guide to the genre, first edition; not to be confused with my older book *The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction* [Grafton, 1990; second edition, Scholar Press, 1995] — the choice of title here was not mine, and the book [which, needless to say, is not an encyclopedia] would have been more accurately titled "The Carlton Guide to SF"; the project editor at Carlton Books [a subsidiary of Carlton TV] was Simon Kirrane, and the picture researcher was Sarah Moule — as with all illustrated book projects of this sort, they and their company bosses had a good deal of influence on the finished product; the volume contains: an introduction by me on the definition and pre-history of sf; an extensive section on the "templates," motifs and themes of written sf; a section on cinematic sf; another section on television and radio sf [this is perhaps the best bit of the book, written by Brian Stableford]; another, alphabetically



Books received September 1996

arranged, on authors and filmmakers; another, also alphabetical, on fictional characters; and a smaller section on magazines, followed by a glossary; about a quarter of the text was written by me, the remaining three-quarters by Messrs Stableford, Langford, Di Filippo, Gilmore and "John Grant"; in many ways, it's quite different to John Clute's similar-looking Dorling Kindersley volume of 1995 [*SF: The Illustrated Encyclopedia*] — that had an excellent text, almost entirely written by Clute, and attractive pictures, but was relatively skimpy on films and TV and had no section on characters; despite some minor glitches, and its having been written to a tight publishers' deadline, I'm quite pleased with this new volume, which packs in a lot of information and opinion.) *6th November 1996.*

Rankin, Robert. **A Dog Called Demolition.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14213-1, 318pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ian Murray, £4.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1996; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 109.) *10th October 1996.*

Rankin, Robert. **Nos-tradamus Ate My Hamster.** Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-40705-X, 253pp, hardcover, cover by Ian Murray, £15.99. (Humorous sf/fantasy novel, first edition.) *10th October 1996.*

Rees, Celia. **Blood Sinister.** Point Horror, ISBN 0-590-13749-2, 242pp, A-format paperback, £3.50. (Young-adult

horror novel, first edition.) *23rd September 1996.*

Sá-Carneiro, Mário de. **The Great Shadow (and Other Stories).** Translated by Margaret Jull Costa. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-72-0, 249pp, B-format paperback, cover by Lise Weisgerber, £8.99. (Horror/fantasy collection, first published in Portugal, 1915; according to the blurb, the author committed suicide in 1916 at the age of 26, leaving "an extraordinary body of work which dealt obsessively with the problems of identity, madness and solitude"; this is his second book to be published in English by Dedalus — the first, *Lucio's Confession*, was reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 86.) *16th October 1996.*

Savage, Felicity. **Delta City.** Roc, ISBN 0-45-145519-3, 383pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; the author's second novel, following *Humility Garden*.) *3rd October 1996.*

Sawyer, Robert J. **Starplex.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00372-9, 289pp, A-format paperback, cover by Doug Struthers, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; by this year's Nebula Award-winning [for *The Terminal Experiment*] Canadian author, this new novel has just finished running as a serial in *Analog* magazine [July-October issues].) *1st October 1996.*

Sheffield, Charles. **Tomorrow & Tomorrow.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-37808-2, 375pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Sf novel, first edition;

proof copy received; it is, in part, an expansion of the author's novella "At the Eschaton," published in the original anthology *Far Futures* [1995]; that latter-day "prover" of God, Heaven and everlasting life, Professor Frank Tipler, strikes again...) *16th December 1996.*

Simmons, Dan. **Endymion.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3826-X, 600pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; sequel to *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 106.) *31st October 1996.*

Skal, David J. **V is for Vampire: An A-Z Guide to Everything Undead.** Robson, ISBN 1-86105-055-0, xii+288pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Illustrated alphabetical guide to vampire fiction and film; first published in the USA, 1996; in addition to the main text, it contains a good bibliography and filmography; an intelligently arranged and useful reference work: recommended.) *10th October 1996.*

Smith, Michael Marshall. **Spares.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224656-2, 305pp, hardcover, cover by the author, £9.99. (Sf novel, first edition; Smith's second novel, this is essentially sf [with elements of crime and horror], although it's not included in the publisher's "Voyager" list; set in a 21st-century "arcology"-type habitat in the USA, it has been sold [pre-publication] to Steven Spielberg's film company for a large sum.) *7th October 1996.*

Turtledove, Harry. **Hammer and Anvil: Book Two of The Time of Troubles.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38048-7, 372pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Youll, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it's the second in a new "Videssos" trilogy, following on from "The Videssos Cycle" [four books] and "The Tale of Krispos" [three books]; what with his many alternative-world sf novels, in addition to these Byzantine fantasies, Turtledove has become almost alarmingly prolific in recent years.) *Late entry: 1st August publication, received in September 1996.*

Wells, Angus. **Exile's Challenge.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-468-4, 440pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; it's "Book Two of the Exiles Saga," although the publishers don't make that clear on cover or title page; we listed the American edition as the first edition last issue, but it seems this UK one precedes it.) *21st October 1996.*

White, T. H. **The Once and Future King.** "The World's Greatest Fantasy Classic!" Ace, ISBN 0-441-00383-4, 677pp, C-format paperback, \$16.95. (Fantasy omnibus, first published in the UK, 1958; the four constituent novels, *The Sword in the Stone*, *The Queen of Air and Darkness* [originally *The Witch in the Wood*], *The Ill-Made Knight* and "The Candle in the Wind," were first published in 1938, 1939, 1940 and 1958; this is a very handsome new trade edition with an embossed cover.) *1st 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.

Alexander, David. **Star Trek Creator: The Authorized Biography of Gene Roddenberry.** Foreword by Ray Bradbury. Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0368-1, xxii+599pp, A-format paperback, £7.99. (Biography of the sf television-series producer; first published in the USA, 1994.) September (?) 1996.

Davies, Russell T. **Damaged Goods.** "Doctor Who: The New Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20483-2, 263pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bill Donohoe, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition; the author is an experienced TV writer, but this may be his first novel.) 24th October 1996.

Howe, David J., Mark Stammers and Stephen James Walker. **Doctor Who: The Eighties.** Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 1-85227-680-0, 180pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Copiously illustrated, large-format history of the Doctor Who television series in the decade specified; first edition; like the two earlier volumes in the series, it's packed with detailed information on productions, personnel, etc.) 3rd October 1996.

Lee, Stan, ed. **The Ultimate X-Men.** Boulevard, ISBN 1-57297-217-3, vi+314pp, C-format paperback, cover by Mike Zeck and Phil Zimelman, \$14. (Sf comics-spinoff anthology, first edition; a "Byron Preiss Multimedia Company, Inc" packaged book, it contains all-new short stories about the Marvel Comics characters by Eluki Bes Shahar, Andy Lane, Ashley McConnell, Dave Smeds, Dean Wesley Smith and various other writers who are presumably better known for comics work than for regular fiction.) 1st October 1996.

Leonard, Paul. **Speed of Flight.** "Doctor Who: The Missing Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20487-5, 244pp, A-format paperback, cover by Alister Pearson, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) 24th October 1996.

Lovecraft, H. P., and Others. **The Horror in the Museum, and Other Revisions.** Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-0387-3, 245pp, A-format paperback, \$4.95. (Pseudo-Lovecraftian horror anthology, first published in the USA, 1970; no editor is credited, but probably the book was put together by August Derleth; it's a bit cheeky of the publishers to tout this as a book "by" Lovecraft, since, it would appear, a few passages from just two of the ten stories are by him; the other contributors are Elizabeth Berkeley, Hazel Heald, William Lumley [sic: William, not Brian], Adolphe de Castro, Zealia Bishop and Wilfred

Blanch Talman; the last-named author's story is copyrighted 1927, and is presumably from *Weird Tales*; some explanation of the provenance of the other stories would have been welcome, but there is no introduction or notes; on second thoughts, and considering the word "revisions" in the sub-title, perhaps these are all stories by beginning writers which Lovecraft polished for magazine publication — whatever the explanation, the book's publishers really should have made it clearer.) October 1996.

Nichols, Nichelle. **Beyond Uhura: Star Trek and Other Memories.** Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0238-3, 320pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Autobiography of the actress who played communications officer Lieutenant Uhura in the sf TV series *Star Trek*; first published in the USA, 1994; described as "the first African American woman to have a continuing role on television," she has an interesting tale to tell.) September (?) 1996.

Sammon, Paul M. **Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner.** HarperPrism, ISBN 0-06-105314-7, xix+441pp, C-format paperback, \$14. (Study of the making of Ridley Scott's celebrated 1982 sf movie, first edition; it contains a blow-by-blow text, interviews with Scott and the late Philip K. Dick, and a number of black-and-white illustrations; this has been sent to us by Orion Publishers who are planning a UK edition in February 1997.) Late entry: July publication,

received in September 1996.

Stackpole, Michael A. **The Krytos Trap: X-Wing, Book Three.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40925-5, x+355pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Youll, £4.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) 10th October 1996.

Smith, Dean Wesley. **Goblin's Revenge.** "Spider-Man." Illustrated by James W. Fry. Boulevard, ISBN 1-57297-172-X, 212pp, A-format paperback, cover by Julie Bell, \$5.99. (Sf comics-spinoff novel, first edition; based on the Marvel Comics character, it's a sequel to the author's earlier "Spider-Man" novel *Carnage in New York*.) 1st October 1996.

[Tolkien, J. R. R.] **Realms of Tolkien: Images of Middle-earth.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10344-X, unpaginated [about 140pp], hardcover, cover illustrations by Ted Nasmith and Stephen Hickman, £20. (Fantasy picture book inspired by Tolkien's writings, first edition; it's a follow-up to the similar 1992 volume, *Tolkien's World*; as before, no editor is credited; each of the 58 attractive full-colour paintings is accompanied by a short quotation from Tolkien; artists represented include Cor Blok, Maura Boldi, Inger Edelfeldt, Tony Galuidi, Stephen Hickman, John Howe, Timothy Ide, Michael Kaluta, Alan Lee and Ted Nasmith, among others; all are talented illustrators, though Alan Lee probably still has the edge over most; recommended as a classy gift-book for Tolkien enthusiasts.) 7th October 1996.



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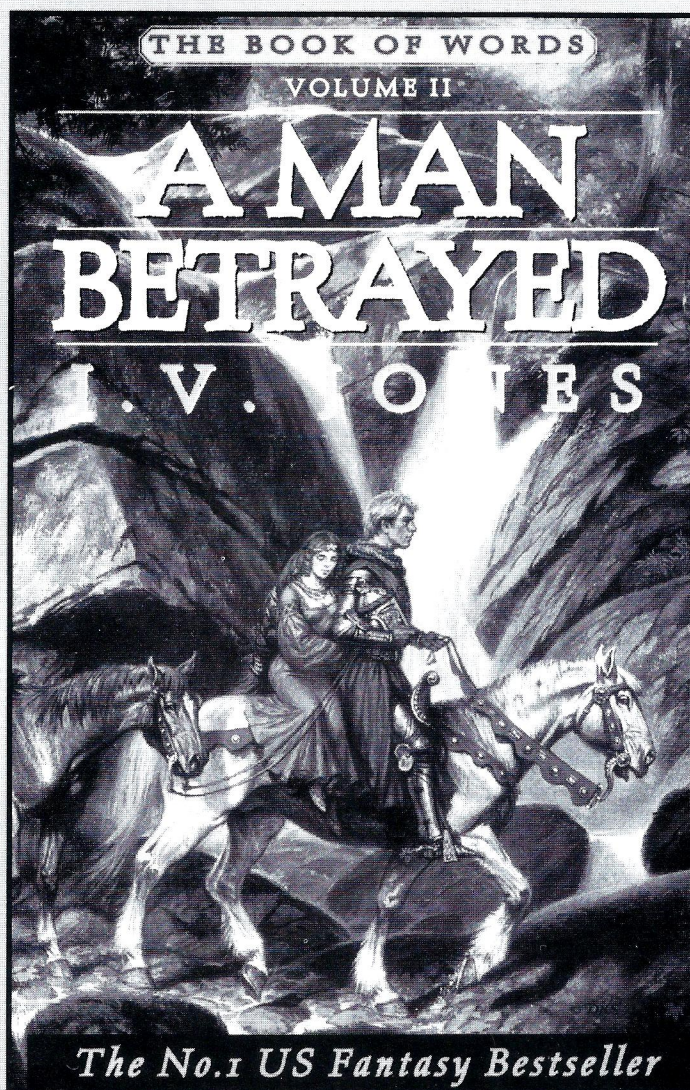
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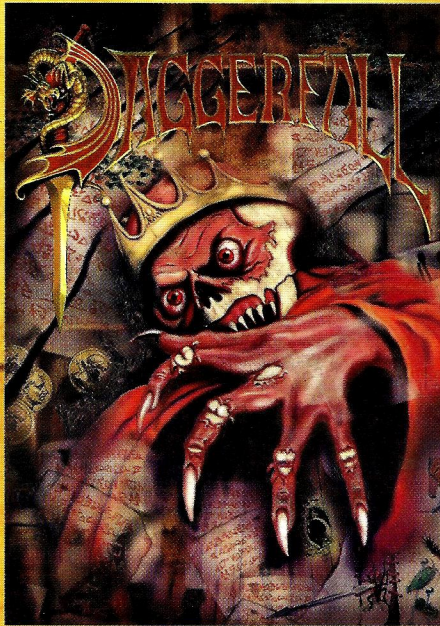
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