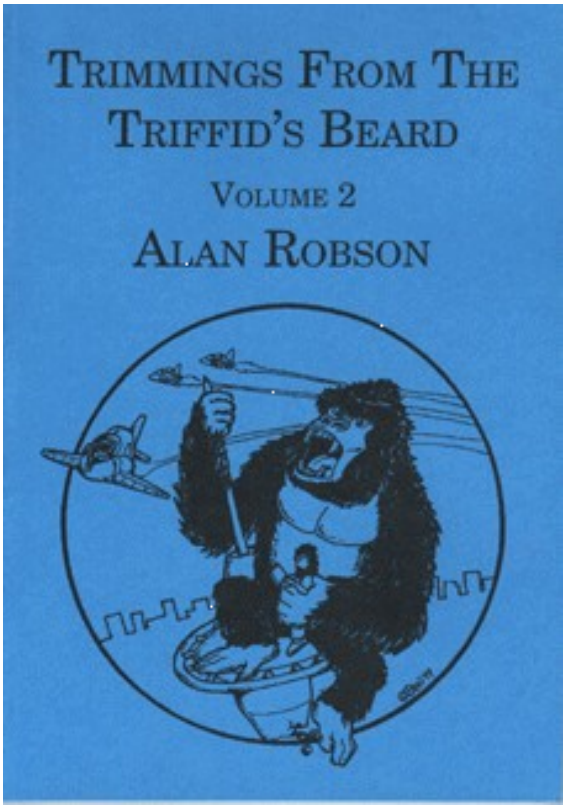

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For Sue

Because she loves words

Foreword

Unlike most holics, (if, as Alan would say, I may be permitted a neologism) (p13), biblioholics (p164) serve a distinct social function. Unlike the alcoholic, whose yarns tend to be maudlin and repetitive, or the workaholic, who rarely has time to talk anyway, biblioholics entertain and enlighten, especially when they are prepared to parade their vice with as much abandon and relish as the Bearded Triffid. Not for him the closet, though that may at times provide a sanctuary for the happy indulgence of a page or three (p95). No, unashamed and unrepentant, the Triffid declares his addiction, and we all profit, as the pages of this second volume of **Trimmings** amply demonstrate.

Alan de Triffid (p198) is monstrously well read. While his focus is mainly on Science Fiction, he ranges widely embracing (if that is the word) Horror Stories, Who-dunits, Cowboy Yarns and occasionally Fantasy (p267). But the listing of these genres only tells half the story. All the opinions which he offers on the books mentioned in this volume, have as their background, a deep and wide-ranging literary awareness -- and this, be it remembered, is one of the hallmarks of a polymath. We are not surprised to discover that Alan has a degree in Chemistry (p166) or that his maths (p36) is more than adequate, (as I discovered to my advantage when I was writing **Pioneers**) or that his knowledge of computers (Macs excepted) is wide ranging. Such qualities are shared with many other lovers of Science Fiction. What we are less prepared for is Alan's ability to refer to (say) the thoughts of Chairman Mao tse-Tung (p164), Lewis Carroll's ***Jabberwocky*** (p10), the works of Kafka (p57), Karl Popper's "paradigm of disprovability" (p166) etc. The list goes on as you will discover as you read these pages. This context of understanding, drawn from world literature, history and philosophy, gives Alan's writing its authority. He can soar beyond genres and swoop, critically, when need be.

But Alan wears his scholarship lightly and his characteristic voice is affirmative rather than severe or prescriptive. "I enjoyed it so much I went out and bought all the other…" (p202) "The book held me enthralled from page one…" (p206) "This book deserves to win every award going." (p268) He takes no pleasure in the disembodied voice of the invisible critic: No! Alan is an enthusiast, and his articles and commentaries are the passionate expression of his informed mind as it explores new texts or revisits old and loved ones. Reading through his book, I had the impression that Alan likes nothing better than finding a new writer to fall in love with.

At the same time, Alan is aware that the role of critic carries certain important responsibilities. One entire article **Gosh -- Haven't You Grown**, is devoted almost exclusively to an analysis and explanation of his own critical practice. It is an article written to celebrate the tenth birthday of **Phlogiston** and what a splendid present for Alex the Editor to receive. And what an honouring of Science Fiction too, that Alan the Critic is prepared to sit down and explain the mixture of erudition, plain common sense and simple caring that he brings to his art. The essay is superbly written -- a mixture of wit and wisdom -- and is the one I think should be read first as it establishes the ground rules which guide Alan's work, and in its writing, epitomises all that is best in Trimmings. Besides, it primes the palate for more.

One of the endearing characteristics of Alan's critical approach stems from his deep love of language in general, and the English language in particular. No writer can complain about a critic who relishes grammar rightly used or who celebrates in such a forthright manner the richness of vocabulary and the peculiarities of English syntax. But woe betide the writer who, through sloppiness or ineptitude, diminishes the language. As I have noted already, Alan is

rarely harsh in his judgements, but when he does choose to demolish he has formidable powers of linguistic analysis at his command. Witness the Article **Do You Speak English** (p15) in which he takes sloppy writing to task. And this, surely, is one of the prime functions of a critic for by attacking the churn-it-out mile-a-minute formulaic writing which is so often careless of the beauty and precision of the language, the critic is clearing the ground for those writers who do reshape and refashion language to serve a distinct creative and literary end. Most writers would agree that when they are "running hot", their normal sense of language vanishes and is replaced by something sensuous and strange -- a bright fusion of thought, feeling and word. Too often, critics of Science Fiction concentrate solely on the ideas in a book and not on the way those ideas are expressed. While a case can be made for Science Fiction being essentially a literature of ideas, how refreshing it is to read articles in which the literature (by which I mean the craft of the writer) is celebrated as much as the ideas. And can one ever really separate the two, I wonder?

The Bearded Triffid writes in a very personal and quite unique way, mingling autobiographical anecdote with critical insight. This style is seen at its best in some of the later essays such as **Monomania**, written for **Phoenixine 98**, which begins with the following intriguing paragraph.

> It has been an odd month. I had a disturbing encounter with an aeroplane; the only books I have read have all been by the same author; I violated the laws of probability; and my cat's gone bald.

While the main focus of the ***What I Read*** essays is always on the books, the autobiographical record is stimulating and moving in its own quite distinct way. I have puzzled as to why this strange marriage works so well and have reached the following conclusion. An act of criticism is also an act of self-discovery. If you say, "This is what I like," or "This is what I believe," you are really exploring and mapping your own feelings and beliefs. It is not surprising then that writing criticism stimulates questions about the origins of one's ideas and opinions, and this leads directly to autobiography.

On a more personal level. I have been intrigued to discover parallels between Alan's life and my own. Both of us are from the North of England. For both of us New Zealand is our adopted country and both of us shared a similar education: yea, even unto Latin, French and Literature. Both of us have a deep admiration for writers as varied as Roger Zelazny and Barry Crump. (p137)

I know exactly the world Alan is describing when he writes in **Lingua Frankly** (p7) about eccentric schoolmasters. The entire article is about encountering the new, about coming to terms with the alien (he is not referring to school masters), and about the various experiments with alien languages found in Science Fiction. The article ends with a tantalising memory and one of the most intriguing speculations of all time.

> They say that the best way to learn a language is to have a torrid affair with someone whose native language it is. I think there is a degree of truth in this. It is more than a quarter of a century since I last saw Yasmin. but I still have a smattering of Urdu.
>
> Is this the language school of the future when we shall finally meet the Alpha Centaurians?

This last article, profoundly serious and yet filled with humour, should dispel any notion that **Trimmings** is a ponderous tome of criticism. I have already mentioned the enthusiasm that informs the Triffid's writings, I now wish to pay tribute to his wit. At no time does Alan's criticism give the impression that he is a frustrated novelist. His art form is the essay. In these he is free

to follow his enthusiasms (whether for cats or a long-out-of-print book), to explore SF in cinema, to comment on the strange patterns of his life and to eulogise the writers he admires. While the wit is never absent, just occasionally he gives fuller expression to his love of the absurd, and when he does, some memorable narratives arise. I am thinking of ***A Dozen Drabbles*** (p23). A Drabble is a short story of exactly 100 words. It is an exacting form which depends on precision as well as economy in the language. The Bearded Triffid offers us a dozen -- all of them good -- and which range from the moving ***Once Upon a Time in an Office*** to the frightening elliptical ***Virtual Unreality***.

One of the reasons why our Triffid is such a fine critic is that he engages deeply with words and structures. I am glad he does not want to write novels simply because that is such a lonely and strange craft and he is such a fine essayist. However, if ever he were to try his hand at longer fiction, I am sure the result is foreshadowed in the essay ***Science Fiction in Everyday Life*** . Here is a narrative that might just make you fall off your chair with laughter. In reading it I was reminded of the work of Alfred Jarry who, just a hundred years ago, invented the science of Pataphysics. Pataphysics bears the same relation to Metaphysics as Metaphysics does to Physics. It is the science of imaginary solutions and pataphysical writing can take many forms. In his essay Alan proves that the aeroplane from Auckland to Wellington must fly at slightly more than half the speed of light, that the dark matter of the universe is hiding in beer and cakes and that computers run on smoke. Why and how, I leave you to discover, for the joy is in the reading not the conclusion. Writing of this kind requires the still faced seriousness of Buster Keaton and the lateral mind of Lewis Carroll. There is also lurking in the Triffid a dark delight in horror which emerges in his description of the lives and eating habits of cats (p223) and in his evocation of the common cold and the dank taste of a beard clogged with… (p235). Stephen King beware.

However, at book's end, it is neither the nimble-minded humour nor the erudition or even the individual commentaries on the books which leaves the most lasting impressing. It is all of these, and something more, something deeply human and moving. There is an awareness that literature is not life, and no matter how much it may delight us, Life is what we have finally to contend with. It may therefore come as a surprise to you when I say that the most memorable essays to me are those in which Alan simply records his affection for friends, be they writers or teachers, and who have now passed on. Read him on Bob Shaw (p113), on Zelazny (p256). but most movingly, read him on Anthony Kelso Kent. (p261). This essay, ***Tony***, displays a perfect marriage of form and content, where the sober auto-biographical narrative nicely balances the literary and analytical discussion. This essay occurs towards the end of the book and for me establishes the tone of the whole work: serious but not heavy, thoughtful but not ponderous, clever but not smart and above all careful for the well-being of Science Fiction, readers and friends.

Phillip Mann

Wellington

28th Jan 1999

Introduction

Some of these essays were originally published in **Phlogiston** under the generic title of **The Bearded Triffid**. The triffid's concerns wandered through many highways and byways, veering between science fiction, literature and life. The essays were sometimes serious, sometimes less so; the one constant was a reverence for art and intellect and an aesthetic appreciation of the skills of the wordsmith.

Later I branched out and a companion series started to appear in **Phoenixine** as **What I read**

on my Holidays (though later the title changed slightly!). Originally the **Phoenixine** essays were intended to be little more than a record of my reading, but other things kept intruding. The artistic ideas that the triffid espoused kept peeking coyly between the paragraphs. Some of the essays were merely observations on the foibles of life; some were deeply felt (though lightly phrased) polemics. And some were just plain fun.

The spectrum spanned by this collection is enormous. I am astonished by the number of concerns (and the ephemera) to which I gave my attention. But I seem to see a pattern that unites it all. If I may be pretentious for a moment and state my theme clearly, I think I see a request for open eyes, for scepticism, for thoughtful acceptance of art (and message, should it be there) rather than merely a simple emotional reaction to it. Art must appeal to the intellect as well as to the emotions. If it doesn't, it is only the equivalent of a mobius strip - it has only one side. I need more dimensions than that in my life. An insult to the intellect leaves an emotional vacuum. High art transcends boundaries, but crossing those boundaries takes more than an overt bribe to the border guards. Hence so many appeals in these essays for simple skills as well as for intellectual rigour and emotional honesty. These are high ideals and are rarely met with, but that is no reason to stop trying.

I had a lot of fun writing these essays. I've enjoyed exploring my aesthetic ideas and I hope you find the journey as rewarding as I have found it. As Bill and Ted might have remarked, I've been pursuing excellence.

Does anybody want to help me nail my jelly to a tree?

Alan Robson
The Bearded Triffid

Movie Go Round

***Phlogiston Thirty-Five**, 1993*

Quite a lot of SF films have been made from whole cloth -- they are not films of books. Most, as you would expect, are unutterably dire though occasionally, as with **Star Wars** they work well.

Some SF movies have been plagiarised from SF books without acknowledgment. The most famous example is probably **Alien**, the makers of which were sued by A. E. van Vogt for ripping off one of the novellas from **Voyage of the Space Beagle**.

Many SF books have been turned into films that didn't work, though **Invasion of the Body Snatchers** (from the book by Jack Finney) and **The Incredible Shrinking Man** (from the book by Richard Matheson) are not too bad. However you should avoid just about everything else including so-called classics like **The Shape of Things to Come** which is preachy and slow moving where it ought to be exciting and prophetic. Also the things that *have* come about are a very different shape from those things that the film predicted and as well as being boring it now seems *naïve* and laughable; a not uncommon fate for SF films.

The list of SF film-of-the-book failures is never ending, but some of the high spots (or low spots, depending on how you view it) are:

The Day of the Triffids from John Wyndham's novel trivialises the book to an enormous extent, introduces some totally unnecessary love interest and reveals that sea water is some sort of universal solvent (it certainly dissolves triffids anyway, to the accompaniment of vast hissings and much steam). I knew there was a good reason why I didn't like swimming in the sea.

Soylent Green, based on Harry Harrison's novel **Make Room, Make Room** again trivialises its

subject matter. The book was a serious warning about the dangers of overpopulation, the film is a pseudo-horror story about cannibalism.

Dune from Frank Herbert's novel is just dire. How dare they make it rain at the end? That was a stupidity on a par with not giving the wookie a medal at the end of **Star Wars**. It ruined the whole thing retrospectively.

Shortly before he died, Philip K. Dick saw the first draft of the screenplay for **Blade Runner** which was based on his novel **Do Androids dream of Electric Sheep**. He said that it made him feel like changing his name, emigrating to Russia, and denying that he had ever been a writer.

By reducing books to a lowest common denominator, by removing much of the depth and subtlety, by elevating unimportant details into major plot threads and by introducing spurious elements such as love interest, the film makers usually succeed in ruining the whole project. I find this profoundly annoying because it is simply not necessary (I hate waste). Why can't they have the courage of the writer's convictions and aim at a higher level?

Stephen King books have been a prolific source of SF movies. They are mostly terrible films, with two honourable exceptions. **Misery** and **Stand By Me**, are superb though neither of them have anything at all to do with SF or fantasy. I urge you to seek them out. **Misery** is based on the eponymous novel about a deranged fan kidnapping her favourite author and forcing him to write a sequel to her favourite book, and punishing him hideously when he fails to satisfy her (it must be every writer's nightmare). **Stand By Me** is a film of the novella ***The Body*** from the collection **Different Season** and it concerns four young boys on the verge of puberty who go out into the forest to look for a dead body. It sounds unpromising material but it builds into a magical, lyrical experience. I would never have thought it possible.

I also have high hopes for **The Tommyknockers** which has recently been filming here in New Zealand.

Paradoxically some SF movies have turned the tables and books have been written based on the films. Probably the best of these is **Fantastic Voyage** by Isaac Asimov. He did such a superb job of turning that very tedious film into a brilliant book that it has seldom if ever been out of print and the myth has arisen that the film was actually based on his novel! Well it wasn't. The film came first and he was asked to write the book in order to promote the film. He succeeded in completely overshadowing it.

However most film "novelisations" are as bad as you might expect them to be, particularly the ones written by Alan Dean Foster (which is most of them, he seems to have cornered the market). Orson Scott Card did quite a creditable job with **The Abyss**, but he is an exception, not a rule.

A great number of SF books have never been filmed -- and would probably be quite dismal if they were. Many will almost certainly never be filmed for reasons of terminal weirdness or technical difficulty. Stanley Kubrick is on record as having said that if it can be written he can film it, but I would be willing to bet that even he would have enormous difficulty with books such as **A Clash of Cymbals** by James Blish which deals with, among other things, the destruction of the entire universe and the beginning of (possibly) several more.

Two and a half SF books have, however, been filmed brilliantly. These are **Forbidden Planet** from the play by William Shakespeare, **A Clockwork Orange** from the novel by Anthony Burgess, and **2001** from the novel by Arthur C. Clarke. You could, with justification, deny that this last is a film of a novel since both book and novel grew almost simultaneously as both Kubrick and Clarke contributed to the other's project (see Clarke's fascinating **The Lost Worlds of 2001** for more information on this). However one is unequivocally the work of a film maker

and the other is unequivocally the work of a novelist. The assertion is close enough to the truth.

I find it interesting that the last two were both filmed by Stanley Kubrick. It seems to me that he is someone who is particularly sympathetic to the SF point of view. Even his other films skirt around the edge of the subject. Consider **Dr Strangelove** (**or how I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb**) and **The Shining**. Even **Spartacus** flirts with it (I'll swear I saw Conan in the background).

Forbidden Planet, of course, only half way counts since it is a film of Shakespeare's **The Tempest** with SF trappings. Nevertheless that is close enough to qualify it -- **The Tempest** is a magnificent fantasy story in its own right. I saw it again a few years ago as part of the **BBC**'s epic bardathon (a project over several years to show all of the plays). Michael Hordern played Prospero, and it was a wonderfully moving and emotional performance.

I've always loved movies. That's an odd statement to come from someone as non-visual as myself. As I think I've explained before, visual images leave me largely unmoved. I much prefer the print media. Nevertheless I subscribed to Sky television as soon as it appeared because a channel devoted to nothing but movies was just too attractive to resist.

The first time that I ever went to the cinema was to see a Disney movie called (I think) **The Vanishing Prairie**. I was about three years old and my mother decided it was time I learned about cinemas. I retain no memory of the event, but my mother said that I paid very little attention to what was happening up on the big screen. It seems I was much more fascinated by the fact that my seat was on springs and when I stood up it folded back all by itself. I spent the whole three hours of my visit to the cinema standing up, sitting down, and standing up again.

Thus began a life long fascination with movies. Every Sunday afternoon at home I would sit glued to the radio listening to a programme called **Movie Go Round** which played excerpts from current movies and reviewed them. It was only much later on in life that the surrealistic aspects of listening to movies on radio dawned on me. At the time, I was hooked.

Movies were the high spots of my teenage life and the cinema was a place of constant pilgrimage. I smoked my first cigarette in a cinema and got my first grown up kiss in a cinema; and in between I saw a lot of wonderful films.

In the intermission, ladies with trays around their necks would appear, and you could buy ice cream and crisps and a most revolting orange juice called "Kia Ora" which I never saw on sale anywhere except cinemas. It was advertised with a silly little cartoon which played on the big screen as the ladies appeared. A horrible little cartoon character was exhorted thus: "Aurora, Aurora, ask the girl for Kia Ora". Once (I must have been about ten years old) I bought a choc ice from the lady and discovered I didn't like it. So I carefully took all the chocolate off and put it in my pocket, then I ate the ice cream. My mother was less than pleased to find my pockets full of melten chocolate and for a while I was banned both from the cinema and from ice cream. (The magic of visiting the cinema -- we called it "going to the pictures" -- has been captured superbly in the mainstream novel **The Picturegoers** by David Lodge, all of whose books I recommend unreservedly).

At university I joined the film club and saw, to quote a friend, "far too many foreign films about starving peasants". I remember an underground movie called **Geography of the Body** which we all went to see because we thought it might be dirty. It may well have been -- it was hard to tell. Certainly the camera spent an inordinate amount of time exploring a naked female figure -- but it did it all from a distance of about half a centimetre with a magnifying lens, and all you could see were enormous pores and the occasional hair which looked like a steel rod.

What criteria should one apply to a film? What critical yardsticks can be brought to bear? Personally I demand the same from a film as I do from a book (the two media are inextricably

linked in my mind). Namely it should make sense, the characters should be well realised, it should preferably move me emotionally (though not cynically manipulate my emotions like all those terrible "disease of the week" movies do). Finally it should have something to say. That is not to say that I require the thing to have a message. As Sam Goldwyn was wont to remark, "If you want a message, hire Western Union". But I do want something more than the unutterably trivial which is why movies such as **Rambo** and **Terminator** leave me utterly unmoved since they are merely excuses for big muscles and special effects all of which are very dull without something coherent to tie them together. I cannot see any value at all in a film whose sole purpose is to show off the technical expertise of the stuntmen and the special effects department. It is all too easy to fall into the special effects trap with an SF film. After all, wasn't it the "Gosh -- wow -- sensawunder" effect that attracted you to SF in the first place? And there is no denying that a properly made SF movie will undoubtedly stretch the special effects people far more than a more mundane film would. Start with the destruction of the universe and build up to a climax.

Films have a much more difficult job to perform than books because they manipulate an extra dimension. You can actually see what is going on instead of having to picture it in your mind. Paradoxically, that makes it harder for the film maker, rather than easier. When you are reading a book, your imagination has no budgetary or technical constraints. It can fill in all the corners for you without fear or favour and reading a well written passage can be an amazing sensuous experience as the action plays out in your head. When translated to a film screen, the same scene can often seem thin and artificial compared to what you had visualised in the privacy of your mind. This is a challenge few film makers accept with relish. Fewer still ever manage to bring it off with any degree of confidence. One reason that Kubrick succeeds so brilliantly in his SF movies is that he rises to this challenge and masters it in spite of breaking all the other rules of good movie making. **2001** consists of virtually nothing but special effects and there are no human characters of any significance in it. Only the monolith (a Big Dumb Object to use a critical term coined by one of the contributors to the new edition of the Nicholls encyclopedia) and HAL the computer can really be considered to be characters in any traditional sense. Yet still the movie works, still it never fails to move me almost to tears. The scene where Moon Walker throws the bone into the sky in triumph just has to be one of the all time great scenes.

Similarly with **A Clockwork Orange**, he took a book that was written entirely in a future slang and somehow managed to translate that faithfully into visual terms. It remains a cinematic *tour-de-force* and I always thought it was a shame that the film was vilified because of the violence it portrayed. It had important truths in it. The antics and attitudes of Alex, the thug from the future, are becoming more familiar to us in our everyday lives. The film may not have set out to prophesy, but as an aside it succeeded there as well.

There are some SF books that have never been filmed, but they ought to be. **A Princess of Mars** by Edgar Rice Burroughs would be a brilliant action and adventure film. **Tiger, Tiger** by Alfred Bester would stretch the special effects people to the limit and beyond and still have an exciting story to tell. **The Left Hand of Darkness** by Ursula Le Guin and **City** by Clifford D. Simak would be profound and important works.

And just for the sake of silliness, someone should film **Bill, the Galactic Hero** by Harry Harrison. It would be a comedic *tour de force* and would probably win prizes.

If it was filmed properly, of course.

Lingua Frankly

***Phlogiston Thirty-Six**, 1993*

SF has long recognised the fundamental importance of language. After all, if you can't talk to

the nasty aliens how on earth (or off it) are you going to have any meaningful communication other than war? Perversely, one of the best stories on this theme is not generally considered to be SF at all. James Clavell's masterpiece **Shogun** is an alien contact story thinly disguised as a historical novel about Japan. The hero, a shipwrecked Englishman, must make his way in a totally alien society with a totally alien language and customs. The problems the hero encounters in seventeenth century Japan are exactly the things that SF has been dramatising for years. How do you absorb a language whose sounds are utterly unfamiliar to you? How do you come to grips with a culture where you have no points of contact at all—where everything that everybody does is completely contrary to your instinctive reactions? How do you communicate?

SF has come up with some weird and wonderful alien communication methods that for want of a better name I suppose we must call languages. In **VOR** by James Blish (The novel was based on an earlier short story written by Blish in collaboration with Damon Knight) the alien entity communicates by changing the colours on a patch on its head. The letters VOR stand for Violet, Orange, Red.

Jack Vance persistently introduces odd communication methods. Messages are passed by masks, smells, music, signs, colours and semaphores. Stories such as ***The Moon Moth*** and **The Languages of Pao** seem principally motivated by studies of how people (and/or things) communicate and how these communications reflect the speaker's perceptions of reality. These themes surface again in Ian Watson's first novel **The Embedding** where he cleverly links together alien, South American and computer languages and the subjective realities they impose on their users (or speakers).

In **Memoirs of a Spacewoman** Naomi Mitchison wrote a whole novel about a research worker attempting to understand and communicate with an alien species. Phillip Mann's **Eye of the Queen** centres around cultural and communication problems between men and aliens.

In Terry Carr's **Dance of the Changer and the Three** the aliens are energy forms and they communicate by dancing. This may not be as far fetched as it sounds. Some modern day biologists consider that bees may communicate by dancing and in the short novel **The Adventures of the Peerless Peer** Philip José Farmer takes this idea to a ludicrously logical extreme when Sherlock Holmes, about to be attacked by a swarm of black and white striped African Killer Bees, takes all his clothes off, smears himself with a disguise of mud stripes and dances at them. The bees consider him to be just another bee, albeit somewhat large, and they read the message of his dance, wheel around in mid swarm, and fly off to attack the villain instead!

This is probably the most bizarre use of the tools of communication in SF but there are others that come quite close to it. In **Cosmos** Carl Sagan suggests that the infinite series that makes up the decimal portion of pi is a communication from the original universe builders. In **The Sirens of Titan**, Kurt Vonnegut reveals that Stonehenge is merely an intergalactic telegram to a stranded alien whose spaceship engine has broken down on Titan. When viewed from above and decoded it reads: "Replacement part being rushed with all possible speed".

My first real contact with a language other than English was when I was eleven years old. I'd just started secondary school and it was my first French lesson. Along with all the other new boys I sat in my classroom waiting for who knew what? There was a *clump*, *clump*, *clump* on the stairs and the door was flung wide to the wall with a resounding CRASH. In came a begowned schoolmaster who strode to the front of the room and announced in ringing tones, "Bonjour toute la classe! Je me suis Monsieur Antoine."

For the next forty minutes he harangued us in French. Gabble, gabble, gabble. We all stared at him in complete bewilderment. Then the bell rang to signal the end of the lesson.

"Au revoir!"

He strode from the classroom slamming the door behind him.

For the rest of the year he taught me French. He believed in the total immersion method and would not permit a single word of English to be spoken in his lessons. Outside the class Mr Anthony was a perfect English gentleman and raving loony. He felt that hymn tunes were far too dirge-like so he sang them fast and cheerfully at morning assembly and was invariably two verses ahead of the congregation, much to the consternation of the pianist and the discomfiture of everybody else since his singing voice was powerful and tended to overlap and lead the crowd. Hymns invariably ended in total confusion with Mr Anthony looking puzzled, all the other masters looking angry and the school as a whole feeling semi-hysterical.

Inside the class Monsieur Antoine spoke French, and only French. I still treasure the memory of the day he taught us the French words for various articles of clothing. As he named an article, he would take it off and wave it at us. Perhaps I should point out that to this day I do *not* know the French for "underpants" (but I do know "jacket", "shoes", "shirt", "vest" and "trousers"). I've had a soft spot for languages ever since, though Latin tested that tolerance sorely, and it is probably worth pointing out that I learned more French in that eccentric year with Monsieur Antoine than I learned in the next four years with more conventional teachers. I remember him fondly and will always be grateful for the firm grounding he gave me in the one foreign language that I can claim to speak with a fair degree of fluency.

Assuming that you can talk to the aliens, how can you be certain that what you are saying is what they are hearing? Some words simply don't translate as you would expect them to. Philip K. Dick had a lot of fun with this idea in **Galactic Pot Healer** where the protagonist plays a game with his friends. They submit book and film titles to a computer to be translated into a foreign language. They then submit these foreign translations to another computer to be translated back into English in an attempt to guess what a foreign person might see and hear when presented with the word. These re-translated phrases are then shown to each other and each attempts to guess what the originals might have been. My favourites from the book are "The Male Offspring in Addition Gets Out of Bed" (**The Sun Also Rises**) and "Those for Which the Male Homosexual Extracts Transit Tax" (**For Whom the Bell Tolls**), both by "Serious Constricting Path" (Ernest Hemingway). Also **The Corn is Green** which became "The Cliche is Inexperienced". Some friends and I played with this idea once. Here are some retranslations of some famous SF book titles. See what you make of them (answers at the end of the article):

Soil Stays by George Stewart
Sandy Hill's Kids by Frank Herbert
The Metal Mirage by Norman Spinrad
More Unusual in a Funny Country by Robert

Heinlein
The Autumn of the Keeps by Samuel Delaney
The Last Tree by J. G. Ballard
The Person Hotel the Stoned Rook by Philip K. Dick

All of which seems to suggest that the universal translating devices so beloved of SF are probably not viable, though they are undeniably convenient as a means of moving the story along. The structure of languages seems to be rather too complex to permit meaningful translation to be possible (at least it appears that way at the moment) though I have read articles seriously proposing that the artificial language Esperanto be used as a common middle ground in the translation process. Since the grammar and construction of Esperanto is completely defined and completely regular it should be possible (the theory goes) to make an exact translation of something from one language into Esperanto and from Esperanto into a different language (Swedish to Esperanto and then Esperanto to English, for example) rather than by trying to translate directly between the languages in one step. This sounds fine in theory but I am dubious as to how well it will perform in real life simply because there is so much in a real language that cannot be translated literally since it depends on custom and culture. Consider the very common concept of an April Fool. In the English speaking countries, this is an old tradition and we all have a lot of fun with it (I remember once in England when the **Guardian** newspaper published a travel supplement one particular April 1st. The supplement spent many lyrical pages extolling the beautiful, tranquil islands of San Serif as the ideal holiday resort. A lot of people were completely fooled). In France, the same tradition exists, but there, you aren't an April Fool, you are a "Poisson d'Avril"—an April fish (or, more literally, fish of April). How do you translate such a phrase? Literally or idiomatically? And how is a machine supposed to handle such an idiom? You can't legislate for that. I feel that the regular grammar and structure of Esperanto is a blind alley.

Besides, how do you translate nonsense? Is Lewis Carroll's ***Jabberwocky*** written in English? Probably not. However it is certainly possible to argue that only a native English speaker can understand it. There is a frisson to the nonsense words that Carroll made up that is purely English in tone. Versions of the Jabberwocky in other languages simply don't work. Damon Knight remarked of a German translation he had seen that it was "merely rather sad".

Problems of translation are central to ***A Rose for Ecclesiastes*** by Roger Zelazny where a poet-linguist from Earth attempts to meet the few remaining Martians and translate their holy texts. Translation from the Martian language also arises in ***Omnilingual*** by H. Beam Piper, though this time the Martians are all long dead and the Earth archaeologists feel the task is hopeless. The protagonist eventually finds the key to the language in a Martian periodic table of the elements—after all, science is constant across the universe isn't it? The periodic table becomes a Rosetta Stone for Mars.

Science may be one constant, but it is possible that other things cross the species boundary as well. In ***First Contact*** Murray Leinster speculates that humans and aliens will cross the cultural

divide by telling each other dirty jokes.

It makes you wonder if there are any language constants as well. It has been said that if the culture does not have a word for it, you can't do it or conceive of the possibility of it. In **1984** George Orwell postulated Newspeak—a language designed so that certain thoughts would be unthinkable in it. The rulers saw it as a perfect tool for keeping political power by preventing thoughts of opposition. Similarly Yevgeny Zamiatin in **We** (a thematic precursor to **1984**) introduces a mechanical language that emphasises conformity and the regimentation of society. Gene Wolfe returned to this theme in **The Citadel of the Autarch** where he expressed a tale of the individual spirit entirely in patriotic slogans. (All of the volumes that make up **The Book of the New Sun** have a lot of fun with linguistic invention).

So where do words come from? As a child I made up a secret language. Most children seem to pass through this phase. One of my toys at the time was an old bottle full of buttons and beads. They were bright and shiny and I called the toy my bottle of abrogating glue. My parents were a bit bemused by this but they went along with it and abrogating glue it was. Many years later, both my parents and I were rather astonished to discover that "abrogating" was a real word with a real meaning. Had I heard it somewhere or had I made it up out of whole cloth? To this day I do not know.

Another word I made up had a more obvious derivation. I had been musing about the word "Yes" and the colloquial word "Arrr" which comes from the deep South of England and which means "Yes". In my mind I combined the two words into a portmanteau word and for months, whenever anybody asked me a question which required an affirmative reply, I would say "Arse", much to the amusement of whoever was listening (it is not a word you expect to hear from a six year old). Eventually my parents couldn't stand it any more and forbade me to say it.

I don't know whether these experiences match the true evolution of languages, but consider all the loan words we have in English and how we have adapted them. English is a most bastardised mixture of words. We have borrowed terms from almost every language you can think of (what is the common English word borrowed from the Aztec? Chocolate; derived from Chocolatl).

I remember my Latin master yelling at me:

"What is the common English word derived from ‘tergum'?" He was red in the face and sweating. "Tergum," he yelled. "Tergum."

The class stared at him blankly.

"Common English word—come on you steatopygeous bushmen. What common English word is derived from Tergum?"

Nothing.

"Tergiversation!" He howled. "Tergiversation—the act of turning one's back. Tergum is Latin for back."

Perhaps it was an effective teaching technique (certainly I will never forget the word), but it made for loud and unpleasant Latin lessons.

In **A Clockwork Orange** Anthony Burgess made a whole language out of loan words. The language in which the novel is narrated is based on Russian loan words and it is surprising both how quickly the language ceases to seem strange, and how long the words echo and rebound in the mind after the book is over.

In an article called ***The Words in Science Fiction*** Larry Niven speculates on the derivation of words and how SF writers make them up. Apparently he used to do this sort of thing for fun in boring lectures at university and a lot of the strange words that cropped up in the known space stories came from these idle hours.

Languages change—we have all seen that in our own lifetimes. I don't think I've said "See you later, alligator" for thirty five years. My Latin master once gave me a lovely example of this sort of change. He was on holiday in Greece and wished to take a ferry to one of the islands. He was unsure which ferry to take and so he asked one of the locals. Unfortunately he did not speak modern Greek (only ancient Greek); but he tried. He was rather disconcerted when the person he addressed burst into hysterical laughter. Thinking about it later, he deduced that he had spoken to the man in a rather archaic way. In English, it probably amounted to something like, "Ho, varlet! Doth yonder vessel ply the waters 'twixt here and the isles?"

The evolution of languages with time probably accounts for the fact that I cannot read pre-twentieth century novels with any degree of pleasure. The old fashioned feel to the language (and attitudes to a certain extent) turns me off and I can't help wondering just how quaint the language of this article will sound in a few years time. David I. Masson explored this idea in a short story called ***A Two-Timer*** where a time traveller from the seventeenth century describes in his own English style what he found in the twentieth century. One of the major things he found was sheer linguistic bewilderment. A similar effect was shown very dramatically (and convincingly) in the film **Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome** where the physically and culturally isolated survivors of a plane crash develop their own derivative of the English language. The fragments of the language that we hear in the film are very attractive and they flow well and sound very real. For me this was one of the high spots of the film.

There seems to be some in-built cultural bias that tells us when new words are acceptable and when they are not. Neologisms come and go; only very rarely do they stay. Consider "laser", "quark" or "tachyon". They survived. But what about "velocipede" or "wireless"? They did not survive. Why not? I don't know.

A curious linguistic phenomenon of our times is the acronym or initialism (SF, UNICEF, CNN, DOS, MODEM, RTFM, HPFM). Many of these come from the computer world (another very science fictional connection between high tech and language) and some of them have become common coin. I have an ambition—I want to write a sentence that consists of nothing but acronyms. All I need is a verb…

The words and structures of language are themselves sometimes a motivation for telling a story. The most famous example of this is Tolkien's **Lord of the Rings**; a huge tale whose purpose was to dramatise (or justify) a whole world full of languages the creation of which predated the novel by many years. Tolkien's friend and colleague C. S. Lewis did something very similar in **Out of the Silent Planet** where he has a lot of fun with three Martian languages. **Babel-17** by Samuel R. Delaney is a complexly structured novel in which language itself is the central image. Cast in the form of a spy story, it tells of Babel-17 itself, a perfectly analytical language with no word for "I" (an odd idea which turns up again in Robert Silverberg's **A Time of Changes**). Delaney's **The Ballad of Beta-2** is also very concerned with linguistic analysis. It is a theme that is very close to his heart and his non-fiction works (notably **The Jewel Hinged Jaw**) spend much time discussing this.

The more you know of a foreign language the more complex the problems that arise. I once knew somebody who was completely bilingual in English and French. She had a French mother and an English father and she grew up speaking both languages. This had the oddest side effect—she was completely unable to play Scrabble since she could not differentiate between French and English words. To her they were just words, all equally valid, and she never understood why her friends complained at things like:

c

h
o
r
s
e
s

e

v

e

a

u

x

They say that the best way to learn a language is to have a torrid affair with someone whose native language it is. I think there is a degree of truth in this. It is more than quarter of a century since I last saw Yasmin, but I still have a smattering of Urdu.

Is this the language school of the future when we finally meet the Alpha Centaurians?

Answers to the retranslations:
Earth Abides by George Stewart
Children of Dune by Frank Herbert
The Iron Dream by Norman Spinrad
Stranger in a Strange Land by Robert Heinlein
The Fall of the Towers by Samuel R. Delaney
The

Terminal Beach by J. G. Ballard
The Man in the High Castle by Philip K. Dick

Do you speak English?

Phlogiston Thirty-Seven, 1994

Word processors are wonderful devices. I'm using one as I write this article and I wouldn't be without it. I can incorporate second thoughts, move things around, interpolate sentences, rewrite whole chunks, and it is all so incredibly easy. What a relief it is not to have to retype a dozen pages for the sake of one new paragraph as I used to have to do all too many times in the past when using my little Olivetti portable typewriter.

Unfortunately the temptation to do all of that neat stuff is sometimes too overwhelming to resist. The ease with which words can be processed leads inexorably to lots of words banged out at an enormous rate and accounts in large part for the proliferation of so many large books and never ending series.

Two perpetrators of this literary fecundity are Margaret Weiss and Tracy Hickman and it seems to me that they embody many of the sins that word processors must be held responsible for. Like their food counterparts, if word processors are wrongly used they produce tasteless, easily digestible pap.

Serpent Mage and **The Hand of Chaos** by Margaret Weiss and Tracy Hickman are published by Bantam. They are two novels in the **Death Gate** cycle. They are also enormously large books which appear to have been written and published within days of each other, so rapidly did they appear on the shelves. The books are typical fantasies -- event driven rather than character driven since the characters are so wooden and dull that they couldn't drive anything! There are no surprises in the plots. Weiss and Hickman have found a money spinning formula and they never vary it at all. The books aim at a captive market (nobody is going to buy these books unless they have bought the previous ones since they are virtually incomprehensible if you have not read the earlier books in the series). This is a common sin of modern publishing and I have fulminated about it before.

However the ease with which words can be spun together and the fact that so much writing in this area is formula writing anyway makes it very tempting simply to bang out any old rubbish as fast as possible (and let the sense, such as it is, go hang). I strongly suspect that these books are made up of largely unrevised first draft material. What else is one to make of this sort of saccharine writing:

> My lamb fell asleep almost immediately. I was puttering about the room, sorting her dear ribbons and laying out her dress for the morrow when a strange feeling came over me. My hands and arms felt heavy, my tongue dry and swollen. It was all I could do to stagger to my bed. I fell instantly into a strange state. I was asleep, yet I wasn't. I could see

> things, hear things, and yet I could not respond. And thus I saw them.

Why the old fashioned phrase "the morrow"? What is wrong with the simple word "tomorrow"?

The books are riddled with unnecessary footnotes referring to the history and customs of the races involved in the story. The footnotes define and describe the "unusual" words used in the text. On one occasion, a footnote defines the word "duenna" and I think it is a measure of the contempt that Weiss and Hickman have for their audience that they feel it necessary to define this perfectly ordinary word. (Nevertheless, footnotes are also very trendy things to have in novels these days and Weiss and Hickman are nothing if not dedicated followers of fashion.)

The trend towards rapidly processed words can be seen even more clearly in **Ghost Legion** by Margaret Weiss, again published by Bantam. Here Margaret Weiss deserts her long time partner Tracy Hickman to produce a solo novel. It concerns Dion Starfire, the ruler of a galaxy. After years of war an uneasy peace reigns. Dion is in love with a woman who is not his queen and the alliances that rest on his marriage are threatened. The illegitimate son of the dead king leads a revolt against Dion. Can Dion preserve his throne and keep peace in the galaxy?

Despite the futuristic trappings and pseudo-scientific speculations that litter the text this is not a science fiction book. This is a clichéd historical romance, a medieval costume drama with ray guns. The social set up is laughable (feudalism across the light years -- good grief!) and the characterisation non-existent. It would not be out of place if it was shelved with the other bodice-rippers which are at least honest enough to proclaim themselves for what they are instead of hiding behind a glossy facade.

The evidence of automatic writing with little or no revision applied to the text is even stronger in this book. Consider this passage:

> She was breath taking. Xris would have taken off his cloak -- had he owned a cloak -- thrown it in the mud at her feet. Hell, he would have thrown himself into the mud at her feet, begged her to walk with him. But he reminded himself sternly that business was business and he'd better keep this on a business footing -- which meant standing on his own two.

This passage has four sentences and contains three grammatical errors, one ambiguity, one arguably bad grammatical habit, one misuse of punctuation and two biological impossibilities. That is not bad going for four sentences.

"Xris would have taken off his cloak -- had he owned a cloak -- thrown it at her feet." Ignoring the parenthetical clause indicated by the hyphens, the sentence reads: "Xris would have taken off his cloak thrown it at her feet." We should always be able to remove parenthetical phrases or clauses without altering the major meaning of the sentence. If we do this here, we discover that the sentence has no meaning since there is no conjunction joining "…taken off his cloak" to "thrown it at her feet." and running them together turns the whole thing into nonsense. Probably the best way of joining them would be with "and" though a semi-colon might just be acceptable. The structure of the sentence suggests that the parenthetical clause is an afterthought interpolated into the flow. A better structure which removes the interpolation would be: "If Xris had owned a cloak, he would have taken it off and thrown it at her feet." Even this is not ideal since merely owning a cloak does not necessarily mean that one is wearing it. A much better phrasing is: "If Xris had been wearing a cloak, he would have taken it off and thrown it at her feet." This removes all the errors and also the ambiguity.

"Hell, he would have thrown himself into the mud at her feet, begged her to walk with him." A similar mistake can be noted here. Again we have a missing conjunction between the elements

of the sentence. A comma is used to suggest it, but that is not correct. A semi-colon would be marginally acceptable. Again though the word "and" is a much better choice. Thus we would end up with: "Hell, he would have thrown himself into the mud at her feet and begged her to walk with him." This ignores the physical impossibility of a person walking when lying in mud (or even speaking if one is face down), but it is still better than the original.

"But he reminded himself sternly that business was business and he'd better keep this on a business footing -- which meant standing on his own two." Starting a sentence with "But" is generally frowned on. It can sometimes be an effective technique for adding extra emphasis (provided it is not overdone -- it is a habit I often catch myself indulging in; but that does not make it any more correct). It does seems a little out of place here. However, that possible error pales into insignificance when we examine the end of the sentence. If we parse the sentence strictly, we see that the word "two" is used as a noun. Since Xris is standing on his "own two", I am tempted to ask just which part of the body a "two" is! Obviously the writer meant to say "standing on his own two feet." However she omitted the word "feet" because she mistakenly assumed that "two" could be qualified by the previous word "footing". Since the context in which "footing" is used is actually unconnected with the person's own feet, this is simply not the case.

Other passages from these and other books make it perfectly obvious that Weiss and Hickman are not as illiterate as these extracts might suggest. They do know the elementary rules of English grammar. It is just that sometimes, in the heat of the moment, they make mistakes. A little revision (or, since they are using a computerised system, perhaps the application of one of the many grammar checking programs that abound) would improve the prose immeasurably.

I'm not sure what to do about the puerile plots out of the stock cupboard, but that is a different problem. Of course, the fact that such elementary mistakes still exist in the published book also raises the question of exactly what Bantam's copy editors do all day long, but that too is a different problem.

If you wish to read unrelievedly ungrammatical prose, try the thrillers of Eric Lustbader. Virtually every line contains constructions that start with a capital letter and end with a full stop but which cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered to be sentences since they are totally innocent of verbs.

It may seem that I am becoming as boring as Robert Browning's grammarian (see **The Grammarian's Funeral** wherein is described the death rites of a pedantic man who all his life long "...ground he at grammar").

Despite that, I think that grammar is a very important part of both the written and spoken language and without at least paying lip service to it you will always end up with the type of ugliness that the extract from the Weiss novel typifies.

Grammar is a subject that is taught less and less frequently these days. Teachers are more concerned with self-expression than with grammar (though how you can express yourself cogently without a modicum of understanding of the rules of grammar escapes me). Most people simply apply casually learned conventions to their speech and writing without bothering too much about formal rules. As long as you don't bend things until they break (as in the Weiss extract) you will probably get away with it most of the time. Often, therefore, grammar is a non-issue.

However I find it ironic that very fine points of grammar (and vocabulary) quickly become the subject of heated debate when the concept of gender raises its head. The problem comes, of course, when words such as "man" (with connotations of masculinity -- ie man as in not woman) are used in a gender unspecific sense to denote humanity in general. Women get very upset (quite rightly in my opinion) at seemingly being ignored in this fashion and wimpish defences about the word being used generally rather than specifically cut no ice.

There is no doubt that gender is a biological fact. It is utter foolishness to pretend otherwise. Men and women demonstrably exist and belong to different genders. Whether or not that gender is relevant in a given English sentence is of course a perfectly legitimate topic for debate. (It is all too often confused with sexuality, which has nothing whatsoever to do with it.)

I find it hard to understand how the sentences "The man is very tall. He must be over six feet." can cause any controversy. All men are of the masculine gender and the pronoun "he" correctly refers back to the subject of the previous sentence (a specific man). The gender of the person is correctly identified (*not* the person's sexuality -- I insist that we separate the two). The gender is *very* relevant to the sentences since we are referring to a specific person who *ipso facto* possesses gender. Thus similarly "The woman is very tall. She must be over six feet." is also nothing but a simple statement of fact.

Problems arise when you say "The person is very tall. He must be over six feet.". Here an undoubted bias is showing itself. What evidence do we have that the person under discussion is masculine? None at all -- so why should a masculine pronoun be used? It would make just as much sense to say "she" instead of "he". Strictly speaking we need a gender-neutral pronoun in the second sentence but the only one we have that comes close is "it" and that won't work because it implies sexual neutrality (which is an impossible state for a person to be in except in certain rare medical cases) rather than gender-neutrality which is what we are seeking. There simply is no gender-neutral pronoun in English.

Over the years, many people have tried to invent the things. In the short story collection **Dealing in Futures**, Joe Haldeman suggests "tha" instead of "he" (and "ther" and "thim" for "his" and "him"). I seem to recall Timothy Leary suggesting "s/he" and "ti". However none of these have ever really caught on and they all sound very artificial. ("s/he" cannot be pronounced and "ti" is a homonym for "tea" and "tee" and sounds silly in this context.)

I don't really think we have a problem though. All our *plural* pronouns are gender-neutral ("they", "their" and "them"). All that is necessary is to rephrase gender specific sentences in the plural and the gender connotation vanishes from the pronoun. If it is not possible to rephrase the sentence in the plural without losing the sense, then avoid the use of pronouns entirely by rephrasing or repeating the noun to which the pronoun refers. Thus my sentence about a tall person might become: "The person is very tall; perhaps over six feet." or "The person is very tall. The person is over six feet."

A computer manual which informs us that "When a user invokes the program he is presented with a menu of choices." could more accurately construct the sentence as "When users invoke the program, they are presented with a menu of choices." In this particular case we might do better by phrasing it in the passive voice -- "When the program is invoked a menu of choices is presented." However the passive voice can quickly become too much of a good thing and a piece of prose written entirely in the passive is often excruciatingly tedious because of the distancing impersonality of it.

I think in every case it is possible (without too much circumlocution) to rephrase gender specific sentences which do not refer to entities of a specific gender.

A closely related problem arises when we consider the vanishingly small number of nouns that have gender specific forms. I suspect this problem owes much of its impact to the fact that (outside of biologically important sentences) gender as a grammatical idea is largely non-existent in English (though not so in many of the languages from which it evolved -- notably Latin and Greek).

I'm not sure I could write this article or make these points in French, for example, since gender is so intrinsically bound in to the language that getting worked up about it would render the average French speaker utterly dumb. In French, a table is feminine (why? who knows!) and

perforce one must use feminine words when discussing it. Contrariwise a footstool is masculine and only masculine words may be used. Parts of speech must agree in number and gender. Men and women, and words relating to them, are merely a small extension of this fundamental idea and it all seems perfectly natural.

However in English the idea only applies to a very small number of word pairs which all relate to people (who we must remember are entities which intrinsically possess gender). These are words such as author/authoress, actor/actress, aviator/aviatrix, dominator/dominatrix and so on. (Aren't the feminine endings interesting? Why don't we have an actrix or an aviatoress?)

There is a trend towards using only one of these words (generally the masculine) no matter what the gender of the person under discussion. By and large I dislike this trend. In a very real sense it insults Goldie Hawn to refer to her as an actor. However referring to her as an actress draws an unnecessary distinction. Remember that gender is possessed by a person. The profession that the person follows has no reason to be associated with gender other than through a specious extension of the concept of gender as a property of non-biological nouns, as in French. We have seen that this is a very non-English thing to do. Thus the specific person is legitimately "she". The reference to her as a (female noun) actress is much less legitimate and much less easily defended. (If you want to insert the words "actor", "he" and "Kevin Costner" in the appropriate places in the above sentences I don't mind. They lead to the same conclusions.)

Again though, English is such a rich language that almost invariably we can find a gender-neutral word to replace the gender-specific one that imposes a gender role where it is not germane. What about, for example: writer, thespian and pilot? (I'm stumped on dominator/dominatrix. Can anybody help? Chairman/chairwoman is another very difficult one. Chairperson is becoming more widely used, though it is a very ugly word.)

The neologisms that people coin to avoid any implication of a gender role or gender trap are sometimes hilariously inept. A woman of my acquaintance refuses to be labelled "Ms" on the grounds that she is not a manuscript. I find this a very compelling argument and I am almost unable to use the word any more because of the mad pictures it paints in my mind. (If she took a shower this morning does it make her a palimpsest?)

I also find no merit in semi-facetious self-righteous debates about manhole covers and similar trivia. Including "man" in a word is not of itself an indication of gender bias. Thus manacle, manager, manatee, manchester, manchineel, manciple, mancunian, mandamus, mandarin, mandate, mandible, mandoline, mandragora, mandrake, mandrel, mandrill, manducate, mane, mangabey, manganese, mange, mangel-wurzel, manger, mangle, mango, mangold, mangonel, mangosteen, mangrove, manhattan, mania, maniac, manic, manichee, manicure, manifest, manifesto, manifold, manikin, manioc, maniple, manipulate, manitou, manna, mannequin, manner, manoeuvre, manometer, manor, mansard, manse, mansion, mansuetude, mantel, mantic, mantilla, mantis, mantissa, mantle, mantra, manual, manufacture, manuka, manumit, manure, manuscript, manx, many, manzanilla and manzanita are not, and should not be, controversial words.

Nevertheless I do wonder why a ship is invariably referred to as "she" by both men and women alike. Perhaps this is the very last legitimate gender-bearing non-biological noun in English?

A Dozen Drabbles

Phlogiston Thirty-Nine, 1994

A Drabble is a short story of **exactly** *one hundred words, not a syllable more, not a syllable less. In addition, up to fifteen words are allowed for a title. Hyphenated-words-will-be-argued-about. The idea and the name of the form were first set down in a Monty Python sketch. Since*

then it has taken on a life of its own and many famous writers have committed drabbles to paper.

Here are some of mine. Why don't you send in some of yours?

Alien 4

The alien was a traditional bug eyed monster with green warty skin. It had enormous fangs jutting from its upper lip. They hung half way down its chest and terminated in fearsome points. They bulged so large in its jaw that it couldn't quite close its mouth and great gobbets of whatever it used for saliva trickled down the fangs and fell hissing to the floor. Puffs of smoke erupted as they landed on the carpet.

"I dribble," it roared, spitting foam everywhere, "therefore I drabble."

And as I watched in amazement, it drabbled in every room in the house.

Modern Technology

John cut a wedge of lemon and squeezed it over the salmon steak on his plate. It was the largest fish he had ever caught. It would last for ages.

Someone knocked on the door. Damn!

A uniformed official stood there clutching a complex beeping apparatus. He pushed past John and went into the kitchen. The beeps became a solid whine and the official opened the fridge.

"Aha!" he said. He groped inside the salmon and retrieved a small silicon chip. "Another successful tracking. John Smith, you are under arrest for salmon poaching."

Caught by fish and chips, thought John.

Once Upon a Time in an Office

The photocopier was bored and lonely. All day long it had done nothing except copy a particularly dull memorandum. In an attempt to relieve the tedium of its existence, it decided to shuffle its sorting trays up and down as noisily as possible.

Clank, clank, clank; all the way up. Clonk, clonk, clonk; all the way down. Hour after hour. Clank, clank. Clonk, clonk.

"For heaven's sake shut up!" shrieked one of the workers, driven to distraction. A finger lunged for the switch, and as everything went dark, deep inside itself the photocopier smiled. At last someone had noticed it.

It Crept in the Crypt

John could not believe his eyes. In the middle of the crypt lay a terrible monster covered with cockroaches. The insects had eaten the softer, tastier portions of the monster and its empty eye sockets stared sightlessly.

As the sound of John's footsteps rang through the crypt the monster sat up in the middle of the

cockroach swarm.

"Who's there?" it bellowed angrily.

It grabbed a handful of cockroaches and rammed them firmly into each eye socket. Feelers waved curiously from the holes as it got up and staggered towards John.

He turned and ran from the bug eyed monster.

Trade Secrets

The holy father shuffled his notes and looked out at the hopeful faces staring up at him.

"Now that you have ended your training," he said, "and you are about to go out and spread the word of God among the heathen, there remains only one more thing for you to learn. You cannot convert the unbelievers until your body language itself tells the world of your faith. Correct posture is vital."

With the support of a friend the holy father demonstrated his meaning, and a buzz of excitement filled the room as all the eager missionaries assumed the position.

Virtual Unreality

John was getting the hang of the game now. You had to time things just right to kill as many aliens as possible. The computer was unforgiving. One mistake and you were dead.

The computer was getting the hang of the game now. You had to time things just right to let the player kill as many aliens as possible. But you had to be unforgiving. One mistake by the player and he was dead.

John looked forward to killing aliens. The computer looked forward to killing John. Computer games are metaphors for life on both sides of the screen.

Alien 5

The alien spread its tentacles and sang a Wagnerian aria. The troops surrounding its flying saucer listened in awe as the perfect notes floated over them. When it finished, they burst into spontaneous applause. The alien bowed slightly and cleared its throat. Then it began to sing a selection of songs by Schubert.

Unfortunately the recital was interrupted by the arrival of the General, who was not a music lover. He strode up to the alien and growled, "What is going on here?"

The alien stopped singing, stared at the General and smiled.

"Take me to your lieder," it demanded.

(The pun in this one is so obvious that I simply can't believe I am the first person to think of it. If any of you are aware of any previous incarnations of it, please let me know.)

Circles

John stared angrily at the regular geometric patterns spread all over the field. His crop was completely ruined, the stalks flattened and split, pressed down into huge circles and spirals.

There had been no warning—John had slept though the whole thing and when he awoke this morning, there they were as far as the eye could see.

This sort of thing had been going on ever since the economy collapsed and the government had started selling military secrets to anyone who asked in order to pay for the social security.

Damn those village kids and their stealth motor bikes.

Dirty Dishes

The greasy plates slid into the scummy water. John scrubbed, and remnants of chili stained the water red.

Eventually he finished and reached to pull the plug. But before he could let the water drain away, more dirty plates arrived and he howled with frustration. He had been washing dishes for more than five thousand years and it would never end. So many dishes, such wrinkled fingers with the split white skin sagging. As fast as he cleaned the plates people removed them, ate chili con carne and dropped them back to be washed.

Washing up is an infinite loop.

Sink Duty

The water was drained, and the tea towels were folded neatly on the heated towel rail. The greasy remnants of the chili con carne had been removed from the plates and the sink was well scrubbed. Peter Smith turned up, smiling from ear to ear. "Oh," he said in well simulated surprise, "have you finished? Have I arrived too late again? My wife says it is my major talent." He sounded very proud of himself.

"No, no," murmured John as he drove a carving knife deep into Peter's chest. "Think nothing of it. You are merely the late Mr Smith."

The Man in the Moon Came Down Too Soon

The moon loomed in the sky with a fat, complacent face. The man in the moon looked down on the planet beneath as he had for centuries past. John settled himself against a rock and stared up, looking the moon directly between the eyes. He raised a can of beer in an ironic toast.

"Lunatics Rule OK," he said, and drank deeply. "What do you really think of it all down here?"

The beer was smooth and cool and the moon was fat and yellow. John was flying high, happy and smiling.

The man in the moon winked an eye.

The Crew are Revolting

The mighty spaceship ploughed through the void between the stars. The crew were near to mutiny and the captain was deep in angry conversation with the artificial intelligence in charge of supplies.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Come on Marie, you stupid machine. How could you allow such a situation to arise? How did you expect us to travel five hundred light years with no toilet paper?"

"What is it to me?" said Marie haughtily. "I have no need for toilet paper."

The captain buried his head in his hands. "What am I going do?"

"Let them use cake," said Marie.

Gosh -- Haven't You Grown!

Phlogiston Thirty-Eight, 1994

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Except of course it was ten years rather than twenty and Alex Heatley instead of Sergeant Pepper all of which ruins the scansion, but I'm sure you get the general drift of what I'm trying to say.

It is my proud boast that I have never had a subscription to **Phlogiston**, I have never paid a cent for any copy of **Phlogiston** and yet I have a complete collection of the magazine because I have had an article in every single issue. It happened like this.

"Will you," said Alex in a Machiavellian moment, "write something for **Phlogiston**?"

"OK," I said craftily. "I'll write things for you as long as you'll publish them."

"Good," said Alex, falling into my cunning trap and simultaneously springing his own. "I'll publish them as long as you continue writing them."

That was ten years ago and we have both kept our own side of the bargain ever since. I have forced him to keep **Phlogiston** going by the devious scheme of writing an essay every three months or so. He has forced me to keep writing an essay every three months by the devious scheme of publishing **Phlogiston** at regular intervals. It has now become a matter of pride. Neither one of us is going to give up first and thereby lose face. Consequently the magazine will continue to appear as long as our friendly rivalry goes on. I look forward to re-writing this essay for the fiftieth anniversary edition at which point I will be well into my eighties, Alex will be a grandfather and **Phlogiston** will be published as an audio/visual/olfactory multi-media laser diskette with a 3D cover holographically etched by Picasso *via* an online ouija board running Windows 53.3 (and the next release really will have the bugs fixed -- honest).

One of the many things I've been doing in this column over the last ten years is to be highly critical of some of the books I've been reading. However I've never really discussed the act of criticism and the criteria I tend to use to judge these pieces of writing. If you don't know my criteria in detail how can you judge my criticisms fairly? Therefore I thought I would take this opportunity to nail my colours to the mast and see if anybody salutes them. Perhaps you could regard this article as a manifesto.

I always look for four things when judging a piece of fiction. In no particular order, I look for a sense of place and time, a sense of character, the logic and believability of the plot and the language used to tell the story. It's hard to consider any of these in isolation -- they all influence each other to an enormous extent and the points of overlap are just as important as the topics themselves, if not more so. But let's try and deal with each of them in turn.

The sense of place and time is intimately related to the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief. After all, we know that all fiction is essentially a great big lie. We aren't supposed to believe it (or in it), we are just supposed to wallow in it and enjoy it. If we simply can't forget our disbelief, our knowledge of the essential unreality of what we are reading, we may as well not bother starting to read it in the first place. Anything that the writer can do to make it easier for the audience to go along with the story is obviously a good thing. Conversely, anything which makes it harder to accept things for the simple sake of the story must be a bad thing. The skill (or otherwise) with which the writer sets up the place and time of the story's events is vital.

In the story ***Jack*** Connie Willis chooses to tell a tale set in the London of World War II at the height of the blitz. By and large she evokes the atmosphere very well. She has obviously done her research very thoroughly and the intimate little details she scatters through the story evoke the time and place very well indeed. However she makes several mistakes which, for me at least, broke the spell and jerked me out of the tale far too often.

For example, she uses the American word "gotten" which is a construction that has long vanished from English speech. According to the BBC's magnificent programme **The Story of English** this is an archaic form dating from Elizabethan English. The British stopped using it a long time ago. The Americans, it seems, continued with it.

One of the characters in the story is supposed to come from Newcastle, but is referred to several times as a Yorkshireman. A few minutes with a map would soon have sorted this one out. In a discussion about vegetables one character refers to "rutabagas"; a word which simply does not exist outside of America and which would never under any circumstances fall from the lips of a native English speaker. (As far as I can tell, the American rutabaga is the vegetable that an English person would refer to as a swede, or possibly a turnip). Therefore I cannot really believe that this is England or that these are English people. Reality breaks into the story and the spell is broken.

All these are small points, I grant you, but it is the culmination of a lot of small points which makes up the story as a whole. The more you get wrong, the more likely it is that the reader will give up in disgust before the end of the tale is reached.

To be fair to Connie Willis, I am English by birth and she is not and so I cannot reasonably expect her to get every single nuance of an English setting correct. Also I have no doubt that the things I have pointed out would pass a large part of her reading audience by, even those who *are* English. A considerable number of Londoners probably do think that Newcastle really is in Yorkshire -- the myth has it that anything north of Watford isn't real anyway so who cares if you misplace a city or two? The **Guardian** newspaper once published a map of England from a Londoner's viewpoint. The arctic circle went through Manchester and a stagecoach service ran north from Watford where the roads turned into dirt tracks. So perhaps I do her a disservice; perhaps she misplaced her geography on purpose. Nevertheless it niggles.

The reverse is almost certainly true of course. When an English writer tries to look, sound and feel American for whatever reason, it probably all comes out wrong as well, though I am not qualified to tell.

The late Eric Frank Russell used to write a lot of quite funny short stories for **Astounding** in the John Campbell years and he often tried to put on an American flavour for the sake of the market. So much so in fact, that many British fans believed that he really was an American writer.

John Brunner, another British writer, sold many of his stories to American outlets and therefore they often had an American setting. Indeed, many of his books have never had a British edition at all. To me his settings feel authentic. Doubtless they do to him as well -- he is a conscientious man and would have tried his best to get it right.

However in spite of this effort, I have no doubt that both of these writers committed just as many solecisms from a true American point of view as American writers have from a British point of view.

Probably the worst example I know of getting the setting wrong is a novel called **The Investigation** by the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem. Again, the events of the story take place in London, but it is a London where a police lieutenant (a rank that does not exist in the British police force) drives around London in Buicks and Oldsmobiles (cars that are virtually *never* seen on London streets). All the police are armed (British police are not routinely armed) and I vaguely recall that everyone drives on the right hand side of the road as well.

There is no way that anyone could ever believe in this -- I don't care how good the story is. Too much of it is too wrong and as a direct result, nothing else in it can possibly work. I don't know the circumstances behind the production of this book. It might have been the fault of the translator rather than of Lem himself. On the other hand, perhaps he was trying to tell an alternate world story -- though if he was, he fails to give any clues and he never uses the situation for anything, so I doubt it.

The other side of the coin is admirably demonstrated by Phillip Mann's new novel **A Land Fit for Heroes: Volume 1 Escape to the Wild Wood**. Here we really do have an alternate world novel and the writer invokes a world that never was, but that might have been. For various reasons, the primitive forest that once covered the whole of the British Isles has never been destroyed. Therefore this forest has to be described and lived in during the events of the novel. He never sets a foot wrong. His evocation of the forest is so strong you can almost smell it. Not only is disbelief willingly suspended, belief is willingly enforced and the reality of the book is paramount. That is how the trick should be done and it makes a good yardstick against which to measure the success of other stories.

The classic evocation of time and place is, without a doubt, Robert Heinlein's novel **Beyond this Horizon** wherein a door dilates and the hero steps through. No more mention is made of it than this one reference and if you blink you will miss it, but the hero's casual acceptance of a door with an iris in it anchors the reader's imagination firmly in the future in which the book is set. It simply wouldn't have worked if Heinlein had drawn attention to it and spent a page and a half lecturing about the history of doors -- a time and a place must feel lived in and drawing unnecessary attention to commonplace details is a sure way to make it feel artificial and break the spell. After all, how many novels set in contemporary times do any more than say something like "He switched on the television and relaxed to watch it."? If the next few paragraphs explained what a television was we'd give up in disgust. Why should SF be any different?

John Campbell once remarked that the type of stories he wanted were stories that the characters in them could conceivably read without getting turned off by the level of unnecessary detail; that it to say he wanted contemporary stories of the future (and that is *not* an oxymoron).

You can't be too hard on the writer though. It would not be fair to condemn stories set on the canals of Mars if the stories were written prior to the gathering of the evidence that refuted the existence of the canals. A critic is not allowed the 20/20 vision of hindsight. Nevertheless it pays to examine the details closely. If you ever get hold of a first edition of Larry Niven's **Ringworld** hang on to it -- his sense of place was so dislocated that he had the Earth revolving back to front so that the sun rose in the west and set in the east. This bug has been fixed in all subsequent printings!

A particularly science fictional problem is to make places that nobody currently alive has ever visited seem real; or even to make places that simply don't exist seem real. If you set your story on a planet of Alpha Centauri or within the event horizon of a black hole or in a wormhole between universes you face a much more difficult task. Or perhaps it is an easier task. After all, nobody is going to criticise your geography (Newfortress could easily be in Eboracumshire -- who could deny it?) In such a situation, all you can ask yourself is how consistent the whole thing seems to be and also how well described it is. This latter is particularly important the more *outré* the place is. I found Larry Niven's **The Smoke Ring** quite unreadable because the descriptions of the ring were so vague and woolly that I was simply unable to picture it, and that rendered much of the action of the story incomprehensible. With closer attention to the sense of place the story would have been a lot stronger.

A sense of time is just as important as (and closely related to) a sense of place. Despite my carping about the details of Connie Willis' story ***Jack***, she really has done a magnificent job of evoking the time in which the story is set. The past and the present are always a dangerous time for a story because we know so much about those eras. The future is a lot safer because we don't know anything about it yet. But wherever and whenever a story is set, it is important that the place and time feel lived in.

The drama of a story hangs most of all on the characters who act it out. If they don't work, neither will the story. If they are boring and dull, we simply won't be interested in them. Neither will we care about them if they never seem to come alive at all.

Characterisation is very difficult. What makes a character? The only clues are the physical descriptions (assuming the author describes them -- Heinlein, for example, virtually never describes any of his characters except in the sketchiest of outlines), the thoughts and feelings the character expresses and the words that are spoken. How well do these add up to a whole person? Indeed, how well do they add up to a whole alien being? Again SF is in a unique position in that the characters may not even be human. Nevertheless, they have to be believable. One of the admitted high spots of SF characterisation was the Martian Tweel in Stanley G. Weinbaum's short story ***A Martian Odyssey***. Tweel was utterly alien and utterly incomprehensible. There was no doubt that he (for want of a better pronoun) followed his own obscure instincts and motivations. There were good reasons for the bizarre actions the Earthmen observed. After all, Tweel was a sentient, thinking being. But we never do find out what those reasons are even though we can be absolutely certain that they do exist. With this story, Weinbaum made SF grow up as literature. There is no doubt that it is flawed in many areas, but the character of the Martian shines through. You don't have to be human to be memorable. After this story it was no longer possible to claim (as many did) that SF's special literary concerns absolved it from the necessity to follow the structures and guidelines that applied to more mundane literary forms.

Making a character believable and alive requires a sense of drama and a knowledge of the conventions. Nobody is ever going to believe in a villain who twirls his moustachios and proclaims "Har, har me proud beauty," as he ties the heroine to the interstellar train lines. I think what I'm trying to say here is that clichéd behaviour is anathema to good characterisation.

The well-drawn people from stories we love stay with us long after the details of the stories themselves have evaporated. I remember little or nothing about the book **Tom Sawyer**, but the

character of Tom is as alive in my head now as he was thirty or more years ago when I first read the book.

It is important to distinguish between character and caricature. Beginning writers often try to give their characters a "funny hat" to try and make them stand out from the crowd -- a stutter or a nervous tic, an affected way of lighting a cigarette or drinking a drink. These are merely labels, a "kick me" sign that hangs around the neck and that adds nothing to the person. What is always much more effective is to let the drama speak for itself, to let the actions and the motivations for those actions draw the lines of the person.

It applies just as much to a character like Kimball Kinnison as it does to one like Winston Smith. It is a measure of just how much better a writer George Orwell was than E. E. Smith that Winston is that much more believable. Kinnison was so much larger than life, so heroic, so clean living, so fearless and so flawless that he came across as a cartoon painted in primary colours. Had Doc Smith made him more inward looking, had his tragedies affected him more and his triumphs moulded him more, had his idealism been touched with selfishness (and his life with mundanity like mortgages and income tax) he might have come across as more believable.

Yet the self-same criticisms can be laid at the door of Edgar Rice Burroughs and still, to me, John Carter and Tarzan are eminently alive and believable even though I am perfectly well aware of the literary faults and technical shortcomings of the stories. So I contradict myself? Very well, as Walt Whitman said, I am large. I contain multitudes. Sue me.

When you get right down to it, this can become terribly subjective -- does it work as drama for you? Two actors can recite the same words and one may convince, another may not. Or maybe both will convince in different ways. Shakespeare put few if any stage directions or discussions of character or even physical appearance in his plays (about the only stage direction I know of is the famous "Exit, pursued by a bear" which for some odd reason always makes me laugh) and there have been many classic interpretations of the character of Hamlet (for instance), all of them completely different, all of them equally valid, and all of them using exactly the same words. Perhaps the value of a character resides not in the words the person speaks, but in the things surrounding that dialogue.

The plot of a story is central to how well it will be received. There are people who claim that SF has a special place in literature. Because it is a "literature of ideas" it has a special dispensation. Idea is all and plot, characterisation and setting (and sometimes language too) are subservient to the central idea or theme. As always there is some truth in these arguments but too rigorous an application of them leads to the sterile "wiring diagram" stories that **Astounding** (later **Analog**) was often accused of publishing. This sort of thing often turns a story into little more than a mildly sugar-coated lecture and I sometimes think that writers of these kinds of things would do better to write essays than to try and write fiction. I once claimed that I did not like James Hogan's books because "the words get in the way of the story" which is just a smart-arse way of saying the same thing. If all you want to do is explore the implications of a technological gimmick or theme then an essay is probably by far the best medium.

That is not to say that technological gimmicks don't have their place. Of course they do -- it is just a matter of finding the right place. Bob Shaw invented one of the few truly original science fictional concepts when he came up with the idea of slow glass -- glass that slowed down light to such an extent that it literally took years to crawl from one side of the pane to another so that when you looked into it you saw scenes that had taken place outside the glass years ago and probably far away. He thought of slow glass many years before he first wrote about it. He felt that he needed just the right plot to utilise the device properly and over the years he considered and discarded dozens of stories that didn't quite seem to fit. Eventually he came up with what seemed to him like the perfect plot and he wrote ***Light of Other Days*** which later formed part of his novel **Other Days, Other Eyes**. The emotional impact of the story was amazing and it

walked away with every prize in sight. If you want to be mercenary, he has probably earned more from that one story than from all his other stories put together. All because the plot was just right. With a different plot, with a flawed vehicle to carry it, people would probably have said "Oh yes, nice idea, next story" and the impact would have been much less. It would have sunk into the oblivion of a zillion other nice stories. But with the right plot to carry the gimmick, it was unbeatable.

Despite these caveats there is no doubt that a science fictional plot is a very special thing a little divorced from a "mundane" plot. **Galaxy** magazine used to have an advert on the last page which consisted of an extract from a cowboy story. The characters rode up on horses and their six guns roared, bullets flew and the bad guys bit the dust. Underneath this little extract was another where the characters rode up on flying saucers and their ray guns and blasters roared and the bad guys breathed vacuum. "You'll never see it in **Galaxy**" the advert said.

The point was, of course, that flying saucers, ray guns and blasters do not of themselves make a story science fiction. If it could equally well be a western, then it might as well be a western. The things that prop up the plot are not the whole plot, they are only window dressing and **Galaxy** claimed (untruthfully) that it would not publish such artificial science fiction stories.

James Blish used to refer to this sort of thing as the "call a rabbit a smeerp" phenomenon. They look like rabbits, they act like rabbits, but if you call them smeerps instead then does that make it SF? He thought not, and I agree with him.

So examine the plot details closely. Is it a smeerp or not?

Of course the basic plot is almost always going to be a smeerp. It is what you do with that smeerp after you first conceive it that counts. For example, few people would deny that Alfred Bester's magnificent **Tiger, Tiger** is one of the best SF novels ever written and yet the plot, as Bester has admitted many times, is a direct steal from Dumas' **The Count of Monte Cristo**. That could so easily make it a smeerp. However Bester was completely in control and knew exactly what he was doing -- none of the historical smeerp-like trapping of the source are carried forward and what Bester does with the implications and ramifications of the basic idea turn it into a true SF novel, about as far removed from a smeerp as it could possibly be.

How original is the plot? The individual plot elements are unlikely to be very original -- one space journey is much like another, one love affair like all the ones that have gone before, one destroyed universe much like the next. How potentially boring and dull. But nevertheless if these elements are put together with originality and insight they really will begin to function at a meaningful level. If you cook your stews using only tins from the stock cupboard you will end up with bland and boring food. But if you use fresh ingredients with a modicum of skill and imagination you will make a tasty dish fit for a banquet. The more a story is plotted using elements straight from the stock cupboard the less likely it is to enthral and compel, the more likely it is to be a yet another smeerp.

You should also consider whether or not the plot makes sense in its own terms. Does it contain contradictions or paradoxes that invalidate it? Damon Knight showed that when you straighten out the narrative line of A.E. van Vogt's **The World of Null A**, the events it describes simply could not have taken place because they abound in mutually incompatible events.

And then we have language -- the words themselves. Subsumed in this is the whole question of style. After all the words that are chosen to tell the tale define the style of the telling. A sentence by Jack Vance is quite different from a sentence by Ray Bradbury and a sentence by Terry Pratchett differs from both of them even if all three write a sentence on the same subject.

Everyone has their own pet hates and mine are the words "diapers", "panty-hose" and "math". Go ahead -- call me prejudiced. I think it is because I grew up with "nappies", "tights" and

"maths", and a sentence such as "I can't wait until she comes out of diapers and gets into panty-hose but I can't work out how long that might take because the math is too difficult." makes me grind my teeth. To me it is the literary equivalent of fingernails on a blackboard. Fortunately diapers and panty-hose occur infrequently in SF stories, but you wouldn't believe how many times I wish for maths!

James Blish had words to say on this subject as well. His particular fetish was what he called "said-bookism" -- the use of alternatives to the simple word "said". He complained about characters that swore, spat, hissed, roared, ejaculated, whispered, frowned, winked, cried, screamed etc. Some of these are actions rather than descriptions of tones of voice. Nevertheless they are often applied to the spoken word and if used too frequently they invoke images of characters with vast vocal ranges who never simply "say" anything but instead emote like Wagnerian messy-sopranos. Ever since Blish pointed it out to me I have shared his dislike of the phenomenon and these days I like my dialogue simple.

Bob Shaw once claim-ed to have read the sentence: "'Rat,' he hissed." in a story by (I think) Ken Bulmer. He enjoyed it because he wanted to know how anybody could hiss a word without a single sibilant in it. If anyone can give me demonstration, I would love to hear it. Prizes are on offer.

It is rare these days to come across books that use the language badly in a technical sense. Most publishing houses simply won't countenance illiterate prose, though the odd bit of bad grammar does slip though the copy editing net sometimes. More often the irritations come from poor word choices, synonyms that aren't quite synonymous enough, clumsy constructions and opaque language.

A sensitivity to style often comes from reading a piece of prose out loud. Don't be shy -- give it a go. See if the words flow and if they can be said together without slipping and sliding across one another. I once gave a talk which involved reading extracts from several novels and after it was over someone approached me and commented that he had never realised what a lousy stylist E. E. Smith was before.

If you read the prose of Jack Vance or Cordwainer Smith or any other of SF's great stylists, it sings and flows like magic. It is hard to say what makes a great stylist, what forms a good choice of words, but you always know it when you see it or hear it.

After examining a story under these headings, after taking it apart piece by piece, you have to put it together again and look at it as a whole. What was the writer trying to say and was it successful or not? What is the work about -- not the details of the plotline but the sub-text, the theme. **1984** is not about Winston Smith's love life and rebellion, it is about politics and power which is why we still read it a decade after the year in which it is supposedly set.

More often than not the piece isn't about anything at all. I don't condemn a story because it is nothing but a simple story -- far from it. Don't ever criticise the simple (simple? HAH!) art of story telling. But if there is a sub-text it needs emphasising and examining to see just how successful the writer was in stating it and whether or not conclusions are to be drawn from the theme.

The most important question of all is, of course, did you enjoy the story? No matter whether the answer is yes or no, you must produce reasons. After all, if you cannot say why it worked (or didn't work) how do you really know if you enjoyed it or not? Unthinking acceptance or rejection is just plain silly. (The mainstream writer David Lodge has written several novels peopled by university lecturers in English Literature. He pokes a lot of fun at academic pretensions and, on occasion, his characters point out that whether or not the reader *enjoys* a piece of prose has nothing whatsoever to do with criticising it!)

And when you have done all of these things, you may consider sitting down and writing a review

or a criticism. How do you put it all together? In an anthology of reviews and criticisms called **Picked Up Pieces**, John Updike gave some advice on this point.

Firstly, he said, try to understand what the writer was attempting to do and do not cast blame for not achieving what was not attempted. After all, both Peter Benchley and Herman Melville wrote a book about a man hunting a great white denizen of the deep, but it would be most unfair to condemn **Jaws** because it lacks the depth and subtlety of **Moby Dick**. Such things are simply not there, so don't go looking for them and don't complain that they are not to be found. Considered in its own right as a simple thriller, **Jaws** is a perfectly good book.

Updike goes on to suggest that the flavour of the book is best conveyed by quoting passages from it. I'm not sure I go along with this unless it is used to illustrate a point about one of the specific areas of analysis I discussed above. Quoting for the sake of quoting seems unnecessary to me -- but I'm not going to be dogmatic about it.

He also suggests that plot summaries be kept to a minimum, a point with which I whole-heartedly agree. Nothing is worse than reviewing a book by simply listing the plot elements and describing what happens. Apart from anything else it often spoils the book for a reader (if you know what is going to happen in advance, why bother reading in the first place?) It takes no skill to say "and then the hero..." and it adds little or nothing to a discussion of the book.

Finally, says Updike, if you judge the book is deficient in some aspect, cite a successful example, preferably from the author's own works, but failing that, from the work of some other writer if you feel it illuminates the problem.

To these I would add a last command -- keep it short. Samuel Delaney wrote an entire book of criticism about one short story by Thomas Disch. That is simply overkill.

I don't claim that the things I discuss in this article form the only approach to writing a critique, or even that the factors I have concentrated on are the only possible ones. However they are the ones that work for me, the ones I consider to be important because they directly affect my feelings about the story I am reading.

Now I would like to share with you a final point that only recently occurred to me. You should consider also the physical nature of the pages themselves. Modern books often seem to be printed very cheaply and sometimes the ink rubs off on the fingers, necessitating a trip to the bathroom to wash the hands after reading. Lately I have noticed that after washing my hands I have to wash the soap as well because it looks so grey and scummy covered in the grime it has removed from my hands. Modern publishing practices have added a whole new meaning to the phrase "dirty book".

So -- this is **Phlogiston** and the latest ***Bearded Triffid*** and to paraphrase A. A. Milne, now we are ten. Therefore will you all please picture suitable animals in your head and sing along with me:

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Well done, Alex.

The Lesser Spotted Science Fiction Writer Part 6: Michael Moorcock

Phlogiston Forty, 1994

Once I asked Michael Moorcock to autograph a book for me. This took him all of five seconds. Then he spent about a minute and a half sketching a picture of a giant chicken on the title page. He handed my book back to me. "It's a picture of a moor cock," he said, and he laughed hugely. You can always depend on Michael Moorcock for a sense of humour and a good joke.

Moorcock was born in 1939. I suspect he came into the world clutching a pencil and yelling loudly for paper. He seems to have been writing for much of his life. In 1950, when he was eleven years old and I was busy being born, he produced a handmade magazine called **Outlaws Own**. By 1957 he was doing it for a living and had become the editor of a magazine called **Tarzan Adventures**, a weekly journal published by Westworld Publications. Some of Moorcock's earliest fictions were published here; a series featuring the warrior lord Sojan the Swordsman. They are perfectly competent tales of heroic derring do, much given to sword fights and monsters, and set on a strange and remote planet. They read very much like Edgar Rice Burroughs' tales of John Carter of Mars, which is hardly surprising considering the magazine in which they were published.

By 1960, Moorcock had branched out and was writing for the Fleetway Library. Fleetway published small comic books about cowboys, detectives, war -- that sort of thing. They cost one shilling, and I used to read them quite a lot as a youngster when I was ill. My mother would go down to the local newsagent as I lay on my bed of pain covered with chickenpox spots or whatever, and she would buy three or four Fleetway comic books. I always got better very quickly.

Moorcock would write an outline for Fleetway which he would offer to an editor. If it was accepted he would write the script itself, the frames, the continuity boxes and the speech balloons, together with a description of what should be in the picture in the frame. He once sold a series of sports stories by convincing the editor that he knew everything there was to be known about all the various sports. One story involved ‘Skid Solo', a racing driver and the editor got furious when Moorcock had all the cars racing around Brands Hatch the wrong way.

The Fleetway stories poured out. ***Zip Nolan of the Highway Patrol***, ***Olac the Gladiator***, ***Kit Carson***, ***Dick Daring***. Sometimes alone, often in collaboration with Barrington Bailey, he wrote and he wrote. These stories taught him a lot about the realities of commercial fiction, how to structure a story, how to write to a deadline. The experience stood him in good stead when he branched out into longer works, writing for the **Sexton Blake Library**.

Moorcock left Fleetway after a terrible row which culminated in him throwing a typewriter out of the window. This was not untypical of this point in his life.

> I was writing floods of hackwork for Fleetway and was getting sometimes £70 or £80 a week which was going on drink, mainly, and, as I remember, involved rather a lot of broken glass of one description or another. I do remember with great pride, my main achievement of the winter of 1960 or 1961, which was to smash entirely an unbreakable plate-glass door in a well known restaurant near Piccadilly. And the management apologised...
>
> ***The Secret Life of Elric of Melniboné***
> in **Sojan**, Savoy Books 1977.

He bummed around Europe for a while playing guitar, but found it hard to make a living and was sent home starving by the British Embassy in France. He wrote pamphlets for the Liberal party and he published some rather badly written but enormously popular stories in **Science Fantasy**, one of two magazines edited by John Carnell. The other magazine was called **New Worlds**.

Moorcock was invited by Carnell to write a guest editorial for **New Worlds** and he offended a lot of people by a call for a revolution in science fiction. He deplored the lack of:

> ...passion, subtlety, irony, original characterisation, original and good style, a sense of involvement in human affairs, colour, density, depth, and, on the whole, real feeling from the writer.
>
> Guest Editorial, **New Worlds** No. 129 April 1963.

Reading these words today, more than thirty years after they were written, is a very depressing experience. Nothing seems to have changed very much in the meantime.

Moorcock's sentiments were spot on, but given that his own publication record at that time showed only a few heroic fantasy stories and one or two rather immature "literary" works (together with vast amounts of juvenilia for organisations like Fleetway) he was hardly leading from strength. All his published writings seemed to suffer from the very defects he accused others of. Perhaps all that could be said in his favour was that at least he recognised this.

Consequently it came as somewhat of a shock to many people when, about a year later, he took over as editor of **New Worlds** and proceeded to re-shape it in the image of his manifesto.

New Worlds became the epitome of the *avant garde* and in retrospect far too many of its

writers took themselves far too seriously. But even in the midst of all the preaching of serious literary theory, Moorcock's sense of fun never let him down. For much of the life of the magazine, the artist Eduardo Paolozzi appeared on the masthead as Aeronautics Adviser.

The magazine was very variable in the quality of the fiction it produced. Mainly this was because it was put together as a sort of editorial collective. Moorcock and his friends would hammer out compromises, each putting in stories that the others liked but that they hated, simply in order to be allowed to include stories that they themselves liked!

However enough good material was published for the magazine to have a firm following and for a time it even had an Arts Council grant. It gained a brief notoriety when it published Norman Spinrad's **Bug Jack Barron** which contained the word "fuck" (unheard of in popular fiction). Questions were asked in Parliament and the major book chains in England refused to sell the magazine any more. This was the kiss of death and eventually it perished from lack of sales. The final issue was a special "good taste" edition which had a very Victorian feel to it.

It was in **New Worlds** that Jerry Cornelius was born. (His initials are not a coincidence). He was the archetype of the sixties era and so successful was he that many of the **New Worlds** writers wrote stories in which Jerry figured largely. (Most of these were collected in **The Nature of the Catastrophe** Hutchinson, 1971). But he was always Moorcock's character and it was with the Jerry Cornelius stories that Moorcock found his own voice as a writer, outgrew the cheap fantasies of his youthful period and emerged as a mature and skilful writer. (One of the later Cornelius novels, **The Condition of Musak**, won the Guardian Fiction prize).

The stories are ironic and compressed, with large amounts of information concentrated in a small space. The imagery makes contemporary references drawn from pop music, art, astronomy, physics, and politics. They are a picture of an era and if nowadays some of them seem a little dated, that is no bad thing in itself because they remain true to the times that they portray. The stories are peopled by grotesques, caricatures of the types used so successfully a generation before by Charles Dickens (a writer with whom Moorcock has much in common and whom he admires a lot. In an interview with Colin Greenland, he discusses Dickens' **Bleak House** and praises it highly).

The most successful of Moorcock's grotesques is Jerry's horrible mum.

> She sighed and lowered herself into the discoloured armchair. "Oooch! Them fucking springs. Damp as Brighton Beach too." The complaints were uttered in a tone of comfortable approval. She had been too long out of her natural environment. She reached up for the gin and began to unscrew the cap. Frank handed her a dirty glass from the sink.
>
> . . .
>
> She peered at the cracked mantelpiece on the far side of the room, locating the faded pictures of the fathers of her children. There was Frank's father in his GI uniform. There was Cathy's father in his best suit. There was the father of the dead twins, of the three abortions -- the one who had married her. Only Jerry's father was missing. She didn't remember him for all she'd borrowed his name. Through all her marriages she'd always been known as Mrs Cornelius. She'd only been sixteen, hadn't she? Or even younger? Or was that something else? Was he the Jewish feller?
>
> Soon she was dreaming her nice dream as opposed to her nasty dream. She was kneeling on a big white woolly carpet. She was completely naked and there was blood dripping from her mangled nipples as she was buggered by a huge, black, shapeless animal. In her sleep, her hands fell to her lap and she dug at herself with

> her nails and stirred and snorted, waking herself up. She smiled and drank down the rest of the gin and was soon fast asleep again.
>
> **The English Assassin**, Quartet. 1973.

My own favourite character from the Cornelius books is the disgustingly entertaining Bishop Beesley who is grossly fat and appears to live on Mars bars and similar confectionery. At the Gala Ball which follows the Peace Talks, the Bishop meets an ex-nun. Not unnaturally, they both take off their clothes, cover themselves with chocolate and prance around doing an obscene version of the cake walk. And then:

> In the Yellow Room Bishop Beesley was struggling to get his surplice on over the hardening chocolate, leaving the half-eaten ex-nun on the floor where she lay. He adjusted his mitre, picked up his crook, stopped for one last lick and then hurried out.
>
> **The English Assassin**, Quartet. 1973.

Mrs Cornelius and Colonel Pyat (another character from the Cornelius books) both feature largely in a quartet of novels which will probably be Moorcock's magnum opus. In these novels (**Byzantium Endures**, **The Laughter of Carthage**, **Jerusalem Commands** and the as yet unpublished **The Vengeance of Rome**) he attempts to give us nothing less than the history of (and an explanation of) the twentieth century. It is a grandly am-bitious under taking haunted by the shadow of Hitler's holocaust. They are painful books and Moorcock excels himself as an artist by making a hero (or at least a leading character) of Pyat, a horrible, whining, evil and misguided man who espouses all the causes that darkened the first half of this century. To write of such a man without alienating your audience shows skills of high order.

One of Moorcock's more commercially successful serious stories from the **New World**'s era was **Behold the Man**. Originally a novella published in the magazine, it was later expanded into a novel. The hero, Karl Glogaur, a disaffected Jew, is given the opportunity to test a time machine. He travels back to the year 28 AD to check out the crucifixion. The machine crashes and Glogaur is stranded. He is taken in by the Essenes and later journeys in search of Christ (our old friend JC again). He finds Mary and Joséph, but their son Jesus is a congenital imbecile dribbling in a corner. Glogaur stays at the synagogue for a while and, by various diverse means, takes over the role of the historical Jesus and is eventually crucified.

The novella won a Nebula award, and is generally well received (though somewhat controversial with committed Christians). However Moorcock himself is rather disparaging of it:

> There's no fucking irony in **Behold the Man**. That's why I don't like it. It's too morbid. There isn't a bloody joke in the whole damn thing. My ex-mother-in-law used that as her criterion for a book, and I think she was quite right: that's a good criterion.
>
> **Michael Moorcock: Death is No Obstacle** by Colin Greenland, Savoy Books 1992.
> (The book is the transcript of an interview.)

The story exemplified many things the **New World**'s writers believed in. In an earlier era and written by another writer, there would have been far too much made of the time machine. It would have been a central plot element, the "science" to justify the "fiction". However in Moorcock's hands it becomes almost unimportant, simply a McGuffin to get the hero from A. to B. (There is some rather obvious symbolism which makes it clear that it is also a surrogate womb and when Glogaur arrives in the past he is being re-born). The novel's real concerns are elsewhere and it is much stronger as a result of the change in the traditional emphasis.

Moorcock seems to like unusual time machines -- he has used a bicycle, a speedboat, mysterious tunnels, a hangman's noose, and many other outré devices as time machines. They

all seem to work quite nicely thank you.

Behold the Man was followed by a sequel called **Breakfast in the Ruin** which is an examination of moral themes exemplified by a series of stories involving Karl Glogaur in agonising decisions in many different troubled eras. He starts out an innocent and ends up completely corrupt. Interspersed with these episodes are vignettes called ***What Would You Do*** which propose insoluble life and death problems to the reader. The book is Moorcock's most depressing and the introduction reads:

> Michael Moorcock died of lung cancer, aged 31, in Birmingham last year. The where-abouts of Karl Glogaur are presently unknown.
>
> **Breakfast in the Ruins**, NEL 1972

It is signed "James Colvin" (one of Moorcock's pseudonyms from the **New World**'s days).

The book is a prototype for the Pyat novels, a guided tour of the bad times of the world from the Paris commune through Auschwitz, Kenya and the Mau Mau, Vietnam, and on into the future. In it Moorcock confronted his own mortality through Glogaur. For once he wasn't playing with it as he had in the Cornelius books and the Elric fantasies. For once it was real.

One of the many games that Moorcock plays is to re-use characters and situations in many of his novels. Characters are always popping up in other books (sometimes after they have died in an earlier work) without explanation. Death is no obstacle, as Moorcock himself has remarked, and if the character fits, the character will be used. Moorcock fans delight in following these twists and turns. All the Jerry Cornelius novels have a party about half way through and the guest lists of these parties are enormously funny to the well-read Moorcock aficionado. The guests are characters from his own (and other people's) books, other SF writers, personal friends, and characters from books he hasn't written yet.

Moorcock's fascination with his characters is demonstrated to great comedic effect in **The Chinese Agent**. Arthur Hodgkiss (alias Jewellery Jules, master gem thief) is all set to steal the crown jewels. However at the tower he is mistaken for the Chinese agent of the title and who is there to pick up the secret plans of Operation Glass. British Intelligence put their top man on to the job -- suave, ladykilling Jerry Cornell (yes, him again) and the book turns into total farce. It is the only Moorcock novel ever to have made me laugh out loud. It feels somewhat dated now -- very sixties -- but still it overflows with comic invention and wit and has in it a character even more outrageous and revolting than Jerry Cornelius' mum -- Jerry Cornell's Uncle Edmond:

> [Uncle Edmond] led him down a damp, evil-smelling passage and into his room. It was full of newspaper-wrapped parcels that gave off a horrible stench. Nobody knew what Uncle Edmond kept in the parcels. Nobody ever tried to find out.
>
> Jerry reeled, wanting to lean against something, but was repelled by everything that offered itself as a surface.
>
> Uncle Edmond sat down in a battered rocking chair beside his bed. The bed seemed to shift slightly as if it already had an occupant. Uncle Edmond stared at the bed and then picked up an old walking stick. He hit the bed, and it was still. "Little buggers," he said ...
>
> The lice moved uncomfortably as the creaking bed shook to Uncle Edmond's cough. They were tired and hungry lice. They had come with the mattress which Uncle Edmond had found propped beside someone's dustbin. They had expected nothing but the fires of the public incinerator, and then had come this last minute rescue. They had prepared to feast the first time Uncle Edmond had laid himself down on his

> new acquisition. They had been disappointed. Even the lice could not bear to get close to Uncle Edmond. They huddled at the far end of the bed even now. At least, they thought, the public incinerator would have been quick.

The Chinese Agent, Mayflower 1979

In his back yard, Uncle Edmond has a Pile. It gurgles and glops and is slimy and smelly and sometimes he feeds it things...

Perhaps Moorcock's most famous and enduring character is Elric of Melniboné. As a young man, Moorcock absorbed all the classic fantasies by Burroughs, Howard, Clark Ashton Smith and similar writers. Partly as a reaction against their stereo-types he tried to write a heroic fantasy that broke the rules, where the hero was not strong and fearless. Elric is a physically weak man. Without the dark strength given him by his sword Stormbringer (it eats souls and passes on their vigour) he would soon die. Furthermore he makes errors, his friends and relatives die on his quests (sometimes by his own hand) and he has a tortured conscience. All this makes him more believable, more human (for want of a better word -- Elric is not a human being). The whole added up to a fascinatingly complex hero and over the years the books and the stories proliferated. Indeed, Moorcock thought so much of his hero that he revised and re-wrote many of the stories in order to remove contradictions and smooth out the narrative sequence. (Many of the Elric stories have been published in many different versions -- a bibliographer's nightmare).

Moorcock returned to Elric time after time. Some of his earliest fantasy stories feature the Melnibonéan and so do some of his latest and there is no doubt that with this haunted albino, Moorcock hit a nerve.

> ...Elric was ***me*** (the me of 1960-1, anyway), and the mingled qualities of betrayer and betrayed, the bewilderment about life in general, the search for some solution to it all, the expression of this bewilderment in terms of violence, cynicism and the need for revenge were all characteristics of mine... [**The Dreaming City**] was packed with personal symbols (as are all the stories bar a couple)... Elric, for me, symbolised the ambivalence of mankind in general with its love-hates, its mean-generosity, its confident-bewilderment act. Elric is a thief who believes himself robbed, a lover who hates love. In short he cannot be sure of the truth of anything, not even of his own emotions or ambitions.

The Secret Life of Elric of Melniboné
in **Sojan**, Savoy Books 1977)

There are resonances between the Elric fantasies and the Cornelius novels. Indeed, the plot of part of the first of the Jerry Cornelius novels (**The Final Programme**) is also the plot of an Elric novelette called ***The Dreaming City*** (the first story in **The Stealer of Souls**) and this is quite deliberate. Partly it shows the meaningless nature of plot incidents in themselves and partly it demonstrates the meaningful relationship between Elric and Jerry as aspects of the eternal champion. But mainly it is just for fun (after all Elric is a guest at one of the big parties that infest the Cornelius novels and you wouldn't want to upset a guest would you?)

For sheer sustained wit and inventiveness, though, nothing surpasses the stories set at the End of Time. They comprise three connected novels (**An Alien Heat**, **The Hollow Lands** and **The End of All Songs**), a stand-alone novel (**A Messiah at the End of Time**, sometimes published as **The Transformation of Miss Mavis Ming**) and a collection of novellas called **Legends from the End of Time** An Elric story (***Elric at the End of Time***) is also set in this era.

The trilogy details the adventures of one Jherek Carnelian (yes, it's him again) from the remote future. He falls in love with Amelia Underwood, a time-traveller from 1896 who is briefly

stranded at the End of Time. The story moves backwards and forwards between the End of Time and Victorian England. H.G. Wells appears (Jherek borrows his time machine) as do other famous real and surreal people.

The novels combine the comedy of manners with science fiction melodrama and much of the wit comes from this odd juxtaposition. Exaggerated images and changeable landscapes contrast with the proper love interest between Amelia Underwood and Jherek. He is a child (the decadent society at the End of Time seems never to have grown up) and he has a child's delight in novelty. Like a child he is easily bored and his enthusiasms wane. Amelia is the soul of rectitude, very conscious of her obligations and duty; concepts that are all but meaningless to Jherek. The misunderstandings these contrasts generate are central to the plot. Moorcock takes a huge delight in exploring them and the pace never flags.

Graham Greene considered his books to be made up of "novels" and "entertainments" and made a sharp and clear distinction between them (though he made no judgement as to the worth of either). Some of the same division can be seen in Michael Moorcock's work. If the Pyat novels are Moorcock's masterpiece novels, the End of Time stories are his masterpiece entertainments (which, of course, does not detract from their worth as novels).

Perhaps Moorcock's silliest book was a novel he never actually wrote. **The Time of the Hawklords** was published as by Michael Moorcock and Michael Butterworth. Moorcock supplied only the general idea and Butterworth wrote the book. As I recall (it is many years since I read it, and I have no wish to re-read it), someone has planted a device that sings Julie Andrews songs in the centre of the earth. Because the songs are beaming out all the time, the Earth's population is slowly going mad. Only the rock music of Hawkwind can counteract the deadly effect of the Julie Andrews songs, and guns are built with miniature Hawkwind tapes in them. Everybody carries these guns and whenever they suspect someone is being overcome by Julie Andrews, they draw their gun and blast the person with heavy metal rock. Do you wonder I don't want to read it again? It was originally announced as the first of a trilogy. A second book was published (**Queen of Deliria** by Michael Butterworth) but no third novel ever appeared, and I am not surprised.

What characterises Michael Moorcock? There is no easy answer because he is no easy writer. Despite his often expressed disdain for the medium, he continues to write SF and Fantasy. And yet his major works are moving further and further away from the genre. The Pyat novels and singletons such as **Mother London** are only peripherally connected with the field. (Despite this they all contain elements of fantasy; though perhaps it might better be called ‘magic realism' in the Gabriel García Márquez mould). He is a commercial writer (the early years of fast, voluminous production taught him his craft) and he makes a good living at it. But there is more to him than this. He is very aware of the art of his craft (if I may be permitted such an inelegant phrase) and it is important to him, as witnessed by his constant experimentation with form and content, with text and subtext. Every new book is a new experience with something new to say:

> And so each venture is a new beginning,
> A raid on the inarticulate ...
>
> T. S. Eliot ***Four Quartets***

To me this is the major attraction of Michael Moorcock -- he is a versatile writer and every new book is a new exploration. He never stands still.

In the end, though, you can always depend on Michael Moorcock for a sense of humour and a good joke. He once edited a collection of stories by authors such as Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling etc. It was called, if memory serves, **Before Armageddon**. Moorcock once donated a copy of this book to an auction at a British SF convention. It was quite a rare book. It

was autographed -- by Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling...

Funny Business

Phlogiston Forty-One, 1994

It doesn't pay to analyze a joke too much. There is a terrible risk that all the humour will disappear. It probably isn't all that wise to try and describe a joke either. Second hand humour is never funny. But let's try anyway.

If you look closely at the SF of the so-called golden age and later, you find a surprising amount of humour and light-heartedness. Perhaps the first sign that a genre is growing up is its ability to laugh at itself. Far too much of the Ur-science fiction from the 1920s and thirties is ponderously serious and dull. The authors who came after were more laid back, willing to indulge in a joke, sometimes for satirical or allegorical purposes, but more often simply because it was fun.

Science fiction is a genre that lends itself well to humour. After all, so many of the stories are so outrageous and the gadgetry so surrealistic that it always borders on the absurd anyway. It doesn't take much of a shove to cross the barrier. (Many of the Goon Shows were arguably SF).

So, equipped with the spaceships and ray guns of an earlier generation we now have writers such as Bob Shaw who have no compunction in describing a spaceship with a matter transmitter in the rear and a matter receiver in the front and which travels the universe by being repeatedly transmitted through its own length. Or Harry Harrison with his coal powered robots and even (in **A Transatlantic Tunnel, Hurrah**) a coal powered aeroplane!

This latter is also a perfect demonstration of the total lack of a sense of humour that many SF fans exhibit. After its first magazine publication, the magazine received a letter (**Analog** Nov 1972) discussing the story in general and the coal-powered aeroplane in particular. The tone of the letter was such that it was perfectly obvious the gentleman in question had not realised that the story was an enormous leg-pull. It burbled off into arcane engineering points that Harrison had "got wrong", but eventually concluded that yes, perhaps the aeroplane was feasible after all. I seem to recall a rather spluttering reply from Harry Harrison which said, in words of one syllable, "It was a joke, you cretin!" (all right -- cretin has two syllables, but I'm paraphrasing).

Perhaps the golden age writer who first and best realised the essential absurdity of many science fictional situations was Fredric Brown. The short story ***Placet is a Crazy Place*** takes place on a planet which meets itself coming back in its orbit, causes hallucinations and is inhabited by widgie birds which are made of matter so dense that the planet itself appears to them as thin as air appears to us. They have a habit of flying through the foundations of buildings, thereby making the buildings unstable. In his novels **What Mad Universe** and **Martians Go Home** (in my opinion his best novel) he has enormous fun with SF clichés. The first describes an alternate world in which the SF clichés are actually true history. The second is, quite literally, about little green men.

A writer who seems to have fallen into obscurity these days is Henry Kuttner. He died young and his reputation has been eclipsed by the writers who came after him. But both on his own and in collaboration with his wife C. L. Moore he produced some of the funniest stories I have ever read. Some have been collected -- though long out of print **Robots Have No Tails** occasionally surfaces in second hand bookshops. Make it your business to seek it out. It contains all the stories about Galloway Gallagher, a man whose subconscious is a brilliant scientist. When he is sober he is just an ordinary person, but when roaring drunk his subconscious takes over and makes the most incredible inventions. The stories concern the efforts of a hungover and very repentant Gallagher trying to figure out just what he's built this time. Why, for example, could he possibly have built a robot with a transparent body? And

having done that, why did he make it so vain that all it wants to do is stand in front of a mirror watching its cogs go round? To find the answer to that conundrum, read ***The Proud Robot***.

As far as I know Knutter's other connected stories have never been collected into a single book. The stories about the Hogbens, a very unusual family of hillbillies, are unfailingly funny and virtually impossible to find. I have one or two in a collection published by Mayflower in 1965 (**The Best of Kuttner --** Volumes One and Two).

In ***See you Later***, the Hogbens fall foul of another hillbilly family known as the Tarbells. The eight Tarbell boys:

...all come over in a bunch with their shooting irons and busted their way in. We didn't want no trouble.

> Uncle Lem -- who's Uncle Les's twin except they was born quite a spell apart -- he was asleep for the winter off in a holler tree somewheres, so he was out of it. But the baby, bless his heart, is gitting kind of awkward to shift around, being as how he's four hunnerd years old and big for his age -- 'bout three hunnerd pounds I guess... then there was Grandpaw in the attic and I'd got sort of fond of the little Perfesser feller we keep in a bottle...

Saunk Hogben, the narrator of the story, finally solves the feud by splitting himself into two billion, two hundred and fifty million, nine hundred and fifty nine thousand nine hundred and nineteen parts, travelling forwards in time, standing in front of every person in the world, handing each of those people a stick of firewood and then spitting in their faces.

It says a lot for Kuttner's sense of plot that he managed to make you believe that this preposterous nonsense was the only possible solution to the problems raised in the story!

Kuttner had a thing about blue eyes. He seemed to find them irresistibly funny. One of his most famous opening lines, from a short novel published under the pseudonym of Lewis Padgett and called **The Far Reality** (also published as **The Fairy Chessmen**) is:

> The doorknob opened a blue eye and looked at him.

That one, along with L. Sprague de Camp's famous "Yngvi is a louse!" have entered the folklore.

Until it was killed by the paper shortage during the second world war, the magazine **Unknown** published an amazing number of satisfyingly funny stories. It was edited by John W. Campbell, a man not known for his sense of humour, and yet his lightness of touch on this magazine proved, if proof were needed, that he really was an editor par excellence. It was in this magazine that L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt chronicled the misadventures of Harold Shea, the incomplete enchanter. Even writers whose major works tended towards the serious produced light-hearted pieces that fitted perfectly into the mood of the magazine. Lester Del Rey's stories about the elf Ellowan Coppersmith appeared here as did H. L. Gold's ***Trouble with Water***.

Campbell's clown prince, though, was Eric Frank Russell, a British writer who, in the 1940s and 1950s, published story after story in **Astounding**. He was very good at lampooning the bureaucratic mind and he poked fun at the military. His masterpieces are the fix-up novel **The Great Explosion** and the novels **Wasp** and **Next of Kin** (sometimes published under the title

The Space Willies -- it is one of the funniest novels I've ever read, and if I hadn't quoted from it extensively in another article, I'd quote from it again here). In 1955 Russell won a Hugo for his short story ***Allamagoosa***, an anti-bureaucratic satire which packs a tremendous punch

An author whose name is not often associated with comedy is Philip K. Dick. This is a shame, because many of his stories demonstrate a wonderful sense of the outrageous and bizarre and contain moments of genuine comedic genius. I defy anyone to read **Galactic Pot Healer** without cracking up. Joe Fernwright, an unemployed ceramics technician (the "pot healer" of the title) is employed by an alien being called the Glimmung to help repair the pots in a cathedral which is to be raised from the bottom of the ocean on a distant planet. Joe receives the job offer from the Glimmung as a message in a bottle which he finds floating in his toilet bowl one day. The Glimmung seems fond of this means of communication. Later in the novel he is engaged in mortal combat with his deadly foe the Black Glimmung at the bottom of the ocean. Joe and Willis (a robot whose ambition is to be a freelance writer) row out to the scene of the fight.

> ...A large bottle. And in the bottle a note.
>
> "Another message from Glimmung," Joe said acidly as he unscrewed the lid of the bottle and dumped the note out; it fluttered on to the bottom of the boat and he retrieved it carefully. Holding it in the light of the torch he read it.
>
> Watch this place for hourly progress reports. Cordially, Glimmung.

Later, as the battle progresses, another note arrives.

> Good news! I have routed the opposition and am presently recovering.
>
> In disbelief he read the words. Is it a gag? he wondered. Fake bravado at a time like this? ...A second bottle, smaller than the previous two, floated to the surface. He sequestered it, unscrewed the lid, and read the brief note within.
>
> The previous communique is not a forgery. I am in good health, and hope you are the same. G.

Even Dick's serious novels are not without their moments of mirth. **A Scanner Darkly** is probably his best book, a monumental and serious work about the problems of drug addiction. But even in its darkest scenes we find moments such as the section where Charles Freck attempts to commit suicide by drinking a bottle of wine heavily laced with a drug overdose. Unfortunately he has been swindled by his dealer and instead of dying he suffers an hallucination wherein a fearsome creature from between dimensions appears at the foot of his bed clutching an enormous scroll.

> "You are going to read me my sins," Charles Freck said.
>
> The creature nodded and unsealed the scroll.
>
> Freck said, lying helpless on his bed, "And it's going to take a hundred thousand hours."

> Fixing its many compound eyes on him, the creature from between dimensions said, "We are no longer in the mundane universe. Lower plane categories of material existence such as ‘space' and ‘time' no longer apply to you. You have been elevated to the transcendent realm. Your sins will be read to you ceaselessly, in shifts, throughout eternity. The list will never end."
>
> A thousand years later... they had gotten up to the third grade when he was six years old. Ten thousand years later they had reached the sixth grade. The year he had discovered masturbation.
>
> He shut his eyes, but he could still see the multi-eyed, eight foot high being with its endless scroll reading on and on.
>
> "And next -- ", it was saying.
>
> Charles Freck thought, At least I got a good wine.

There are many characteristics of humour. In my opinion the most successful humorous books derive their success from the innate situation they describe. Perhaps the secret is that the characters do not know that things are funny. Charles Freck really was trying to commit suicide and for him the creature from between dimensions was a terrible and embarrassing consequence of that attempt. Joe Fernwright was unemployed and the job offer from Glimmung was his last hope. We can see the humour in the grittily surrealistic scenes that Philip K. Dick describes for us, but we are standing outside. That different perspective makes a lot of difference.

But humour manifests itself in many ways. Where would science fiction be without the pun?

Probably the worst puns (or best, depending on your point of view), appeared in a series of vignettes that were intermittently published in **Fantasy and Science Fiction**. They were known as Feghoots, because they described the adventures of one Ferdinand Feghoot. They invariably ended with a punch line that was a most excruciating pun. They were perpetrated by the anagrammatical Grendel Briarton (real name Reginald Bretnor). They were collected together in a book called **The Compleat Feghoot** which was published by Mirage Press in 1980. I challenge anybody to read more than three consecutive Feghoots without giving up in pain. Over the years, once Briarton had showed the way, many other writers contributed Feghoots to the magazine. But none were ever as good as the originals.

Under his own name, Bretnor was responsible for an amusing little tale called ***The Gnurrs Come From the Voodvork Out***. The United States is at war with Bobovia, but Papa Schimmelhorn has the answer. He has invented a secret weapon -- a musical pipe. When it is played, gnurrs come from the voodvork out and eat everybody's trousers. All we have to do is arrange to have the pipe played in Bobovia and gnurrs will from the voodvork come out and eat all the Bobovian trousers. Being trouserless, the enemy will also be demoralised and will immediately surrender. What army can fight without trousers?

The pun can be overdone and sometimes far too much reliance is invested in it. I enjoy a good pun as much as the next triffid, but they can get a little wearing. Even the clever ones (and few are clever) grow tiresome. They even leap out at you from the titles. Andrew Harmon has published **The Sorcerer's Appendix**, **The Frogs of War** and **The Tome Tunnel** and early in 1995 will inflict **101 Damnations** on his long-suffering public.

Probably the worst contemporary punster is Piers Anthony. The Xanth novels, of which there are far too many, seem these days to have no other reason for existing. Fans make up excruciating word plays and send them to Piers Anthony and if he likes them he will include them and mention the contributor in his Author's Afterword.

In a way this is a shame. The first three Xanth novels are surprisingly good. The ideas were fresh and funny and worked very well indeed. But they quickly became tired and I gave up round about number eleven. They are still appearing with great regularity and selling well, so they must be popular but for the life of me I can't think why.

Anthony's comedic tour de force is without doubt **Prostho Plus** -- a fix-up novel combining a series of novelettes about the adventures of an intergalactic dentist (of all things). I have a phobia about teeth and dentists and I cannot read the book without simultaneously squirming and giggling. Brilliantly funny and not recommended reading just before having your wisdom teeth out. You wouldn't believe the many different kinds of alien teeth and dental problems that Anthony's fertile mind invents.

Anthony is an exasperating writer who has produced a body of very fine work. It is just rather hard to find sometimes. A good example of this is his new novel **Isle of Women**. Don't let the punny title fool you into thinking this is another Xanth novel or a spin off -- it isn't. It is not a funny novel at all. It is a thoughtful and serious work, probably the first of a series (sigh) and Anthony has taken for his canvas nothing less than the entire history and prehistory of humanity. That is a large subject, of course. That he succeeds at all is astonishing. That he succeeds as well as he has is nothing short of miraculous. A first class novel. But I digress

One of the things that makes humour so difficult to write is that it does not translate easily across cultures. Even within the English-speaking world we find that something an American finds side-splittingly funny will often leave an English person completely unmoved. And *vice versa* of course. Once you start to translate from a foreign language and culture there is a danger of losing both the baby and the bathwater.

This seems to be particularly true of eastern european languages (and perhaps that says something quite profound about the enormous differences between the eastern european and western european cultures). It is well known, for example, that Franz Kafka used to read extracts from his works to his friends and would often cry with laughter as he read. Yet his novels in an English translation are unspeakably grim and frightening. In science fictional terms, I suspect Stanislaw Lem is a similar case. His wit and wisdom are highly praised by those who have read him in his native Polish. The flavour of this comes across a little in his translated short stories (particularly in **The Cyberiad**, and **Tales of Pirx the Pilot**) and yet his novels are almost invariably clumsy and cumbersome.

Since we see this effect so clearly in English translations of foreign works, I often wonder how successfully humour translates from English into a foreign language. I am thinking here particularly of Robert Rankin, an SF writer of whom I am inordinately fond and whose books are among the funniest I have ever read. And yet I fail to see how anybody who didn't grow up in England in the 1950s could possibly understand his obsession, in novel after novel, with brussels sprouts and split windscreen Morris Minors. Even English speaking people from countries other than England would probably find that this left them cold. How much more so someone coming across them in (say) German. Do such things get translated literally? I strongly suspect not. But it would take a translator of genius to find the cultural icon that corresponded with these things in a different society. Indeed, they may not even exist.

Mind you, the British are notorious world wide for having a sense of humour that is comprehensible only to themselves. Perhaps a foreign reader would approach sprouts and Morris Minors in that frame of mind. But what would they make of "taking tea with the vicar", Rankin's euphemism for something sexually perverse which he never actually describes. (On

occasion his characters have also been known to enquire of each other as to where the gerbils are kept).

One writer who has succeeded in crossing the humour culture barrier is Harry Harrison. He is an American writer with a large and fanatical following in all the English speaking countries (and for all I know the non-English speaking ones as well). His stories of the Stainless Steel Rat (and to a certain extent Bill, the Galactic Hero) though they have satirical overtones, are more often than not simply an excuse for a jolly romp. He claims that the first Stainless Steel Rat story came about when he was practising writing "teasers" -- opening sentences that are supposed to grab an editor's attention and force him to want to continue reading. One day Harrison wrote a teaser that was so intriguing he decided that he really had to write the story that went with it, just to find out what happened. Thus was born Slippery Jim diGriz, the Stainless Steel Rat himself. Here is the teaser:

> When the office door opened suddenly I knew the game was up. It had been a money maker -- but it was all over. As the cop walked in I sat back in the chair and put on a happy grin. He had the same sombre expression and heavy foot that they all have -- and the same lack of humour. I almost knew to the word what he was going to say before he uttered a syllable.
>
> "James Bolivar DiGriz I arrest you on the charge -- "
>
> I was waiting for the word charge, I thought it made a nice touch that way. As he said it I pressed the button that set off the charge of black powder in the ceiling, the crossbeam buckled and the three-ton safe dropped through right on the cop's head. He squashed very nicely, thank you. The cloud of plaster dust settled and all I could see of him was one hand, slightly crumpled. It twitched a bit and the index finger pointed at me accusingly. His voice was a little muffled by the safe and sounded a bit annoyed. In fact he repeated himself a bit.
>
> "...On the charge of illegal entry, theft, forgery -- "
>
> He ran on like that for quite a while, it was an impressive list but I had heard it all before. I didn't let it interfere with my stuffing all the money from the desk drawers into my suitcase. The list ended with a new charge and I would swear on a stack of thousand credit notes that high that there was a hurt tone in his voice.
>
> "In addition, the charge of assaulting a police robot will be added to your record..."

The origins of his other major comic character Bill, the Galactic Hero are more complex. The book that was eventually published under that title was a satire poking some quite sharp barbs at Robert Heinlein's novel **Starship Troopers** (with a few digs at Asimov's **Foundation** stories thrown in for good measure).

Mingled in with the satire are some appallingly bad jokes (I love them). Bill has saved money by

putting some of his wages aside. He kept his savings in a rubber toy cat. And bit by bit the kitty grew.

The original novel has recently been followed by several sequels, written in collaboration with a number of different authors. They are much less successful and seem quite clumsy by comparison.

In recent years the bookshelves have begun to groan under the strain of supporting vast numbers of enormous tomes with ethereal anorexics and mythical beasts on the covers. We are living in the age of the fantasy novel. And sometimes we poke fun.

The first of the modern fantasy satires was probably the Harvard Lampoon's **Bored of the Rings**, an enormously funny pastiche of the Tolkien classic (their **Doon -- the Dessert Planet** should not be missed either). There are, however, two writers of humorous fantasy who stand head and shoulders above the rest. Terry Pratchett and Tom Holt leave the competition standing.

Tom Holt's field of fun is mythology and legend and his best comedic effects come from juxtaposing these with modern day reality. In **Expecting Someone Taller**, Malcolm Fisher inherits the Tarnhelm, which allows him to assume any shape he wishes, and the Ring which makes him ruler of the world. Serves him right for running over a badger who turns out to be Ingolf, last of the giants. The stage is set for a Wagnerian romp

Over the course of a dozen or so books Tom Holt has romped along with greek mythology, the Faust legend, the Flying Dutchman, Blondel's pursuit of King Richard the Lionheart and the legend of the sleeping hero who returns with his knights when the country is in peril. Here is the scene, from **Who's Afraid of Beowulf**, when the sleepers first awake:

> Something moved in the darkness and moved again with the restlessness that attends on the last few moments before waking. "For crying out loud," said a voice, faint and drowsy in the darkness, "there's some of us trying to sleep."
>
> The silence had been broken irrecoverably, like a pane of glass. "You what?" said another voice.
>
> "I said there's people trying to sleep," said the first voice. "Shut it, will you?"
>
> "You shut up," replied the second voice. "You're the one making all the noise."
>
> "Do you two mind?" A third voice, deep and powerful and the structure of beams seemed to vibrate to its resonance. "Quiet as the grave, they say. Some hope."
>
> "Sorry," said the first two voices. The silence tried to return, as the retreating tide tries to claw its way back up the beach.
>
> "I told you, didn't I?" continued the third voice after a while. "I warned you not to eat that cheese, but would you listen? If you can't sleep then be quiet."

> ...Somewhere in the gloom there was a high pitched squeaking sound... "The wizard says try counting sheep," said the second voice.
>
> "I heard him myself," said the third voice. "Bugger counting sheep. I've counted enough sheep since I've been down here to clothe the Frankish Empire. Oh the Hell with it. Somebody open a window."
>
> There was a grating sound and a creaking of long-relaxed timber. "Sod it," said the first voice. "Some clown's moved the ladder."

Terry Pratchett operates in a completely different (but just as funny) world. The Discworld is an enormous disc resting on the back of four elephants which are standing on a giant turtle called A'Tuin. In 16 novels, a Companion and a Mappe, he has explored the world and its somewhat eccentric characters. The seventeenth novel (**Interesting Times**) is due for publication even as we speak. The riotous success of these novels (they invariably head into the best seller lists) has made Terry very rich and the rest of us very happy. He writes the kind of book that should never be read on a bus since people will look at you in wonder as you snort and giggle. Mind you, it probably means that you will always be able to sit comfortably -- nobody will want to sit by you in case it's catching.

Probably one of the reasons that the Discworld stories have succeeded as well as they have is because Terry never makes the mistake of making his characters funny to themselves. The real Discworld has no humour in it at all. In some ways the Discworld is the example par excellence of the point I made earlier on. The books are funny only from outside. The Discworld is real life to the characters who inhabit it and they do not know that outsiders are watching them and laughing (and they would be mortified if they even suspected it).

For example, Mr Ixolite is a banshee with a speech impediment. This makes it almost impossible for him to sit on a roof and howl when people are about to die and therefore he just writes them a note instead ("OooeeeOooeeeOooeee") and slips it under the door.

Now this may be funny, and it always gets a smile when I mention it. But just consider it from Mr Ixolite's point of view. He is a banshee who is physically incapable of doing what banshees are supposed to do. He is a sad and depressed person, and with very good reason. He is the Discworld equivalent of an opera singer whose vocal chords are strained, or a long distance runner confined to a wheelchair after an accident. How do you imagine those people feel when their major occupations are no longer possible? Now consider Mr Ixolite again. The best comedy is often not very far removed from tragedy.

The Discworld has some medieval trappings and among these are the various guilds. According to the **Discworld Companion** (by Terry Pratchett and Stephen Gibbs, Gollancz 1994), the Fools Guild (or to be strictly accurate, the Guild of Fools and Joculators and College of Clowns) was founded some 150 years before the present by one Charles Nixon, former Fool to the Duke of Quirm. The motto of the Guild is "DICO, DICO, DICO" ("I say, I say, I say"). The current King of Lancre is a graduate of the Guild. I like to imagine him hitting his courtiers with a pig's bladder and saying:

"Dico, dico, dico. Quis erat pullus viam transvenit?"

The Lesser Spotted Science Fiction Writer Part 7: Roger Zelazny

***Phlogiston Forty-Two**, 1995*

Roger Zelazny is a man famous for what is probably his weakest work; the multi-part and completely open-ended **Amber** series. It seems to be perennially in print and yet his deeper, more powerful (dare I say more serious) works seem to appear and disappear so fast that if you blink you will miss them. I can't remember when I last saw a copy of **Doorways in the Sand** (my own personal favourite) on the bookshelves. (Well actually I can, it was in 1976 -- I don't think it has been reprinted since then). All of this makes Zelazny a most frustrating writer to discuss since all the commonly available evidence seems to suggest that he is at best a workaday, commonplace author. Yet his status in the field indicates otherwise. He has a whole string of awards and commendations behind him and among his peers his reputation is second to none.

Samuel Delaney said:

The work ... abounds in literary, historical and mythological allusions. The sensitivities revealed are far-ranging, capable of fine psychological and sociological analysis, and are as responsive to the contemporary as to the traditional... There is no other writer who, dealing with the struggle between life and death on such a fantastically rarefied level can evoke so much hunger for the stuff of living itself.

The Jewel Hinged Jaw, Samuel Delaney

High praise indeed. And so we are left with a paradox. How can we reconcile Zelazny's undoubted status as an artist with his equally undoubted status as a writer of mass-produced fiction? In his time he has produced books of high art as well as lowest common denominator, bread-and-butter hack work. Such is the riddle of the man. I'm not sure I have answers, but I would at least like to examine the question in some detail in an attempt to justify my assertions.

I will concentrate almost exclusively on the writing. I will not try to relate the man to his work. This is generally a sterile exercise (after all if the work cannot stand alone, what use is it?). It would be a particularly inappropriate thing to do as far as Zelazny is concerned for he is a very private person who believes strongly that a piece of writing should be considered as a thing in its own right, quite independent of the author. In an interview with Paul Walker published in 1987 the following dialogue took place:

"So tell us about your childhood hangups."

"No."

Speaking of Science Fiction
Paul Walker, Luna Publications
1987

I suspect this took the interviewer somewhat aback, but after a pause for breath he continued:

"Why not?"
"Because I'm a bug on privacy."
"Shyness?"
"Some, I suppose. I like to keep my writing apart from my personal life. I make my living displaying pieces of my soul in some distorted form or other. The rest is my own." (ibid)

But some facts are known. Roger Zelazny was born in 1937. He gained an MA from Columbia university in 1962. From 1962 to 1969 he was employed by the Social Security Administration in Cleveland, Ohio. He interviewed people, wrote letters, memos, reports and manuals in the

deadly dull bureaucratese that often characterises such jobs. Strangely during these years of drudgery he produced, in evenings and weekends, many fine fictional works. Paul Walker asked him how he managed to separate these two aspects of his writing and the reply was very illuminating:

> I never regarded it as real writing. It was just a chore. It was pure, specialized communication. Not a drop of myself in it. (ibid).

This ability to distance himself from his writing, to do it on automatic pilot and just churn out "pure, specialized communication" probably accounts in part for the formulaic writing that makes up such a significant amount of his output. It is a *sine qua non* of the professional (as opposed to the artist) and can be said to indicate his ability to produce work that, in the words of Robert Heinlein, is there simply to pay the grocery bills. That is why he is so irritating. There can be so much more to him than that, and to approach him solely at that level really is to praise with faint damns.

In 1969 he left the government service and turned to full time writing and he has supported himself from his writing ever since.

His early work was adopted by the prophets of the New Wave and for a while Zelazny was seen as one of their gurus. Certainly his work from that era (the sixties and seventies) displays a lot of the flamboyances of style (and sometimes of subject matter) that was the hallmark of the new wave. However he never really fitted comfortably into narrow categories. Even from his earliest days it was obvious that he was more than just a stylist (one of the new wave's more besetting sins was a tendency to confuse style with content) and his work always had a depth and solidity to it that has allowed it (or at least its reputation) to survive when many of its contemporaries have vanished without trace. From this era came a multitude of short stories, most of which were collected together in **The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of his Mouth**, and some novellas which appeared in book form as **Four for Tomorrow**.

He expanded one of his short stories (***...And Call me Conrad***) as the novel **This Immortal** and won a Hugo for it in 1966. In the same year he won a Nebula for the novella ***He Who Shapes*** (later to become the novel **The Dream Master** -- Zelazny's original title for this piece was **The Ides of October**. Perhaps titles are not his strong point), and another Nebula for the novelette ***The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth***. Two years later he won another Hugo for the novel **Lord of Light**.

It was an explosive start to a career and probably made a large contribution to his decision to take up writing as a full time occupation. But too many early successes are often hard to live up to and some of his later works have been unfavourably compared to the highlights of his beginnings. This is probably an over-reaction. My own personal favourites of his books date from these middle years of his career, books such as **Jack of Shadows**, **Doorways in the Sand** and **Roadmarks**.

For a time it seemed as if Zelazny was taking the world of myth (or rather of specific myths) and building it into his art -- using myth, if you like, as a vehicle to comment on what he was seeing, a metaphor for the time. In **Lord of Light**, for example, the crew of a starship have used the technology available to them to become (to all intents and purposes), gods. The gods they emulate are those of the Hindu pantheon, though the development of the plot takes on aspects of other mythologies. There are echoes of the legend of Prometheus (who stole fire from the gods) and of Coyote the Trickster from the native American *oeuvre* (a mythology he would mine again later in **Eye of Cat**).

Being gods and therefore having infinite powers the protagonists have of course become

corrupted. They exploit the masses, their own descendants, refusing to share the technological benefits they themselves enjoy. The society portrayed is repressive and stagnant and Sam (the hero, and one of the gods) recognises this and sets out to try and correct it. Of course he succeeds. I never did like happy endings.

The novel illuminates Zelazny's major themes more clearly perhaps than any of the others. He is concerned with vanity, greed, power, guilt and revenge. Time after time his protagonists are the psychological walking wounded who despite lifestyles that (superficially at least) we would all envy are nevertheless consumed by internal devils and immoral imperatives.

However despite being larger than life the characters always remain credible. This is one of Zelazny's greatest strengths -- that he can make you believe in these grotesques and cheer for their triumphs, weep for their tragedies. That alone would mark him as a writer of immense skill. The reader always feels *involved* in the novel.

He returned to the theme again in **Creatures of Light and Darkness**. Similar in scope to **Lord of Light**, this time the gods are taken from the Egyptian pantheon. The novel was much less successful than its predecessor, probably because Egyptian mythology is less familiar to modern audiences and the reworking of the material remained obscure as a result. I found the book quite confusing and hard to follow.

Three times is the charm. Zelazny returned to the theme of man aspiring to godhood once more in **Isle of the Dead**, published in the same year as **Creatures of Light and Darkness** (1969-1970 was a very prolific year for him). This time he created his own pantheon instead of milking an already existing earthly one. Francis Sandow (a man from the twentieth century) becomes a god of the alien Pei'ans. He is Shimbo of Darktree, Shrugger of Thunders (what a lovely phrase).

The novel charts his return to a world he created many years before, Illyria and his dark masterpiece the Isle of the Dead. To his horror, after his years of absence and neglect, he finds it devastated and polluted, emptied of people. It is the creation of another Pei'an god, Belion. The gods must contest to resolve this.

I think that **Isle of the Dead** is the strongest book of the three.

One of the disadvantages of Zelazny's decision to use an existing pantheon in **Lord of Light** and **Creatures of Light and Darkness** is that it made it hard to control the flow. Whether he liked it or not, invoking that mythology dragged with it all the baggage of inherited legend it had accumulated over the years. It invoked images that sometimes were inappropriate because of the archetypal nature of the particular myth, and that tied his hands. The books often read as if the writer was struggling against his own characters simply to satisfy the demands of the myth-as-is, rather than the myth-as-he-would-like-it-to-be. With a newly invented pantheon and a blank canvas in **Isle of the Dead** there was more freedom to explore and I never felt (as I did with the earlier books) that dead weight of centuries of earth-bound tradition. It was a freer, more satisfying book as a result. Not everyone would agree with me (and the fact that **Lord of Light** won a Hugo and is famous and **Isle of the Dead** did not win a Hugo and is relatively obscure speaks for itself).

Francis Sandow returned in a later novel, **To Die in Italbar**, a novel of the plague and an examination of the fine dividing line between healing and slaying. Many doctors have the touch of death.

The works that followed these early triumphs began to show a general decline and he produced a stream of books (mainly fantasies) which were often pedestrian and plodding, indistinguishable from a thousand others (the **Dilvish** books, for example). During this time he seemed to be concentrating on his **Amber** series, an open-ended novel which started

promisingly but eventually degenerated into soap opera. Other books were, perhaps, written with his "left hand" as the **Amber** books developed.

The first of the **Amber** series, **Nine Princes in Amber**, introduced a typical Zelazny hero; a man with no memory of his past. Gradually through incident and interaction with people who clearly know who he is (and assume that he does too) he learns that he is Corwin, a prince of Amber. Amber is the centre of the universe (in a sense Amber *is* the universe) and the reality we know, and many other realities as well are just shadows cast by Amber. Ousted in a palace coup, Corwin has spent many years living in one or more of these shadow worlds. This book and later ones chronicle his ever more elaborate (and confusing) attempts to regain his rightful position in Amber. Thwarted on every side by friends and relatives, making and breaking alliances, Corwin struggles on. After a while a sameness develops, a feeling of over-familiarity. Boredom sets in. The tale is too long in the telling.

Zelazny brought Corwin's struggle to an ending (of sorts) in the fifth volume of the series (**The Courts of Chaos**) and there he left it for a while. Then the lure of the sequel proved too tempting and he began a new series dealing with the adventures of Corwin's son Merlin. These are very thin books, both physically and metaphorically. Very little happens (the tale is dragged out unmercifully) and the page count is made up with interminable descriptions of journeys through shadow. When that concept was first introduced in the early books the shadow journeys that Corwin made were fresh and original and the descriptions of these many realities were interesting, often fascinating and not overlong. But by the time of the second series they seemed to go on forever. I found myself flipping forwards half a dozen pages at a time just to get past these never-ending lumps of padding (for that is what they are -- they have no significance in terms of plot or character resolution). Eventually I gave up. There simply wasn't enough solid material to hold my interest. I understand that the second series has had several new additions in the last few years. I will not be reading them.

And then, one day on the bookshelves I spotted a novel called **Jack of Shadows**. This was quite early in the life of the **Amber** series and I was not yet disillusioned with it. The title fooled me. I thought it was an **Amber** book (because of the reference to shadow) and so I bought it on the strength of that. In point of fact it has nothing whatsoever to do with Amber. It is a pure fantasy novel (with a brief bow to "science" in that it takes place on an Earth that keeps one face constantly towards its sun). Magic rules and Jack of Shadows, Shadowjack the Thief has broken the compact and duped the Lord of High Dudgeon. I never regretted my decision to buy it -- it is quite simply a knockout, a perfect demonstration of both Zelazny's mastery of language (I don't think he ever again used words so brilliantly or made such beautiful patterns). It reveals him at his peak, demonstrating his absolute mastery of character and scene. Jack shines so brightly. He leaps off the page and *demands* that you hear his story. From the Dung Pits of Glyve (where the dead are regenerated) to the search for Kolwynia, The-Key-That-Was-Lost the inventiveness never flags. **Jack of Shadows** is my most serendipitous mistaken buy.

This middle period (if you like) was a time of consolidation. Building on his early reputation, Zelazny produced a string of works forming a solid base of which any writer could be proud. There was **Damnation Alley** in which Hell Tanner (a Hell's Angel with a conscience) was a most unlikely hero ferrying a vital medicine across a United States devastated by nuclear war. This was a powerful and moving work which was turned into a totally trivial film that quickly vanished without trace.

Doorways in the Sand was a novel that could have been (and often was) written in science fiction's Golden Age. Fred Cassidy is a perennial student (he has a guaranteed income until he graduates, so he makes sure he never graduates -- his intimate knowledge of the university rules and the tricks he plays with the bureaucracy make hilarious reading). Then Fred is accused of stealing the star-stone, an interplanetary artifact which came to Earth in a trade for the Mona Lisa and the British Crown Jewels. He is pursued by telepathic psychologists, extraterrestrial hoodlums and galactic police in disguise and the star-stone (which he didn't steal

but which has designs of its own) flips him through multiple realities and alien perspectives, through the many doorways in the sand. He even graduates.

It says much for Zelazny that he has managed to create a true work of art out of such trash. There are moments in this book that have a haunting beauty. The strange messages read in the sky and subliminally present in so many places (DO YOU SMELL ME DED) are fascinating. What do they mean? It is quite a while before we find out. (DO YOU TASTE ME BRED?) There are also many moments of surreal high comedy:

> I was not completely surprised when I raised my head and saw a six-foot-plus kangaroo standing beside the wombat. It considered me through a pair of dark glasses as it removed a sandwich from its pouch. "Peanut butter is rich in protein", it said.
>
> **Doorways in the Sand**

(Excuse me, I have to go and fill the bathtub with brightly coloured machine tools). It is one of my favourite books and I have re-read it several times. (I AM A RECORDING) It brings together all of Zelazny's many skills. It examines all his usual themes and is brilliantly characterised and immaculately written with a fine wit that is not often present in his other works. If there is a typical Zelazny novel, this is it because it is the ultimate example of the all the things that make Zelazny the unique voice that he is. Nothing else even comes close (except perhaps **Roadmarks**), and he never puts a foot wrong. As an aside, the book is yet another proof of the truth that a talented artist can turn the oldest most hackneyed material into an interesting, thrilling, vital work. There is nothing in this book that you haven't seen before. But you have never, ever, seen it presented as well. The nature of the star-stone will take nobody by surprise. The art lies in the telling of the tale, not in the tale itself. Zelazny never did it better.

Roadmarks is a most idiosyncratic time-travel novel. Zelazny makes concrete the analogy of time as a road extending from the past to the future. Those who travel the road have access to all the turnoffs leading to all times and places (including those that never were but that might have been). Much of the action takes place on and near the last exit to Babylon and involves Red Dorakeen (who might be the hero, it is hard to tell), a lethal monk, a tyrannosaur, Mondamay the Potter (a robot who lives in eleventh century Abyssinia) and the Dragons of Bel'kwinith. Again, Zelazny has taken common coin and re-minted it as something fresh and wonderful. Just as with **Doorways in the Sand**, he has built a work of art out of trash and the book is magnificent as a result.

Zelazny is never blind to new themes and opportunities. There has always been a streak of original brilliance in the furrows he chooses to plough, and on occasion he has anticipated later trends. The three novellas collected together as **My Name is Legion** tell a rather Chandleresque story that is a precursor to the cyberpunk sub-genre that seems so ubiquitous of late. The world is a computerised bureaucracy. The electronic office writ large. The hero was one of the programmers who put together the network of computers that control the world and the people in it. Consequently he knows the loopholes, left himself back doors. As far as the world is concerned he does not exist -- the computers have no record of him (or rather they have lots of records as he assumes personalities at will). In a world of conformity he is perhaps one of the last individuals. (There are strong echoes of John Brunner's **The Shockwave Rider** which examined many similar themes and which is also often regarded as one of the instigators of the cyberpunk movement). In some ways, the book seems very naive nowadays. Time has caught up with the technology Zelazny espouses and left it long behind. The hero has destroyed his punched cards and changed his face. This sounds less than futuristic to present day ears. But that does not invalidate the points that Zelazny was trying to make about the regimentation of society and the message of the book is just as important as it ever was. The increasing depersonalisation of society is a trend that shows no signs of slowing down. The drama may be

melodramatic, but it is no less real for all that. Appropriate stories are timeless stories (that is one of the functions of myth) and the computer is one of the most powerful modern myths, an icon for the future (pun intended) and the book can be viewed in this light as a return to Zelazny's original concerns. Perhaps here he was building a mythology for the future based on the present rather than the past, a step beyond books such as **Lord of Light**. I think he succeeded brilliantly.

The works that followed this middle period of his career (and sometimes overlapped with it) demonstrate a slowing down of his genius. Many are pedestrian and plodding (particularly as he turned away from science fiction and moved closer and closer to the fantasy worlds of swords and sorcery). But there was still the occasional gem. Enough to keep me buying and reading, anyway. The brilliant **Eye of Cat** and the delightfully comedic **A Night in the Lonesome October** (his most recent novel) are wonderful books by anybody's standards. There was also **A Dark Travelling**, a juvenile novel, and several excellent short story collections (Zelazny's short stories have always been well worth reading and his collections are always magnificent).

And there are the collaborations of course. However with two and a fraction exceptions, his collaborative works are uniformly dire and are best avoided. The first (and best) of his collaborations dates back to 1967 when he put a lot of work into a novel that Philip K. Dick had stalled on. Dick's original title for the book was **The Kneeling Legless Man** (which may help to explain why his inspiration dried up) but it was eventually published as **Deus Irae**. It is a magnificent work and demonstrates Zelazny's enormous skills as a writer. He managed to absorb and reproduce Dick's unique style and oddball way of looking at things absolutely perfectly. You simply cannot see the joins.

Perhaps this fired him with enthusiasm for collaborations. Over the years he has written some fantasies with Fred Saberhagen (very ordinary) and some hard SF books with Thomas T. Thomas (again, very ordinary). He has also written some supposedly comic fantasies with Robert Sheckley which are almost unreadable. Sheckley, when he wants to, can write great comedy. He has proved this time and time again, and many of Zelazny's books contain moments of comedic genius and a very fine wit, but their collaborations are simply tired clichés full of very old and very bad jokes. Definitely to be avoided. Lately Zelazny appears to be branching out in his collaborations. With Gerald Haussman he has written a novel called **Wilderness** which tells the story of two famous events from the days of the American Wild West. In 1808 John Colter ran and climbed 150 miles through the wilderness of what is now Yellowstone National Park to escape from pursuing Blackfeet indians. In 1823 Hugh Glass was left for dead after being attacked by a bear. He crawled a hundred miles from the Grand Valley to the Missouri River. The book novelises the stories of these two men. The chapters alternate between the two events which initially feels a little odd since the two are separated from each other by almost twenty years and one wonders what connection there can possibly be between them. This little niggle never really goes away, though it is resolved at the end of the book when a connection is shown (albeit a rather soap opera-ish one). Nevertheless I think it is a structural flaw.

That aside, though, this is one collaboration that does seem to work well and it deserves careful reading. This, and the collaboration with Philip K. Dick are the only ones that deserve a place in a permanent collection (though there is a short story with Harlan Ellison called ***Come to Me Not in Winter's White*** which isn't bad). I suppose that makes two and a bit collaborations that are worth searching out.

Zelazny's great strengths as a writer are his magnificent characters (no one can bring a character alive the way Zelazny can) and the complex themes that he examines. Both of these give his work a depth and an appeal that is sorely lacking in many of his contemporaries. This alone would be enough to guarantee him a giant's status in a field as full of incompetent and pedestrian writers as is the SF world. But he has one other enormous strength that is perhaps not quite so obvious from this brief analysis. He is a wordsmith par excellence.

Zelazny is in love with the language and he uses it as it should be used. He knows exactly the right word for every circumstance. I suspect his feeling for the language is such that as far as he is concerned there is no such thing as a synonym. My favourite example is the title of one of his poetry collections. **To Spin is Miracle Cat**. Look at those words and ask yourself what they mean. Coldly, logically, analytically those five words cannot possibly belong together and the sentence they make is utterly meaningless. But I don't care. Those words in just that combination do most properly belong together and the end result is spine-tingling. Logic and meaning have nothing to do with it; this is all about feeling and art. And those five words are art, make no mistake about it. No other words will do. Zelazny knows that very well.

Is he a great writer? Yes of course he is, don't ask silly questions. Is he a great artist? Yes of course -- he is a weaver of words and a spinner of spells. One of his earliest novels was about an immortal man and many of his heroes have been immortal (or at least very long lived).

But the true immortality is Zelazny's own, for he will be long remembered because of them.

Cell Me A Phone

Phlogiston Forty-Three, 1995

If there is an icon for the 1990s it is a picture of someone with a cellphone glued to their ear. Nothing typifies the decade quite like it. Once only the wannabe yuppies sported them, but nowadays everybody has one of the infernal devices. Even I've got one.

You can tell when a gadget has truly arrived in the public consciousness by the urban legends that accrete around it. By now probably everybody has heard the one about the person striding round in a public place, talking loudly into his phone when suddenly it rings. In the legend he is supposed to blush and creep away, but in my opinion anyone caught in such a predicament ought to say (*Very Loudly!*), "Excuse me, there is somebody on the other line.", thereby convincing his audience that his cellphone is infinitely more technologically advanced than theirs is. I have never quite had the courage to try this out, but one day I will. Of course, by the time I get round to it, cellphones *will* have multiple lines and nobody will be impressed at all.

When I consider the big, black, chunky bakelite telephones of my childhood my science fictional sense of wonder gets turned on at the advances that gave us the sleek pocket cellphone. I shouldn't really be surprised though. The cellphone is an obvious (in retrospect) extrapolation from the clunky 1950s monsters I grew up with. Why did nobody spot it before?

Well consider this, from a novel published in 1948:

> Matt dug a candy bar out of his pouch, split it and gave half to Jarman, who accepted it gratefully.
>
> "You're a pal, Matt. I've been living on my own fat ever since breakfast -- and that's risky. Say, your phone is sounding."
>
> "Oh!" Matt fumbled in his pouch and got out his phone. "Hello?"
>
> "That you, son?" came his father's voice...
>
> [There is a long conversation]
>
> Matt broke in, "I'll have to sign off, I'm in a crowd. Goodbye, thanks for calling."

> "Goodbye son, good luck."
>
> Tex Jarman looked at him understandingly. "Your folks always worry, don't they? I fooled mine -- packed my phone in my bag."
>
> **Space Cadet**, Robert Heinlein

Robert Heinlein got it exactly right (as he so often did) and this prediction is spot on. Mind you he blotted his copybook. The space cadets may have portable phones, but they still do all their calculating with slide rules!

If you wanted to you could use this incident as a perfect example to support the thesis that science fiction predicts the future. You would, however, be completely wrong. Science fiction does no such thing though many naive critics seem unconvinced of this. Somebody once dismissed one of Brian Aldiss' short story collections on the grounds that it contained no useful predictions at all; a criticism which amused Aldiss mightily.

For almost all of its life people have assumed that because it often deals with future settings and as yet uninvented devices science fiction must be considered to be a sort of literary crystal ball telling us how the future will be both in terms of the gadgets we will be using and the type of society in which we will be using them. Such ideas are reinforced by the classic examples of Jules Verne's submarine and H. G. Wells' aeroplanes and tanks and perhaps also Orwell's and Huxley's sociological speculations.

But such thinking is essentially sterile and the evidence does not support it. SF predicts on the machine gun principle. Spray enough bullets around and one of them is bound to hit a target. You don't have to aim at all -- statistics are on your side. Science fiction does not tell us about *the* future, it tells us about *a* future. There are so very many futures (and so very many gadgets) discussed in all of the umpteen umptillion SF books that have been published since the world began that it would be surprising if they didn't occasionally get something right. Hence Heinlein's phone (and Hugo Gernsback's television come to that).

However from out of this plethora of predictions there does emerge one common thread, one consistent message -- the notion that whatever is going to happen, whatever magical devices we may use in whatever society the future may hold for us there is one thing that we can be absolutely certain of; tomorrow will be different from today. Things will change. Science fiction is the literature of change. The details don't matter at all. It is only necessary to know and accept that things will be different.

This is not a particularly profound or original statement (lots of critics have said it before me) but I would like to explore some of its implications, if I may.

Most people find change unsettling, difficult to come to terms with. Familiarity is a comfortable rut to sit in and to be forced out of our rut into something new is often hard and there is a natural tendency to resist it. You can see the effect quite markedly as you watch a cat growing up. Kittens love new things. They live to explore and investigate and everything is new and exciting. Changes in routine, new furniture, new people, new surroundings are new toys to play with and a kitten will investigate and explore all new things with gusto. But as the cat matures, a fixed daily routine becomes more important. New things come to be regarded with suspicion because they interfere with the familiar rituals of food and sleep. Nothing is as conservative as a mature cat. New pieces of furniture are treated with deep suspicion (and sometimes scratched to destruction). New people are avoided in case they don't know how to stroke properly. Moving house is the deepest trauma and it may be weeks before the owners are forgiven and everything returns to normal. Change is suspicious and frightening.

People are very similar to cats in this regard. And the faster the changes come about and the

larger they are, the more difficult they are to cope with. My grandfather was born in the nineteenth century, before the era of powered flight, and he lived to see men walk upon the surface of the moon. Such revolutionary changes in one lifetime are, I suspect, very few and far between and I doubt that I will ever see anything quite that dramatic or revolutionary. And yet, despite having seen it, my grandfather refused to accept much of what he saw. Such new-fangled notions were not for him and he preferred to ignore them. They were threatening. The rate of change was too fast to cope with. His ideas were fixed by an earlier age. He was born in a static society where change was slow. He stopped himself thinking about these things by claiming that they were none of his business or that he couldn't be bothered with them. But that was just an avoidance mechanism and whether he liked it or not they did affect him and they weren't going to go away. He bitterly resented that.

Many earlier generations saw little change in their lives. They were born, they grew up, they died; and during their life very little differed from what their fathers and grandfathers before them had seen and done. Some small innovations perhaps, but nothing dramatic. I think that the generation that preceded my grandfathers was probably the last generation of which that was completely true. The twentieth century accelerated the rate of change of innovation out of all proportion to what it had been before. It has been estimated that ninety percent of all the scientists and technicians who have ever lived are alive now. Not that they are the only arbiters of change, they are only the most prominent. We see such changes in all fields, artistic as well as technological, but even the artistic trends are seldom accepted straight away. Innovation in the arts tends to be sneered at rather than feared because we all feel that we understand art whereas few of us claim fully to understand technology. Nevertheless we remain essentially conservative about both and when the Tate Gallery buys a pile of bricks for a vast sum of money and promotes it as art (as happened about twenty years ago) it finds little support. It can't be art because it is new and strange (and perhaps also because we feel it requires little skill -- there is a feeling abroad that art should be difficult to produce; I have no idea why. There can be beauty and therefore art even in random patterns. Why should a pile of bricks be excluded?).

Sometimes when change (of whatever type) is forced, kicking and screaming, into a lifestyle, it becomes even harder to come to terms with. Again I have a perfect example, from my grandmother this time. In the early 1970s Britain changed its currency and went decimal. To the day she died (about twenty years later) my grandmother insisted that it was a mere fad and that one day soon "they" would have to change it back again because it would never catch on. She never learned to be comfortable with the new currency and always insisted on knowing what the various prices she saw in the shops were in "real money". She was frozen in time, into patterns of familiarity and the familiar was *ipso facto* the one correct way. With such attitudes change becomes anathema.

We can see this on a small scale with my grandmother and on a larger scale with totalitarian governments which are also resistant to change and the threat of new ideas. They too are frozen into patterns of familiarity and when the change takes place, as sooner or later it inevitably does, they break and fall. They cannot live with change and so when change takes place they cease to live. We have seen evidence for that in Soviet Russia and East Germany.

Things like this mean that modern generations no longer have the luxury of avoiding or denying change. The accelerating rate of change positively requires us to acknowledge it and to keep up. If we fall behind the juggernaut will roll over us and crush us. We need a mind set that accommodates the idea of change. SF is the agency that cultivates that mind set. If science fiction tells us anything it tells us that these things happen and prepares us psychologically for the certainty that whatever tomorrow will look like it will definitely be different from today.

I suspect that science fiction fans come much more easily than most other people to change. As a direct result of reading their favourite literature they cope with the whole idea better than the average person or organisation. I have no direct evidence for this, but I do have some indirect,

circumstantial evidence that I have gathered from my job.

I work with computers -- the industry that more than any other is most closely associated with change. My colleagues and I are responsible for a revolution in the way the world does business. Within the space of a very few years, computers have ceased to be arcane machines attended by acolytes in air-conditioned rooms and used by very few people in the organisation. They have spread onto virtually every office desktop and few people now can escape their insidious effect. Most people find this very difficult to cope with and they struggle to keep up (yet another symptom of the reluctance of the average person to accept change -- I often hear moans about "the computer system" and how things have gone to pot since it was introduced). The pundits would have us believe that it all works quite smoothly. They proclaim that there is an ever-increasing computer literacy in the work force, that computers are becoming ever more simple to use. This is rubbish. Computer systems are increasing in complexity almost daily. Ninety percent of the users do not use (and are not capable of using) ninety percent of the features available to them.

And as for the myth of increased computer literacy, it is simply that -- a myth. Virtually nobody truly understands the machines they use every day. I find vast amusement in watching self-important businessmen on aeroplanes showing off with their laptops. Most of them don't have a clue. Sometimes they explain what they are doing to their neighbours. That is usually hysterical and I often find it hard to control myself as I listen to their mangled explanation of a technology that is obviously a total mystery to them. They open their mouths and thrust their feet in right up to the ankles.

But even those who do begin to master the software (and there are some) experience difficulties when someone comes along and installs a bigger and better version with more chrome, bells, whistles and dancing girls. The whole thing starts to become a red queen's race, and even that doesn't always succeed. Running very hard doesn't always keep you in the same place. Sometimes, despite all your best efforts you start to slip behind.

However, extreme as it may seem to them, these end users are seeing only the tail end of a process that is quite frightening in the rapidity with which it overtakes the technicians such as myself who are charged with implementing this new revolution. We see, and are required to cope with, things that are orders of magnitude greater than anything they see.

I have worked in the computer industry for almost twenty five years and in this time I have seen revolutions come and go. My job has changed out of all recognition and many of the vital skills I needed a few years ago have been relegated to the scrap heap. There was a time when I could hold a punched card up to the light and read it as easily as I could read a page of printing. This is a skill for which there is little demand these days. When I first started, terminals either didn't exist at all or were such hideously expensive devices that few sites had them. Nowadays terminals themselves are becoming old-fashioned and the trend is for graphics workstations. These are only the most visible examples, but there are many more. I suspect that I completely renew my skill set every five years or so. It isn't that clear cut -- I don't wake up one morning and say to myself, "Oh, I haven't learned anything for five years, I think I'll study object-oriented programming." Nevertheless, gradual though it might be, if I stop and think and look back I often find that things I now use routinely, without even thinking about them are things that five years ago I probably hadn't even heard of.

And the gap is narrowing rapidly. Soon it might be three years, then two. Eventually the gap might be measured in weeks or days. There might come a time when I will need to learn new things before they are even invented. Perhaps the concept of negative or virtual change will then become viable.

The rapidity of the changes I have to cope with don't particularly worry me and I don't find them that hard to manage. Indeed in many ways I enjoy them. Finding out new things is fun. Many of

my colleagues feel the same way (those that don't do not survive long in the industry) and I have often wondered why.

This is where the empirical nature of my argument comes to the fore. I have no strong evidence, but I suspect that science fiction has a lot to do with it. The percentage of science fiction fans in the computer business is considerably higher that the percentage of fans in any other line of work. My observations suggest that the ratio is about three to one. (Interestingly the next largest group of fans after computer people appears to be librarians). There are probably many reasons for this imbalance but I believe that one of the most powerful is that since SF predicts that change is inevitable and since the computer industry is probably one of the most effective modern tools for implementing change the average SF fan feels comfortable with the framework and is indeed actively attracted to it. It feels like a science fictional world and is therefore fun. The average non SF-fan does not feel comfortable (indeed they probably feel a little frightened by the whole idea). Perhaps SF is propaganda for the future as well as psychological preparation for it.

That, I suppose, makes science fiction the only relevant fiction for the 1990s because it is the only one that so neatly encapsulates the age. Science fiction and its predictive ability (in the general sense) is a paradigm for living through the events that are heading towards us at an ever increasing pace; whatever those events may be.

The small and generally insignificant successful predictions of science fiction such as the cellphone itself are the icing on the cake, the things that give us a nice glow of pleasure when we encounter them. But the message that the cellphone symbolises is infinitely more important that the simple gadget itself.

Once I was at the airport, in one of the lounges where they serve you free beer and so I indulged (as is my wont when the beer is free) and eventually hydraulic pressure forced me into the toilet where I stood side by side with several other gentlemen in the same predicament as myself. Suddenly from the jacket pocket of the man beside came a ringing noise. He jerked in surprise and attempted to answer it with one hand while continuing to go with the flow with the other. The contortions this required proved too much for him and he wet himself copiously. I was laughing so much that I almost did the same.

Heinlein never mentioned that complication. SF doesn't always get the details right -- only the message.

Science Fiction in Everyday Life

Phlogiston Forty-Four, 1995

We live with the literature of the impossible. Indeed that is one of its major attractions. There is a strange thrill involved in the exploration of outré speculations. However many non-SF fans (and even one or two SF fans) do not always realise that many of SF's wilder improbabilities are actually common, everyday occurrences. It is just that the authorities go to great lengths to conceal and camouflage the evidence so that none of us will know that we really do live in a science fictional world...

My first introduction to the mysterious manner that SF speculations have of intruding into everyday life came from Avram Davidson's Hugo award winning story ***Or all the Seas With Oysters.*** The story took the commonly observed phenomenon that you can never find safety pins when you need them and that wardrobes are always full of clothes hangers that weren't there yesterday, and extrapolated from these facts a hitherto unsuspected alien life form sharing the earth with us. Safety pins were the pupa-forms which later hatched into the larval-forms that look just like coat hangers. Eventually the coat hangers grow up into the adult form -- bicycles!

The argument is so persuasive that the hero of the story puts his elegant red French racing bike out to stud and makes a fortune.

I was discussing this story with my friend Steve one day and he went very quiet. "I don't know about that," he remarked, "but I'm sure I've come across something very similar". He went on to explain that he was currently renovating the house he was living in and he had a room upstairs that was full of old-fashioned wardrobes. He couldn't understand what they were doing there and he didn't like them so he smashed up a few and used them for firewood. However he must have left a breeding pair behind because when he went back in the room six months later it was full of wardrobes again.

I was intrigued and Steve took me and showed me the wardrobes -- there were eight in the room. We spent a happy (and sweaty) day carrying them downstairs. Then we dug a huge hole in the front lawn and buried them. This left rather a large hump in the lawn, so tall in fact that it obscured the view from the lounge windows but that didn't matter since Steve hadn't cleaned them for ten years and couldn't see out of them anyway.

Over the next few months the grass grew again over the hump in the lawn. It was such an inconvenient shape that Steve never bothered mowing it (he never bothered mowing the rest of the lawn either) and the grass grew tall and thick and obscured the view (if there had been one) even more. Steve became very proud of the number of different ways he had of being unable to see out of his lounge windows.

This incident confirmed to me that my interest in science fiction was a perfect preparation for an interest in the real world. The two became indistinguishable in my mind and I began deliberately to collect strange phenomena in an attempt to see behind the veil with which THEY, for THEIR own reasons, obscured the reality of the universe.

Just recently, for instance, I had occasion to travel from Auckland to Wellington. We boarded the plane and for once it took off exactly on time at ten past five in the evening. Shortly after takeoff the captain came on the intercom and announced that the flight would take 47 minutes and we would be on the ground at Wellington on schedule at ten past six. Now my watch claims that there are 60 minutes between ten past five and ten past six and I began to wonder what sort of arithmetic the captain was using. Then I realised what must be happening -- if 60 ground minutes corresponded to 47 air minutes then time must be passing more swiftly in the aeroplane than on the ground. Out came the trusty calculator. Hmmmm...

A ratio of 60:47 means that 1.28 ground minutes is equivalent to 1 air minute. The Lorentz transformation assures us that an event which takes place in a time t_0 to an observer in a moving frame of reference takes place in a time t to a stationary observer where:

$$t = t_o \Big/ \sqrt{\left(1 - v^2 / c^2\right)}$$

(v = velocity of aeroplane, c = speed of light in a vacuum)

Consequently we see that:

$$1.28 = 1 \Big/ \sqrt{\left(1 - v^2 / c^2\right)}$$

ie

$$1.28\sqrt{\left(1-v^2/c^2\right)}=1$$

Thus:

$$\sqrt{\left(1-v^2/c^2\right)}=1/1.28=0.78$$

Squaring both sides we find that:

$$1-v^2/c^2=0.61$$

Rearranging:

$$1-0.61=v^2/c^2=0.39$$

Thus:

$$v^2=0.39c^2$$

Taking square roots of both sides we deduce that:

$$v=0.63c$$

Aha! I was right. The aeroplane must be travelling at slightly more than half the speed of light. I had never realised before that aeroplanes travelled so fast. I knew that I was getting shorter and fatter as the years advanced, but I'd put this down to the effect of too many expense account meals. Obviously a much more reasonable explanation for the shape of my body was its constant exposure to relativistic velocities between Auckland and Wellington. It is a good job that aeroplanes don't travel *at* the speed of light or else I'd be infinitely heavy and infinitesimally short which would make it difficult to reach up and put my expense account claim forms on my boss's desk.

Body shape is actually very closely related to science fiction, life the universe and everything, and none of us can escape from the effect. Consider for example the bottle of beer which is sitting on my desk as I write this article. It contains 330ml of liquid. The full bottle weighs 500 grams and the empty bottle weighs 200 grams from which it becomes obvious that the beer itself weighs 300 grams. The thing that I find most puzzling is the inescapable fact that when I drink this 330 ml of liquid I will pass 500 ml of urine and put on 500 grams of weight. Where has the extra mass and liquid come from? This phenomenon was first observed by that

indefatigable scientific researcher and occasional SF writer Bob Shaw and was reported by him in 1976 in a paper entitled ***The Return of the Backyard Spaceship***, which may be found in his collected papers, **The Complete BoSh Volume 2**, Paranoid Inca Press, 1979, pp. 23-31 with illustrations by Jim Barker. The paper states, in part:

> I've checked with other beer drinkers and they confirm the same thing -- every time they have a pint of beer they gain a couple of pounds in weight as well. Now the really intriguing scientific aspect of all this is that a pint of beer weighs only one and three quarter pounds. This means that three quarters of a pound appears from nowhere!
>
> Incredible though it may seem, this process of matter creation within the human body is well authenticated -- and it doesn't just happen with booze. Anybody who is a bit fat will tell you that eating just one measly little two-ounce cream bun makes them two pounds heavier the next day. It is even possible that the entire mass of the universe was created by people eating cream buns and drinking beer. But I'm not interested in cosmology -- it is much too airy-fairy and theoretical for me.

It is a pity that Bob Shaw did not pursue the cosmological significance of his discovery for it seems to me that here we have a quite profound insight into the structure of the universe. One of the great unsolved mysteries of cosmology is the problem of the missing mass of the universe. Calculations suggest that the universe does not contain enough matter to account for some of the observed phenomena in it. There is currently much puzzlement and much peering through telescopes at distant galaxies in an attempt to track it down. Cosmologists are, however, searching in the wrong place. All the missing matter in the universe is here on earth, hiding in bottles of beer and cream cakes.

Perhaps science fiction's ultimate speculation concerns the possibility of perpetual motion; an idea that is pooh-poohed by the establishment. Lin Carter (a very under-rated writer who is not generally noted for his serious scientific speculations) described the phenomenon well in his novels about Thongor of Lemuria. In these books the hero often travels from place to place in a flying machine powered by two enormous springs. As one spring unwinds it turns the propeller that drives the craft and simultaneously tightens the other spring. When it is wound down the second spring is wound up tight and takes over the tasks of propelling the craft and winding up the first spring again! As I recall, Thongor is very grateful that he never has to stop and take fuel on board, fuelling depots being few and far between in the wild barbarian lands he spends so much time adventuring in.

I don't want to get a reputation as a crank. Some things are just plain silly and in my opinion perpetual motion will never amount to much. I know British Patent 11318 granted in 1901 for Tredinnick's Improved Self-Driving Hydraulic Motor suggests that THEY take it very seriously indeed. But the second law of thermodynamics is not easily mocked. This is proved by the fact that all the stories from **New Worlds** magazine in the 1960s which took the notion of entropy as their guiding metaphor, contain no jokes whatsoever. See for example ***The Heat Death of the Universe*** by Pamela Zoline.

No -- I feel that if we are ever to travel to the stars the answer probably lies in the probability waves of quantum physics, a scientific discipline which can best be described by the remark, "Everything happens in lumps".

Perhaps its most practical applications come from the tunnel effect. Particles are observed to be *here* and then *over there* without having been observed at all in the space between. There is generally much waving of hands and erudite discussions of Hamiltonian Operators when the

subject is raised. Particles which exhibit the tunnel effect are always in motion (this seems to be important) and I once described the effect to an incredulous listener in these words: "If you walk up and down outside Buckingham Palace for long enough, eventually you will find yourself inside". Judging by the number of reports in the press in recent years about people to whom this has indeed happened (much to the consternation of the Queen) I think the reality of the tunnel effect has been well and truly authenticated. Therefore space travel based upon the effect cannot be far away; indeed it may already be in use. The authorities just haven't admitted it yet.

Another promising line of research was suggested by Poul Anderson in his novel **The Makeshift Rocket** wherein we meet Knud Axel Syrup and a spaceship built of beer kegs bound together by gunk, upholstered with pretzel boxes and powered by the mighty reaction forces of beer. In view of my own observations about the intimate connection between beer and the fundamental nature of the cosmos, I suspect that Anderson may well have got it exactly right.

Even as we speak spaceships powered by quantum tunnelling glasses of beer are almost certainly thundering though our skies. What else could explain the mysterious absence of politicians from our television screens when parliament is in recess? Where do they *really* go? Certainly nowhere on Earth. I strongly suspect they go to Venus. Let me share my reasoning with you.

I make my living in one of the twentieth century's most technologically innovative and demanding disciplines. That means I play with computers all day long, and I have done so for almost quarter of a century. If I have learned anything at all in those years I have learned that complicated electronic equipment works by passing smoke down the wires between the components on the circuit boards. This is proved by the often observed fact that if the smoke ever leaks out of the wires into the atmosphere the electronic equipment stops working. As soon as you see any smoke coming out of any electronic equipment switch it off immediately to stop any more escaping.

The reverse is also true of course. The smokier the general atmosphere, the better the equipment will work since if the original smoke escapes there is always plenty more to take its place. This is why so many computer programmers used to be such heavy cigarette smokers in the early days when the technology was so much less reliable than it is now. Surrounding the delicate equipment with clouds of smoke was the only way to guarantee that it would finish printing the Snoopy calendar (which is what computers were mostly used for twenty-five years ago).

However if you look up into the night sky you will notice that the planet Venus is completely covered by opaque clouds of smoke. So much so that nobody has ever seen the surface of the planet. Obviously, in such an atmosphere, the inhabitants must have the most incredibly reliable and advanced electronic equipment. I bet they routinely reach levels in **Doom** that the rest of us can only dream about.

This was brought home to me quite forcibly by a story that was published in the Wellington **Evening Post** of 4th August 1995. Since it was reported in a newspaper it must be true, and since it is true it is quite worrying in its implications for the future of one of New Zealand's major industries as well as for what it has to say about the state of the solar system.

The story pointed out that of the 14,000 sooty terns that have been ringed since 1961 only 145 have ever been observed since and it wondered what had happened to all the rest.

I would have thought it was quite obvious. Sooty terns are not native to the Earth at all. They come from Venus and merely use Earth for their vacations (just as our politicians do in the reverse direction). The fact that only 145 sooty terns have ever seen fit to return for a second holiday suggests that we are not very good at encouraging overseas tourism. (Of course, it may be that they find our anti-smoking pressure groups far too offensive, not to mention the

humiliation of the Customs and Immigration authorities forcing them to wear rings on their ankles). I think we need to make some radical changes to our official attitudes before we will be fit to take our rightful place in the society of the solar system.

So there we are. Isn't it just incredible how the study of science fiction and the application of a little bit of common sense reveals so much about the real structure of the universe?

The proofreader notes that in **A Short History of Time***, Stephen Hawking mentions that his publisher warned him that every time an equation appears in a book, the readership is halved. Since the Triffid has just supplied eight equations, he has therefore diminished* Phlogiston's *readership by a factor of two hundred and fifty-six and as there are only about a hundred and fifty people sensible enough to read* **Phlogiston***, he has therefore demonstrated Overkill, but only to a factor of two. It was not until the global thermonuclear craze reached a factor of five or so Beaches that it was recognised as crazy, and abated, so perhaps we should cut short this procedure and execute a pre-emptive shredder strike on the Triffid.*

Alternatively, we can encourage him to drink more of his special beer. If a full bottle weighs 500gms, and an empty 200gms, then the contents must weigh 300gms. Since beer has a density of one gram per cc (being water with a few dissolved extras) the contents should weigh 330gms so that there is a shortfall of 30gms. In other words, a rest mass of 330gms (in the bottle) becomes a moving mass of 300gms (in the Triffid): the formula is the same except for the use of mass instead of time, and so we deduce that the Triffid's velocity is about 45i % of the speed of light, a pure imaginary velocity. You are what you drink.

Nicky McLean (Whom God Preserve)

John Kilian Houston Brunner (1934–1995)

Phlogiston Forty-Four, 1995

John Brunner died of a stroke on Friday August 25th 1995 at the 53rd World Science Fiction Convention (Intersection) in Glasgow.

He was a prolific writer, mostly of SF though he wrote some thrillers, contemporary novels and poetry. His first novel was published when he was only 17 years old. He was a very productive writer and in the 1950s and 1960s he published a whole string of novels for Ace. Many of these were later re-written and re-published in the 1970s by DAW Books. By and large they were competent and entertaining works (Brunner was never less than competent), but essentially lightweight. However in 1968 he published the first of a series of novels that propelled him to science fiction stardom. **Stand on Zanzibar** was a stunning dystopian vision of an overpopulated world. The book was told in the style adopted by John Dos Passos for his ***USA*** novels and was perfectly suited to the world-wide canvas that Brunner had chosen to paint. It won the Hugo that year, and seldom has an award been more deserved. The book is just as stunning and just as timely today as it was then.

Three further dystopian novels followed, all thematically linked. **The Jagged Orbit** concerned the medical and industrial complexes of a tightly controlled political future. **The Sheep Look Up** dealt with the horrors of uncontrolled pollution, and **The Shockwave Rider** was an astonishingly prescient novel about a computerised world that explored the consequences of a global network. Brunner is generally considered to have been the first to describe (and even *name*) that very special type of computer program known as a worm. When Robert Morris brought most of the computers in America to their knees by unleashing the internet worm, Brunner was asked what he thought. He felt that Morris had prostituted his knowledge and should be locked up for a long time in total isolation away from contact with any computers at all. "But I want to talk to him first," he added thoughtfully.

The books marked the high point of his career. Though there were many other worthy works (he continued to be quite a prolific writer) none made as much impact as these. Towards the end of his life he became a little bitter about the lack of recognition. He felt that publishers were reluctant to take risks and published only safe, non-controversial works. He felt that as a professional writer he was constrained to "write to order" and that his artistic reputation suffered as a result. Sometimes this caused him to look down on some of his more popular and entertaining works. I feel this was an over-reaction. The novelist Graham Greene divided his books into "novels" and "entertainments" and he valued them both for what they were. Brunner's novels can also be divided between these categories and they deserve to be appreciated for exactly what they are -- superbly crafted works of fiction; some with a sub-text and some without. But it seems to me that all of them are worthy of respect.

Recently Brunner became somewhat reconciled to this point of view and declared his ambition to write and publish the best "light" science fiction of which he was capable. And indeed works such as **Muddle Earth** and **The Tides of Time** and **The Shift Key** are enormous fun. But even in these later stages of his career he produced books that were more than simple entertainments. Both **The Crucible of Time** which is concerned with a global catastrophe (and which has a cast of characters that contains not one single human being!) and **Children of the Thunder** which is about drug addiction and the decay of society are works as worthy as anything he was writing in his heyday twenty years ago.

Outside of science fiction, Brunner was a passionate advocate of nuclear disarmament. He was heavily involved with the early days of CND and wrote the so-called national anthem of the British peace movement **The H-Bombs Thunder**. He even wrote a mainstream novel about the Aldermaston marches (**The Days of March***)* but I sometimes think I am the only person in the world who has read it.

He had a delightful wit and a wicked sense of humour which is seldom seen in his novels -- though **Timescoop** is a hilarious romp through history culminating in a party in the Grand Canyon. He often indulged his sense of humour in his short stories and his collections (few though they are) are worth searching out because of it. He is also the only person in the entire universe to have written a limerick about the Scottish town of Kirkudbright (pronounced, approximately, K'*coo*-brih). You try it and see how far you get!

John was possessed of a posh, plummy British accent and a supercilious air which he deliberately cultivated. His public talks could often provoke his audiences to fury as he milked them for all he was worth. He enjoyed this enormously. In private though he was a sensitive, polite and charming man. I shared several drinks and conversations with him at British SF conventions in the early seventies and I enjoyed his company. I am saddened by his death.

In the Beginning

Phoenixine Seventy-Four, November 1995

With any luck this will turn into a semi-regular column wherein I will discuss some of the books I have been reading recently. The title comes from the fact that I have just returned from two weeks in Surfer's Paradise, where I was actually working very hard, though I don't expect anybody to believe me. Somehow two weeks in a luxury hotel with all expenses paid is seldom construed as work. Gosh, life is tough sometimes. Anyway, during those two weeks I read a fair number of books and they will probably serve as a good introduction to the sorts of things I'll be discussing in the future. So the title seemed appropriate. I might fool with it a bit in future columns; but it will do for now.

Anyway, I got up at an incredibly uncivilised hour (5:00am, reporting time for the flight was 6:25am -- why do planes *always* leave at uncivilised times) and having bought a Sunday

newspaper and confirmed that I was not a lotto millionaire, I dipped into **Permutation City** by Greg Egan. The story concerns a time when personalities can be re-created inside computers and a large part of the novel is set inside such virtual realities. It sounds clichéd and I must confess I would have avoided it like the plague except that recently Greg Egan has attracted a lot of favourable critical attention. So I assumed that there must be more to it than the surface gloss and I was right. A whole virtual city is created (complete with stowaway personalities) and towards the end the novel becomes quite transcendental as it speculates about what is really real. A great book which lasted me a good couple of days.

I followed it with a special treat that I'd been saving for myself. Christopher Priest is not a very prolific writer, and **The Prestige** is his first novel for about five years. I decided to read it slowly and savour it. Unfortunately that plan failed. The book grabbed me so completely that I simply raced through it at a huge pace. The book opens in the present day as a journalist, Andrew Westley, travels towards an interview. We learn he is an adopted child and that he feels the mysterious presence of a twin brother who all the records deny ever existed. The middle portion of the book concerns the rivalry of two stage magicians at the end of the nineteenth century. Each attempts to outperform and outstage the other (even, on occasion sabotaging the other's act). As the conjurors' journals make clear, both suffer attacks of conscience on occasion, but always something arises to fuel the fire of their feud. In different ways, both seek out the eccentric inventor Nikolas Tesla whose experiments with electricity seem to offer possibilities for stage magic. The final section of the book ties together these disparate threads of past and present in a manner I won't reveal, but it is both logical and satisfying. The book is a stunning achievement, elegantly written and structured like one of the magician's tricks that are the heart of the novel. Without a doubt, the best book I have read all year (and the year is ten months old as I write this).

I had quite a time still to go living in the lap of luxury, charging enormously expensive drinks to my room account and I decided that I needed a *really thick book* to slow me down a little. So I picked up **Memory and Dream** by Charles de Lint. The book is one his magical realism stories set (as are so many of his stories) in the fictional Canadian town of Newford. A young artist is apprenticed to the painter Vincent Rushkin. Like her teacher, she discovers that the act of painting is an act of real creation and the subjects of her paintings are brought across from some other reality and are brought to life here. She cannot stand the pain that this can bring (some of her paintings are destroyed in a fire and her creations die horribly) and she turns to abstract art in an attempt to avoid the responsibility her art has placed on her. And then she is persuaded to illustrate a book of stories by an old friend of hers who died several years earlier.

The book is large and the story is not. I usually enjoy de Lint's work, but I am afraid that this one simply does not work. The tale is too slight to bear both the weight of significance and the sheer drawn out length that De Lint imposes on it.

To occupy my remaining days of sybaritic luxury I turned to **The Iron Dragon's Daughter** by Michael Swanwick, an alchemical fantasy. Jane, a changeling child, is enslaved in a workhouse that manufactures iron dragons, terrible weapons of war. She finds a secret book of magic that details the schematics of one (now wrecked and ruined) dragon. Together they escape. They soon separate (though their lives intersect on occasions afterwards) and the remainder of the book is a picaresque exploration of an amazingly detailed fantasy world with unnerving resonances with our own. I particularly enjoyed Jane's university career where she studied for a degree in alchemy. Remembering my own studies for a degree in chemistry, I sympathised with her when her experiments failed to work (though I never resorted to the somewhat drastic methods that she has to invoke).

The novel is unclassifiable. Sort of like **Gormenghast** crossed with Disney and flavoured with a soupçon of Salvador Dali. Charles Dickens on steroids. I thoroughly enjoyed it and finished it wanting more. This is always a test of a good book.

By now I was facing a crisis. It was time to fly home and I had run out books. What to do? At the airport I bought two more, hoping to use them to while away the hours between (and during) flights. The first was **Age and Guile -- Beat Youth, Innocence and a Bad Haircut,** a collection of twenty five years of journalism by P. J. O'Rourke. Not science fiction, but who said I had to read SF all the time?

I like P. J. O'Rourke. If it makes sense to describe him as a right-wing Hunter Thompson you may get a rough idea of where he fits in to the pantheon of journalists. In his introduction, he points out that he starts out his career making fun of a second rate American president (Nixon) and winds up twenty five years later making fun of a second rate American president (Clinton). This causes him to wonder about the progress of his career. O'Rourke's ability to make fun of himself as well as of the society he reports on rescues so many of these pieces from the polemics they could so easily have turned into (the ones that were polemics he mocks from the perspective of later years and puts them in a new light). If you want to know what the ‘60s and ‘70s were really like you could do worse than read this book for its historical perspective. You may even get an insight into the ‘80s and ‘90s. You will definitely get a lot of laughs.

As the aeroplane landed at Auckland at 1:30am I was deep into **Dark Rivers of the Heart** by Dean Koontz. A large book which I judged to be just right for a journey that ended (as do all journeys, it would seem) at an uncivilised hour. The story is a sort of a chase movie. The hero (Spencer Grant, though that may not be his real name) is hunting for a girl he met once and fell in love with. Meanwhile, both he and the girl are being hunted by an unnamed secret (and highly unofficial and extra-legal) organisation. There are lots of murders, lots of high technology, satellites, computers and such. As a high tech thriller it is enormous fun (though I found the computer sections somewhat naively written even though the ideas they deal with are spot on and anything but naive). It is a sort of proto-SF I suppose and the computer technology and what is done with it makes the book almost cyberpunk. It is very trendy, full of networks and hackers. An enormous timewaster, but thoroughly entertaining.

Now that I am fully recovered from jet lag and have to buy my own drinks, I am reading **Pipes of Orpheus** by Jane Lindskold. But I'll tell you about that next time.

Greg Egan	**Permutation City**
Christopher Priest	**The Prestige**
Charles de Lint	**Memory and Dream**
Michael Swanwick	**The Iron Dragon's Daughter**
P. J. O'Rourke	**Age and Guile -- Beat, Youth and a Bad Haircut**
Dean Koontz	**Dark Rivers of the Heart**

It's Only Words

Phoenixine Seventy-Five, December 1995

Well, the holiday is over, but I'm still reading. Actually, I seldom stop. If I haven't got anything to read I get twitchy and irritable. I read things at every conceivable opportunity, though some of the opportunities I take astonish a lot of people. I used to have a landlord who was amazed at how long I took in the toilet and he put it down to the fact that I always took a book in there with me. However when pressed, he admitted that I wasn't as bad as one of his tenants who used to

go in there with a guitar.

I started this month with Jane Lindskold's new book, **The Pipes of Orpheus**. It is actually two novelettes rather than a novel. Both concern Orpheus, the character from the Greek myths who descended into the underworld in search of his great love Eurydice. He was given permission to take her back to the land of the living, provided that as she followed him out he never once looked back at her. Well, of course he did look back, and Eurydice was dragged back down into the underworld and Orpheus was left alone.

The experience unhinged him a bit (as well it might) and one of his later misdeeds was when he agreed to rid the German town of Hamelin of rats. The city fathers refused to pay him, and in revenge he took the children of the city back to his hidden realm with him. The book opens several years after this event with a group of children who have just escaped from his clutches.

The first novelette concerns their journey into the underworld as they run from Orpheus' pursuit. They go looking for Eurydice on the theory that if they find her and restore her to Orpheus he might treat them a little more kindly. The second novelette is set several years after their return. I can't say much more than that because if I do I may spoil things for you and that's the last thing I want to do. Suffice it to say that I enjoyed it hugely and I strongly urge you to seek it out. The book is an American paperback, published by AvoNova. Don't make the mistake of thinking that this is a children's book just because it has children in it. Anything but. It is gritty and bloody and hard boiled.

After I finished the Lindskold book I emerged from the toilet in search of more reading material and I picked up **Montezuma Strip** by Alan Dean Foster. A lot of people sneer at Alan Dean Foster. He is regarded as a bit of a hack, churning out countless movie novelisations and never-ending fantasy series. I can't deny the truth of this -- much of his work is dross. But there are many nuggets of gold buried there if you search hard enough.

The book consists of a series of short stories (originally published in **F&SF** under the pseudonym of James Lawson) which are set on the Mexican border in a sprawling industrial complex. The federale Angel Cardenas is an intuit, a policeman whose senses are so highly trained and tuned that he can almost read minds -- almost but not quite. He is merely very very good at interpreting body language and speech patterns. He knows when people are lying to him. The stories are about several of his cases.

In an introduction to the collection, Foster talks about money as a motivating factor. One of my pet hates (and Foster's as well) is the story set in some richly detailed future environment which is so economically unfeasible that you simply cannot take it seriously. Where did the money come from to build the vast spaceships that travel so aimlessly? How do they justify their existence? What social and economic climate sustains them? These questions are at the base of the stories he tells in **Montezuma Strip**.

It is a quite hallowed tradition, of course. Poul Anderson did much the same thing many years ago with his tales of the merchant Van Rijn. But such tightly controlled underpinnings to a story are fewer than they should be.

The first story in the collection (which is really just a scene setter) is by far and away the weakest, which is a shame. Two "designers" working for the two largest industrial complexes have vanished under mysterious circumstances. The story resolves nothing, and is merely and excuse for Foster to indulge himself in some futuristic cyberpunk slang and some technological McGuffins that turn out to be the deus ex machina that "solve" the problem. Very weak. But the rest of the stories are little gems.

I don't want you to think I spent the whole month in the toilet. Indeed not -- I spent some of it at Microsoft, on a Visual Basic training curse (no that isn't a spelling mistake). To while away the

bus journey I decided to re-read **Lonesome Dove** by Larry McMurtry. No -- it isn't SF, but it is a magnificent book. If you must categorise it, it's a western, and I always was a sucker for a good cowie (I like John Wayne movies too, at least when they are cowies directed by John Ford).

I first came across **Lonesome Dove** when it was TV miniseries several years ago. I religiously recorded it every week and watched it enthralled, but I never found out how it ended because on the day of the final episode I arrived home in the evening to find that my house had been burgled and the TV and video recorder (with the **Lonesome Dove** tape in it) had been stolen, doubtless by another cowie fanatic. Therefore, in order to find out how it ended, I bought the book and discovered it was one of the best cowies I'd ever read (the other, if you are interested, is **Monte Walsh** by Jack Schaeffer). Apart from telling an exciting story, the book is also tremendously funny, and it has pigs in it (which are not for rent -- this is quite important to the plot). I've read it several times over the years and I always enjoy it immensely. There is a sequel, **The Streets of Laredo** which is not quite as good, and rumour has it that there will soon be a prequel which I intend to buy as soon as I see it.

It is actually a rather rambling, picaresque novel. The characters drive a herd of cows from Texas to Montana. What makes the book work so well are the characters, the humour and (by direct contrast) the brutal, ugly violence. McMurtry pulls no punches and the book feels grittily real as a result. If you enjoy the company of heroes and outlaws, whores and ladies, Indians and settlers and the compulsive mingling of legend and fact (and the demythological insight you get into them all) then this is the book for you. Just as long as you don't want to rent a pig.

Then I went shopping and discovered a new book by Bill Bryson and my cup of happiness ran over. Bill Bryson, you will recall, is the author of **Mother Tongue**, a discussion about the English language wherein will be found the greatest palindrome ever conceived:

Satan oscillate my metallic sonatas

I have been a Bill Bryson fan ever since.

Bryson has also cornered the market in hilarious travel books and **Notes from a Small Island** is his latest. It concerns a journey round Britain, which sounds unpromising, but it is deep down, belly-achingly funny. Don't read it on the bus, people will refuse to sit near you in case you are infectious. We probably ought to have a book of the month in these columns -- well for my money this is it. I'd quote you a passage, but I'd probably have to write the whole book down and the Editor would run out of paper and the postage would be frightful. So just content yourself with this:

I didn't hate Milton Keynes immediately, which I suppose is as much as you could hope for the place.

Next on the list was a collection of stories by Lucius Shepard **The Ends of the Earth**. I picked it up cheap (in London Bookshops I think) otherwise I wouldn't have bothered because several of the stories have appeared in other collections. Is there ANYBODY who hasn't read ***Delta Sly Honey***? But there were also several new stories in there and considering the book was cheap, I can thoroughly recommend it. Keep an eye open in London Bookshops, you could do worse.

I'm off on my travels again. Actually by the time you read this I'll be back, but as I write these words my travels are in the future and next week I fly off to Sydney for a bit more luxury living and the week after I'm in Wellington and the living won't be quite so luxurious, but it will still have its moments. If I will have been seeing any of you then, I hope I will have been enjoying it; and I hope you will have been enjoying it too. Don't you just love the things English can do with verbs?

Alan Dean Foster	**Montezuma Strip**	Aspect
Larry McMurtry	**Lonesome Dove**	Pan
Bill Bryson	**Notes From a Small Island**	Doubleday
Lucius Shepard	**The Ends of the Earth**	Millenium

A Large number of Books

Phoenixine Seventy-Six, January 1996

I have a friend who, when I meet him for drinks or dinner, always asks me "What have you been reading lately?". Usually my mind goes completely blank and I gape at him like a worm in a tequila bottle. But now I no longer have a problem. I simply hand him a copy of the latest Phoenixine and maintain an enigmatic silence. As a diary of my reading it is remarkably illuminating. It wasn't until I started keeping notes for these things that I realised exactly how many books I read, or how mixed they were. This month is no exception.

I started off with the new novel by Iain Banks. It is called **Whit**. Since it is by Iain Banks rather than Iain M. Banks, it probably isn't science fiction, although like virtually all of his books it has SF overtones. I fell in love with Banks' writing many years ago when his first novel **The Wasp Factory** was published. Though probably best described as a shaggy dog story with literary pretensions, it retained sufficient verve and power to hold my undivided attention and I have followed his career with interest ever since. His SF (as by Iain M. Banks) is generally mediocre-certainly not a patch on his magnificent mainstream novels, and **Whit** is black and brilliant, shot through with sardonic Scottish humour. The first person narrator is Isis Whit, the Elect of God of the Luskentyrian sect, a small religious community based near Stirling. The cult was founded by her grandfather shortly after he was rescued from a shipwreck by two lovely Pakistani sisters, with whom he lived in lust for many years. As a result of this cross-cultural Scottish-Pakistani fertilisation, the Luskentyrians have a rather odd diet and on occasion Isis waxes lyrical about the taste of haggis pakoras.

The novel takes Isis out of her closed community into the world of 1990s Britainand Banks uses her odyssey as a mechanism to comment on what she sees. Stated thus it sounds boring (everybody has done this, from Voltaire on downwards). But the novel is anything but boring. By turns hilarious, thrilling, romantic and sad, it tells a rollicking good tale and makes serious social comments as well. The dénouement, where Isis finds out exactly how and why the Luskentyre Sect was formed is wonderfully ironic. I cannot recommend this book too highly (mind you, I say this about all the Iain Banks books).

On a high from this literary experience, I turned to **Amnesia Moon** by Jonathan Lethem. I picked this one up on the strength of his first novel, **Gun With Occasional Music** which was brilliant. The blurb on **Amnesia Moon** was quite enticing (... with a fur covered girl named Melinda, Chaos sets out ... to the Western edge of the American Nightmare...). Don't bother. It's terrible. So involutedly American as to be almost incomprehensible to non-Americans and striving so hard for effect as to seem strained and artificial. Read his first book instead, it's much better.

However there is always Jack Yeovil. Well actually there isn't since his real name is Kim Newman. I first encountered Kim Newman when I read his novel **Anno Dracula** which is set

shortly after the events of the Bram Stoker novel The twist is that in this universe Dracula won, Van Helsing was beheaded and Jonathan Harker killed. Dracula transformed Victorian England, becoming a pillar of the community and marrying Victoria herself. As the novel opens, London is full of vampires (a very fashionable state to be in) and a vicious murderer known as Silver Knife is embarked on campaign of terror as he slaughters vampire prostitutes. In a letter to a newspaper he refers to himself as Jack the Ripper -- but the name doesn't really catch on. Newman has recently written a sequel to this book called **The Bloody Red Baron**, a World War I vampire novel, it would seem, and I look forward to reading it.

Anyway, I was most impressed by Kim Newman, particularly as I tracked down his other books. In the introductions and afterwords I discovered that he also wrote novels set in the Warhammer universe under the pseudonym of Jack Yeovil. You've probably seen these on the shelves -- novels set in trashy role-playing universes. They have garish covers and revolting blurbs designed, it seems, to repel the buyer. But what the hell, I'm not proud and so I bought **Drachenfels** and read it on an aeroplane trip to Wellington. This was fun because I was sitting next to a staid businessman with a laptop computer he didn't know how to use properly and he kept glancing disapprovingly at the trash I was immersed in. (And I kept glancing disapprovingly at the trash he was immersed in as well).

Drachenfels is absolutely brilliant. Ignore the cover and the blurb. Listen to this:

> Above them the fortress of Drachenfels stood against the crimson sky, its seven turrets thrust skyward like the taloned fingers of a deformed hand. This was where their adventures would end, in a fortress older than the Empire, and darker than death. The lair of the Great Enchanter
>
> Drachenfels!

I know, I know. In most hands you would get a huge novel (or perhaps a trilogy) wherein a brave band of companions overcome huge perils as they go up against the might of the evil enchanter and finally defeat him and live happily ever after. Well in this novel, all that stuff happens in a half a dozen pages in the prologue and the novel itself is concerned with the efforts of a playwright/producer to stage a re-creation of the events as a drama in the ruins of the original castle. By turns witty and thought-provoking, this is a detective story (there is a murder to solve), a travelogue, a philosophical discourse and a treatise on the difficulties of staging a play. I loved it.

One of the major characters is a vampire called Genevieve. She also appears in **Anno Dracula** and is the eponymous heroine of **Genevieve Undead** a collection of novellas also by Jack Yeovil. I should point out that Jack Yeovil has also written a novel called **Orgy of the Blood Parasites**. Now who could resist a title like that? Certainly not me. I've read that one too and it is just the sort of book you would expect it to be. I particularly liked the scene with the carrot. Kim Newman/Jack Yeovil is definitely a writer to watch.

Then, at very short notice, I got a trip to Sydney, so it was back to the life of an expense account again. While I gloomily watched my waistline expanding under the influence of free food and drink, I went shopping for books and I found **Yours, Isaac Asimov -- A Life in Letters** edited by Stanley Asimov. This is a collection culled from Asimov's voluminous correspondence with fans and editors and authors and friends (often the same people!). It is edited by his brother Stanley who, most unfortunately, died shortly before the book was published.

He did a wonderful editing job. Isaac Asimov's unique voice shouts out of every page. Here, with his hair let down, are his opinions on this and that and the other. Stanley has divided the book into chapters on topics as various as "Typewriters, Word Processors and Computers",

"Editors and Publishers", "Limericks and Oddities", "Being Jewish", "Being an Atheist". Isaac Asimov had opinions on all of these things and many more besides. This book is a most moving and beautiful memorial to both the Asimov brothers.

I also managed to pick up some books by Peter F. Hamilton, a new English writer. **Mindstar Rising**, and **A Quantum Murder** are set in a future England where the greenhouse effect and global warming have got completely out of control. The rising sea levels have flooded the lower lying areas of the country like the fens and in the chaos the Peoples Socialist Party (PSP) have taken over the reins of government in a totalitarian and corrupt regime that is hated by the people. The first novel opens shortly after the PSP has been overthrown in a bloody revolution. The hero, Greg Mandel, is an ex-member of the Mindstar Brigade. He has a psi-enhancing gland in his brain and can read emotions and has an enhanced intuition. He has seen active service with the army in Turkey and was one of the leaders of the resistance against the PSP. Both novels concern his investigation, as a sort of private detective, of industrial sabotage with alarming social implications. Hamilton handles the multiple threads of these novels with enviable skill and gives us a classical "whodunit" (and to an extent, a "whydunit") in a very convincing future world. I highly recommend the books. There is a third novel, **The Nano-Flower**, but I have not yet read it. Perhaps next month.

Back in New Zealand and back to normality, I relaxed with **The Garden of Unearthly Delights**, the new novel by Robert Rankin. Like all his novels, it is almost indescribable (but I'll try) and full of terrible jokes and puns. The novel introduces a news crumpet. A news crumpet is the woman who sits beside the (male) news reader and reads the silly stories that are beneath his dignity. All major news broadcasts have a news crumpet, you must have noticed. This particular news crumpet is called Miss Talier. Miss Jenny Talier.

See what I mean?

The Earth has entered a new age, a time of legend and heroes, romance, wizardry and wonder. Max Karrien (aka Max Carrion) is an imagineer and that is the last logical thing that happens in the book. The rest is indescribable (like most of Rankin's novels, come to think of it) which probably explains why the blurb has virtually nothing at all to do with the plot. Mind you, very little has anything to do with the plot. Even the plot has very little to do with the plot. I think it ends happily. I think it ends. I think.

It was definitely time for Roger Zelazny. **Forever After** was the last book he worked on before his death. It is a fantasy. The scenario posits a time when the forces of evil have been thoroughly defeated by the forces of good, with the help, of course, of four magical artefacts. Now that their purpose is accomplished, the artefacts must be returned from whence they came. Four novelettes by Robert Asprin, David Drake, Jane Lindskold and Mike Stackpole describe the adventures of the heroes and heroines as they struggle to accomplish their mission. These stories are joined by linking material written by Roger Zelazny himself. He maintained very firm editorial control over the project and insisted that the fantasy elements of the stories be strongly leavened by humour and the same sardonic wit that was peculiarly his shines through all the material. I loved it. Even the artefacts are funny -- I particularly liked the magical ring Sombrisio, which farts a lot and insults everybody.

I'll finish up this month with the new novel by Jack McDevitt. Of whom you may well say *who?* Well he has written two rather good novels, **The Hercules Text** and **A Talent for War**. Now comes his third, **The Engines of God** and it is his best yet. It is an archeological thriller -- not a common genre, I'll grant you. Scattered across various planets in the galaxy are artefacts left by an ancient race. Statues and cities and inscriptions. They are majestic and puzzling at the same time. Why does a planet have a city on its moon when the inhabitants of the planet never developed space travel? Why does the city consist of solid blocks of stone? Each building is solid all the way through. Why is the city partially destroyed as if by fire?

I'm not going to tell you why, that would be a spoiler of massive proportions and most unfair. Suffice it to say that there is a good reason. The further into the book you get, the more puzzling the mysteries become. Strangeness piles upon strangeness, (and also insight upon insight). There is tragedy and splendour here and a truly satisfying climax made even more so by the light it sheds retrospectively over the book as a whole. It makes you want to go back and read it again immediately with the benefit of your new understanding. This is quintessential science fiction and the sense of wonder tingle in the spine is absolutely authentic. Books like this one are the reason we all started reading this stuff in the first place.

Iain Banks	**Whit**
Jonathan Lethem	**Amnesia Moon**
Kim Newman	**Anno Dracula**
Jack Yeovil	**Drachenfels**
	Genevieve Undead
	Orgy of the Blood Parasites
Stanley Asimov (Editor)	**Yours, Isaac Asimov**
Peter F. Hamilton	**Mindstar Rising**
	A Quantum Murder
Robert Rankin	**The Garden of Unearthly Delights**
Roger Zelazny	**Forever After**
Jack McDevitt	**The Engines of God**

There's a Pigeon in the Hole

***Phlogiston Forty-Five**, 1996*

Categories can be useful, particularly when you are trying to find a specific book buried somewhere inside an enormous bookshop. Doubtless the shop will have an SF section (and they'll probably call it Sci-Fi, but we lost that battle many years ago). Maybe there will be a detective novel section, a history section, a humour section -- all there to aid you in your quest for the perfect book that presses all your buttons. However, convenient though this system is, I'm not sure that I fully approve of it. For one thing it blinds you to those authors whose works appear in more than one of the categories. There are more of these than you might at first think.

It was the recent death of Sir Kingsley Amis that got me musing along these lines. He was always one of my literary heroes. In common with everybody else I read **Lucky Jim** and marvelled at the subversive humour of it. Amis was one of the "angry young men" of the 1950s. A label he detested. The book still reads well today, although it no longer seems quite as subversive as once it did. The fashionable angers of the time have become more commonplace concerns or have disappeared entirely.

There are occasional references to science fiction in the book and I remember picking these out with glee when I first read it (Jim, as I recall, makes "Martian faces" in his mirror, for example). I also remember being quite delighted by a scatological joke in another early Amis novel. I think it was **One Fat Englishman**. The hero is out gallivanting with a scrumptious Portuguese girl whom he fancies like crazy. However he isn't getting very far since he speaks no Portuguese and she speaks no English. During the course of this monoglot semi-seduction he feels an enormous fart building up. Part of his mind refuses to worry about it -- after all, if he farts he'll be doing it in English and she won't understand!

Anyway, I was not at all surprised to find that Amis was a science fiction fan. He went on to publish one of the first critical works on the genre (**New Maps of Hell**) and in the 1960s, in collaboration with Robert Conquest he edited the **Spectrum** anthologies. These were quite powerful and influential anthologies (at least in Britain), somewhat on a par with the **Best SF** series edited by the pseudonymous Edmund Crispin (his real name was Bruce Montgomery and, interestingly, he was a good friend of Amis') and they did a lot to popularise the field in Britain where the SF magazines in which the stories were first published were very difficult to come across. Somehow it seems quite appropriate that the two most original and interesting science fiction anthologies of the British post-war era were both edited by people from outside the science fiction world.

Amis even wrote several science fiction novels, although they were seldom recognised as such by the literati. But however you define science fiction there is no doubt that **The Alteration** and **Russian Hide and Seek** are firmly inside the borders. I could even put together a good case for **The Green Man** (where God has a small, walk-on part), and **The Anti-Death League**, though I am willing to admit that the evidence is not quite as strong here.

The point, of course, is that Amis was a writer who recognised that categories existed, but who refused to let himself be bound by them. If he had an idea for a book he simply wrote the book without worrying too much about which shelf it might eventually be filed on. Many of his works are simply novels -- you and I might refer to them as "mainstream". But equally as many belong to one of the genre fictions if you care to make that distinction.

Some critics would consider all of his books to be simply the work of a member of the literary establishment and would look no further. When you gain a certain literary reputation, smaller sins like science fiction novels tend to be recognised but dismissed as irrelevant. This is far too narrow and parochial a judgement and Amis himself would have hated it. In **Memoirs**, his delightfully bitchy collection of autobiographical essays, he makes his feelings on this topic abundantly plain. Amis was above all that sort of thing (or below it, depending on your point of view). He was fully aware of the genre novels and of their place in the world, and he knew exactly how and why they generated the passions that they do. In an essay published in the collection **What Became of Jane Austen? and other Questions** he wrote:

> The minor genres such as science fiction, jazz, the Western and the detective story can (I think) only be deeply appreciated and properly understood by the addict, the bulk consumer who was drawn to the stuff in late childhood for reasons he could not have explained then and would have a lot of trouble explaining now.

Amis himself was just such an addict as other essays in this and other books make abundantly clear. Consequently it comes as no real surprise to find that among his published works are detective stories, spy stories and SF stories. (I don't recall any Westerns or any jazz records, but I am willing to be corrected on this).

If this was peculiar to Kingsley Amis then I suppose we could simply dismiss him as a minor eccentric and move on to something else. But it turns out to be a surprisingly common

phenomenon. It transcends artistic boundaries (not only the literati go slumming) and it seems to be almost exclusively a British trait. There are examples from other countries, but they are far fewer and far less significant. Let's take a closer look...

I think that at some point in our lives we have all been faced with trying to justify and explain our strange hobby to some doubting person or other.

("Why do you read this rubbish?"
"It isn't rubbish!
"Prove it.")

One defence that springs to mind is to try and list all the science fiction books that have been accepted by the mainstream. We point to **Brave New World** by Aldous Huxley, and **1984** by George Orwell. We probably mention H. G. Wells and perhaps Anthony Burgess (**A Clockwork Orange** and various others) and William Golding (**The Lord of the Flies** and several other SF related works). Depending on our audience we might go further back in time and discuss **Gulliver's Travels** by Jonathan Swift and **Tristram Shandy** by Lawrence Sterne. Actually, I'm not sure if **Tristram Shandy** is science fiction, but whatever it is, it is undeniably odd and it has as good a claim to being science fiction, or at least fantasy, as it does to being anything else. How else would you describe a book where the narrator hasn't been born yet?

The interesting thing about all these examples is that in every case the writer was not writing SF for the love of it, he was writing SF for the sake of the story, the message and the theme (or the sub-text if that is your literary bent). Indeed, several of our favourite mainstream colleagues couldn't have even known that they *were* writing science fiction since the term and the genre did not exist when they were putting their words on to dead trees. Anyway, it's irrelevant. None of these writers (and half a dozen more that I could name) felt that they were doing anything out of the ordinary when they wrote their books. They merely wrote what the story required. (I once heard Gene Wolfe comment that what he wrote was just stuff. What happened to it after it went to the publisher was their business and had nothing to do with him). In other words the literary boundaries that you and I may force on to our reading are often meaningless to the writers who produce it. Sometimes I suspect that the tail is wagging the dog.

I doubt if Wells saw any real distinction between the scientific romances of **The Time Machine** and **The War of the Worlds** and the sociological commentary of **Kipps** and **The History of Mr Polly**. Amis and Wells represent perhaps the two extremes in their approaches. Wells probably didn't even recognise that different categories of fiction existed at all, at least not to the extent that we do today. Literary categories were much more fluid in his time. Amis recognised their existence but felt little interest in such artificial distinctions. Both approaches lead to the same end result, of course. The writer simply writes the book that he writes without any feeling of slumming at all. Under this rubric, the only thing that separates the genre writer from the mainstream is that the mainstream writer has a far greater spread and the genre specialist can thus be considered to be far too narrow-minded for his own good. Now there's a thought to play with -- the SF writer as a conservative literary reactionary! (Do I hear you cry "Anathema!"?)

You can see the phenomenon much more clearly when you examine that peculiarly British genre, the detective story. Currently, under the guidance of Ruth Rendell and P. D. James it is becoming almost respectable (and I note, in passing, that P. D. James has also written an excellent SF novel called **The Children of Men**), but it was not always so. Once it was just another genre category. Enormous fun, but no more than that.

Not that it stopped anybody, of course. The British literary establishment took that genre to their hearts and quite deliberately wrote in it (as opposed to writing books that just happened to be of the genre because of their subject matter). Cecil Day Lewis may have been the poet laureate, but it didn't stop him churning out detective novels under the pseudonym of Nicholas Blake. The Oxford don J. I. M. Stewart wrote erudite novels under his own name and detective novels as

Michael Innes. Colin Watson wrote a loving history of the English crime novel called **Snobbery with Violence** and some of the names he mentions might surprise you.

Even in our own narrow field, the genre has its crossovers (if I may be allowed a neologism). There are those who claim that the American writer Fredric Brown was a much better crime writer than he was an SF writer. Certainly he wrote far more of it; though his work was more American in its approach and often lacked the quite rigid structural requirements that the British authors imposed on themselves. Jack Vance has written several crime/mystery novels and won an Edgar (the crime equivalent of the SF Hugo award) for his novel **The Man in the Cage**. Even Asimov flirted with it. See, for example, **A Whiff of Death** and **Authorised Murder** (aka **Murder at the ABA**). John Sladek paid homage to the genre with **Invisible Green** and while sticking closely to the formula, managed to have a lot of irreverent fun as well. But such examples of crossovers between genres, while interesting, are not really germane to the thesis since with the possible exception of Asimov the writers are not mainstream artists. They are simply genre writers exchanging one genre for another which is not at all the same thing, as I'm sure you'd agree.

Oddly, this rather catholic attitude to literary discrimination is almost exclusively British. It is interesting to note that *all* of the mainstream authors whose names I invoked in an attempt to defend SF are British. I would be very hard pressed to name any American writers of equivalent stature. Mark Twain, perhaps Kurt Vonnegut (though he is somewhat of a special case being more of a science fiction writer who was adopted by the mainstream). Perhaps categorisations are perceived of as being more important on the other side of the pond?

Americais not without mainstream writers of merit -- far from it. But the Faulkners, the Salingers, the Scott-Fitzgeralds, the Updikes etc. all seem more rigidly bound to their artistic model than their British equivalents. (Though both Faulkner and Scott-Fitzgerald worked in Hollywood and wrote screenplays). John Barth's monumentally unreadable **Giles, Goat Boy** is sometimes claimed by SF purists looking desperately for mainstream respectability, but I remain unconvinced. It seems to me to be more of an early example of the sort of ‘magical realism' that we associate with the South Americans (Gabrial García Márquez *et al*) than it is an example of fantasy or SF. Perversely, the thing that commonly strikes me about magical realism is how *unreal* it all seems; it feels fuzzy and out of focus and there is a curious distancing effect which makes the books extremely difficult to read. I will never know whether or not Salman Rushdie's **The Satanic Verses** is sacrilegious since I simply cannot struggle through the opaque descriptive language of the beginning. Perhaps I am all the poorer for that -- but I doubt it.

The lack of a categorical distinction manifests itself in other British arts as well. I remember feeling vaguely shocked when Sir Ralph Richardson played the Supreme Being in the film **Time Bandits**. I don't know why I should have been. After all, Sir Laurence Olivier was in **Boys from Brazil** and Sir John Gielgud was in **Arthur** and its sequel. But, snobbishly, one can't help feeling that it is something of a come down for them. That's an utterly ridiculous thing to say, of course and by saying it I am falling into exactly the same trap as those who accuse Kingsley Amis of slumming when he writes SF. Actually I would be willing to bet that Ralph Richardson enjoyed himself enormously. Maybe they gave him a motor bike to drive to work on. He liked motor bikes -- the heavier, faster and meaner they were, the better he liked them. Some of his theatre performances were thought to be quite stiff by critics who were unaware that he'd broken his ribs again in yet another motor bike accident.

One of the things that distinguishes the science fiction novel is its ability to hold up a distorting mirror to society (and it is a major reason why Swift, Huxley and Orwell chose to write their great works in the way that they did). Perhaps this is the reason why mainstream writers are so often attracted to it. When it works (which it does surprisingly often) the result is often memorable. Perhaps the best recent example of this is Margaret Attwood's **The Handmaid's Tale** which I felt was a *tour de force*. However when the experiment fails to work the results are generally dire. The most notorious example of this to my mind being Doris Lessing's **Canopus**

in Argos series which I found (dare I say it?) embarrassingly naive. In fairness I have to point out that some critics do not agree with me. John Clute, for example, has praised the series highly.

Often when the mainstream writer goes slumming it is the vocabulary of the field that lets them down. Samuel Delany has remarked that SF can be characterised by the special sense that it gives to the meanings of words. He points out that in a contemporary mainstream work the phrase "He turned on his left side" is quite innocuous and probably refers to somebody turning over in bed. However in an SF setting the words take on a whole new significance that they never had before. Is the character a robot who leaves his right side turned off? These word games are not unusual in English, of course. It's one of the characteristics that makes the language so much fun to use. The canonical example is the extraordinary number of different ways that you can parse "Time flies like an arrow." But it is definitely an extra stumbling block when attempting to write SF. Paul Theroux (better known as a travel writer) has stumbled here on occasion.

Even though the evidence suggests that in Britainat least, the walls we build between categories are flimsier than they are elsewhere, it still remains a rare thing for a writer to be well respected in both the genre and the mainstream worlds. However in the 1990s one writer has managed quite successfully to make a huge reputation for himself in both areas. Not surprisingly he is British (or to be more accurate, Scottish) and his name is Iain Banks on his mainstream novels and Iain M. Banks on his SF. The ‘M' stands for ‘Menzies'.

His first published book was **The Wasp Factory** in 1984. It took the literary world by storm. Stanley Reynolds, writing in Punch claimed that it was a minor masterpiece and the Financial Times reviewed it as "...a story of quite exceptional quality...". It is certainly surreal and grotesque and the ending of the book has always appeared to me to be rather like the punch line of a shaggy dog story. For that reason I have always felt it was his weakest book.

In 1985 he published **Walking on Glass**. Again this was accepted by the mainstream critics as simply another book. Slightly weird perhaps, but in the words of the literary critic of the Observer "Inexorably powerful... sinister manipulations and magnetic ambiguities". I don't know what that means, but it sounds impressive. The point though is that while you can't describe the book as science fiction (if it is anything, it is a paranoid nightmare mingled with a coming of age story) there is absolutely no doubt that it was written by a science fiction fan. The novel is full of references to the field and the knowledgeable person will have enormous fun playing ‘spot the SF trope' as they devour the book. It was obviously going to be only a matter of time before he wrote something that belonged fairly and squarely in the field proper.

His third novel was a very surreal Kafka-esque nightmare called **The Bridge**. Again there were quite a lot of SF references and a side-splittingly hilarious demolition of the cliché barbarian hero. This sword-wielding Conan look-alike has a broad Glaswegian accent and appears to have been born in the Gorbles. All three of these novels established Banks' mainstream reputation and led Fay Weldon to call him "... the great white hope of contemporary British Literature."

With his fourth novel, **Consider Phlebas**, he stopped messing about. This was simon-pure science fiction and was marketed as such. In this and several other novels and short stories Banks explored the universe of ‘the Culture'. Unusually for the type of space opera that Banks was writing in these books the Culture is not an interstellar empire and neither is it a large corporation nor an amorphous power hungry organisation. Rather it is a loose, but complex socialist commune-writ-large and as such is probably unique in the genre.

If you want to know more about Banks, and if you have access to the internet, you will find **Culture Shock -- The unofficial Iain M Banks information site** at http://www.futurehi.net/phlebas

This site contains (among other things) links to a Banks bibliography, notes on some unpublished stories and a link to a paper by Iain Banks himself which discusses the political, economic and social ideas behind the universe in which he sets most of his science fiction. It is called ***A Few Notes on the Culture*** and will be found at http://nuwen.net/culture.html

Banks has published fourteen books to date. Of these six are firmly SF and most of the rest contain overt or covert SF references. (**Canal Dreams** for example, is firmly a mainstream book and yet it is set in the year 2000). Banks, it seems, cares little for pigeonholes. He just writes books.

In confirmation of this, in an interview with the BBC at the 1995 World Convention in Glasgow, Banks was asked why he distinguished between his genre and non-genre writings by putting different names on them. His reply was that he rather wished he hadn't and in retrospect it was probably a mistake -- though perhaps it was too late to change it now. In one sense, that begs the question, but it does illustrate the lack of distinction that Banks' consciously makes between the categories that others slot his books into.

But that just makes him the latest in a very long and very distinguished line.

Bob Shaw (1931–1996)

Phlogiston Forty-Five, 1996

Bob Shaw's initial involvement in science fiction was as a fan. He obtained his first copy of *Astounding* at the age of twelve, read it, and was hooked for life. In an essay the fanzine **Hyphen**, he remarked:

> ...for the next five years [I] never gave a single serious thought to anything but science fiction. This monomania gave me a lot of personal pleasure and satisfaction -- in fact I was deliriously happy for those five years -- but it had an unfortunate drawback in that by the time I was old enough to start work I was virtually unemployable... I cared for nothing but science fiction, knew nothing but science fiction, was bone lazy and utterly without ambition. Into the bargain I was tremendously proud -- I was the only SF reader I knew and really reckoned myself one of the star-begotten.

However his solitary state was not to last long and eventually he met up with other fans, most notable among these being Walt Willis and James White (who later became famous as the author of the Sector General stories). In 1954 in collaboration with Willis, Bob Shaw published his first "book", a slim fan publication called **The Enchanted Duplicator.** This allegory of SF fans and fan related activities is written in a mock-heroic style and details the fantasy adventures of Jophan as he scales the Mountains of Inertia and journeys through many perils to reach the paradise of Trufandom. Along the way he must contend with the Hekto Swamp and the Torrent of Overdrinking. He must fight his way past the Hucksters and avoid the Glades of Gafia. And so on, but you get the idea. This little allegory seemed to strike a chord, and almost uniquely among fan publications, continues to be regularly republished. My copy is dated 1983 and is the eighth edition. Heaven knows how many more there have been since then. Jophan's Quest has itself entered the fannish folklore (and New Zealandfan Bruce Bern once published a board game based around Jophan's adventures).

Even after Bob began to make a full time living as a professional SF writer, he never lost his love of fandom and things fannish and in 1979 and 1980 he won Hugo awards for his fannish writings, awards of which he was fiercely proud.

In the 1950s he published quite a lot of short stories in the professional magazines, but then fell silent for several years. He returned to writing in the mid 1960s and the short story ***Light of Other Days*** (1966) gained him a Nebula nomination and a reputation as a writer of remarkable ingenuity. The story revolves around a genuinely original SF notion -- slow glass is a substance through which light takes years to travel. Hence it can absorb images of (say) a beautiful view and give up these images decades later after it has been installed as a window in (say) an industrial office block in a grimy suburb. The view that it shows is a view of the past, and historical events may be viewed in real time (if the glass had been properly positioned to view them all those years ago). This story was later incorporated into the fix up novel **Other Days, Other Eyes**.

Bob once told me that he carried the notion of slow glass around in his head for years, waiting for the right story to use it in. He said that it was too glorious a notion to waste on a trivial story. It needed the right plot to illuminate the idea properly. He compared the plot to a jeweller's setting which, if properly designed, would show off a diamond brilliantly, but which if shoddily designed would detract from the beauty of the diamond set in it. He thought of and discarded dozens of plots before he found one that he felt would set the idea properly.

Bob became a full time writer in 1975 and over the years published almost thirty books -- novels and story collections. All were well received and all were ingenious and entertaining. He took great delight in exploring odd notions and he played the game of "what if" most convincingly. What if there really were a proper Dyson Sphere discovered? (**Orbitsville**). What if there existed two planets which orbited each other and shared a common atmosphere? Could explorers travel between them by balloon? (**The Wooden Spaceships**). What if there existed an anti-neutrino world orbiting ***inside*** the Earth? (**A Wreath of Stars**). He also explored many of the classical SF themes and wrote what could be considered the definitive treatment of some of them. Immortality (**One Million Tomorrows**), parallel worlds (**The Two Timers**), interstellar warfare (**The Palace of Eternity**), alien invasion (**The Ceres Solution**), the list goes on and on.

But the one aspect of Bob Shaw the man that seldom surfaced in his professional writing (though it permeated his fan writing) was his wonderfully rich sense of humour. He wrote a regular column in Walt Willis' fanzine **Hyphen.** The column was called **The Glass Bushel** (Bob felt that was the best sort of bushel to hide your light behind). He contributed to many other fan publications. And he gave serious scientific talks at conventions.

Nobody who attended one of these will ever forget them. A diffident, utterly stone faced Bob Shaw would stand at the front of a crowded hall reading his talk from a prepared script and looking slightly bemused at the gales of laughter wafting up from the audience.

> ...I hadn't had a drink for about half an hour, and you know how it is with booze -- a long period of abstinence like that really whets your appetite for it. I think I may possibly have imbibed a little too much because this morning I had a bad headache and there was no alka-seltzer or aspirin. Luckily one of the committee was kind enough to nip out and get me some pain-killer they make in a little shop just around the corner from here -- it's a local anaesthetic -- and that enabled me to come here as planned and tell you all about the Bermondsey triangle mystery...

The jokes would build and build, outrage piling upon outrage. I do not exaggerate at all when I say that I have seen people crying with laughter at Bob's talks, so weak with hysteria that they were incapable of getting off their chair and walking for several minutes after Bob finished speaking. And not once did his face slip. How he managed such perfect self control is beyond me.

But those of us who knew him will remember him not for his novels, his fan writing or his humour (important though those things were), but for his wonderful personality. He was warm and friendly and he loved to meet people and talk about anything under the sun for hours at a time. I knew Bob, on and off, for nearly quarter of a century and I spent many, many delightful hours in his company. He stayed in my house as a guest once and during that week I don't think I ever got to bed before about three in the morning as we shared drinks and conversation. He was a man of whom it can truly be said that everyone who met him loved him. I never, ever heard anyone say anything but good about Bob Shaw. There were no "fan feuds" as far as Bob was concerned.

The day after Bob died I had to install a Unix operating system on a computer. One of the things this requires you to do is give the computer a name. I called it **jophan**.

Bah Humbug!

Phoenixine Seventy-Seven, February 1996

For once the ***What I read on my Holidays*** title is true since this report is about the books I read over Christmas / New Year when I was on holiday and had little else to do except read.

Thirty years ago, in my teens, I fell in love with the books of Sir Henry Rider Haggard (the author of **She** and **King Solomon's Mines** etc). I read a trilogy of his -- they had the same publishing phenomena at the turn of the century as they have today -- and I was hooked. The books were just magnificent and I devoured them. Then I had to take them back to the library and I was desolate. I desperately wanted to own them!

In the years that have elapsed since then I have several times spotted two of the books in second hand bookshops, but never all three together. I wanted all three, so I resisted buying. Then just before Christmas a second hand book dealer found them for me. All three at once. He wrote me a letter -- did I still want them?

Y E S ! !

I didn't really have to reply to his letter. I'm sure he heard my shriek of glee.

The first thing I did over Christmas was re-read those most magical books.

They are **Marie**, **Child of Storm** and **Finished**. All concern the adventures of Allan Quartermain (who was also the hero of **King Solomon's Mines** and several other Haggard books). They feature quite prominently a Zulu witch doctor called Zikali, otherwise known as Opener-of-the-Roads and sometimes the "Thing that should never have been born". Zikali is the master mind behind a devious plot. Because of a great wrong done to him by Chaka, the Zulu king, Zikali plans to overthrow the whole royal house of the Zulu nation and grind it into dust. The novels concern his manoeuvrings against Dingaan and Panda (Chaka's brothers) and Cetewayo the son of Panda. (The fall of Chaka himself is detailed in **Nada the Lily** -- a book which is not strictly part of the series since it does not involve Allan Quartermain).

They were even more wonderful than I remembered. They are by turns romantic, bloody, magical and mysterious. They have triumphs and tragedies, great loves and great deaths. They are everything a good adventure book should be. Graham Greene said:

> Rider Haggard was perhaps the greatest of all the writers who enchanted us when we were young. Enchantment was just what he exercised; he fixed pictures in our minds that thirty years have been unable to wear away.

Greene said that thirty years on from his first reading, and now I am thirty years on from my first reading and he is perfectly correct.

After the sheer nostalgic wallowing of those three books, whatever I read next would have to be a little bit of a come down. And it was -- but I suspect it would have been anyway. The book was **Magic** by Isaac Asimov. It proclaims itself to be "The Final Fantasy Collection"; putting together all the previously unpublished stories (and some articles) that can be classified as having something to do with fantasy.

It is a weak collection with far too much editorial hyperbole. The introduction states:

> And like the great Victorians, Asimov worked at his writing desk
> until the day he died.

This is a lie. Asimov's final illness weakened him too much and though doubtless he would have liked to have died in harness, as it were, he was simply unable to keep working towards the end. There are reports that this saddened him greatly.

There are several new Azazel stories in the book (they are trite and less Wodehousian than the ones that were published in the Azazel collection). There is a new Black Widowers story and a couple of traditional fairy tales. All are lightweight. Of the twenty articles in the book, eleven have appeared in other collections (four have appeared in *two* other collections) and the previously uncollected articles are of little interest.

All in all, a disappointing book.

I followed this with the new novel by Maureen F. McHugh -- **Half the Day Is Night**. I bought this on the strength of her brilliant debut novel **China Mountain Zhang**. In comparison this one was weaker. Nonetheless it held my attention and I enjoyed reading it. It is set in the ocean-bottom city of Caribe. Jean David Dai (he is of French extraction) has come to work as a bodyguard for Maya Ling a banker and wheeler-dealer. As she negotiates the biggest financial deal of her life she comes to the attention of terrorists and Jean David soon earns his keep.

The cleverness of the book lies in the detailed social, economic and political life that McHugh has realised for her underwater cities. The story itself is as trite as the synopsis suggests, but the visualisation and the writing skill are first class and McHugh makes you feel that you are really living in that (sometimes very scruffy) world at the bottom of the sea.

The next book was a sequel that took nearly a hundred years to write, a sequel to one of the books that defined SF -- H. G. Wells' **The Time Machine**. The sequel is by Stephen Baxter and is called **The Time Ships**. It is superb. As I write, the new year is barely ten days old, but I would be willing to bet that this book will stand head and shoulders above anything else I will read in the remaining eleven and three quarter months of 1996. In the blurb on the back Arthur C. Clarke is tempted to remark that the sequel is better than the original! High praise indeed.

Baxter has immersed himself in Wells' style and therein lies the first measure of the book's success. He has included elements from many of Wells' other stories, and this too adds to the air of verisimilitude. However he also has a hundred years of scientific progress to draw on -- knowledge unknown to Wells; and he incorporates that knowledge beautifully into the story which stops it from being a mere period piece.

The plot, of course, takes up where Wells' original leaves off and we follow the Time Traveller on his return to the future to rescue Weena from the clutches of the Morlocks. What happens after that I cannot say, for it would spoil too much. Half the fun is in the detailed working out of the complex plotline. Read and enjoy.

I believe the book has been nominated for a Hugo. It richly deserves to win.

Of course there were other things to do during the holidays besides read books. There are some rather large holes where the front veranda joins the house and I've been meaning to repair them for some time. So I bought some Selleys stuff which proclaims that it is for BIG HOLES. That'll do me, I thought. I've got lots of them. It's great fun to use. Polystyrene foam gushes out of the can into the hole and immediately starts to expand in all directions. You leave it for a few hours to dry and you discover that you used far too much and yellow polystyrene is bulging obscenely out of every orifice. I was lucky I didn't block off the entire veranda.

I trimmed it down, smoothed it out, and covered it with another more cement-like Selley's product. And while waiting for various bits of it to dry I read **Love in Vein** edited by Poppy Z. Brite which is an anthology of vampire erotica. A word of warning, don't read this book if you are at all squeamish because it contains some very over the top stuff. Needless to say, I loved it.

Also over the holidays I caught up with an old friend I'd not seen for many years and invited her round for dinner. She is a strict vegetarian -- a vegan as near as makes no practical difference and that presented me with a challenge. I could hardly offer to cook her a beef rendang, could I? That is a dish which contains not a single vegetable, and I've just learned how to cook it and it is beautiful. But I digress...

On our shelves is a vegetarian cookbook to which I don't usually pay much attention because it is full of references to stuff I've never heard of. But now was obviously an opportunity to do something about it. At the end of Dominion Road, just before it enters the city of Auckland proper is **The Tofu Shop**. It sells lots of other things besides tofu, of course, and there I bought some tempeh, some tahini, black sesame oil, chinese turnip, miso and coconut cream. The shop is full of wonderful things, most of them in packages that don't have a word of English on them, so they must be good. I recommend you explore it.

When Juliette arrived for dinner I was reading **The Last Human** by Doug Naylor, a new Red Dwarf novel. Her arrival gave me a good excuse to put it down which was just what I was looking for because it's dull and derivative. It re-hashes old material interminably and hasn't a single spark of life in it. I thoroughly enjoyed the first two Red Dwarf books whichwere written in collaboration with Rob Grant. On the evidence of this book I would suggest that Grant was probably the more creative of the two.

A few years ago Barbara Hambly was a guest of honour at a local convention. I didn't get to the con and therefore I never met her which is a pity because after reading her new book **Bride of the Rat God** I think I'd enjoy her company. Let's face it, anything called **Bride of the Rat God** has to be worth reading.

The book is set in Los Angeles in 1923, the heyday of the silent movie era. Chrysanda Flamande is a sultry star (she out-vamps them all). The necklace that she wears has marked her as a sacrifice to the Rat God, and now He is come to claim her for His own. Fortunately she has good friends and three pekingese (called Chang Ming, Black Jasmine and Buttercreme) to protect her. The book is a gorgeous romp and I enjoyed every sentence of it.

Why do people write sequels to books that plainly don't need them? Piers Anthony is notorious for this and with **Shame of Man** he has done it again. The book is a sequel to the brilliant **Isle of Women** and like that earlier book it takes slices out of time ranging from the prehistoric past to the indefinite future and follows the changing fortunes of a similar set of characters in each era. However the earlier book said all that needed to be said and in the sequel he is merely going over the same ground in the same way. What was fresh in the first book is dull and repetitive in the second. His anthropological observations are interesting and so are the conclusions he draws from them but that is insufficient by itself to carry the weight of this book. I found it less gripping than its predecessor.

If you like a good horror novel I strongly recommend **December** by Phil Rickman. The title made it an appropriate book to read just before Christmas. The book opens in December 1980 when a folk group are recording an album at an old abbey on the Welsh border. It is reputed to be haunted and they are all psychics of one sort and another -- so it seemed like a good idea at the time. That night their recording session goes horribly and tragically wrong, and that same evening, in New York, John Lennon is shot to death.

The body of the book is set many years after these events and tells what happens to the members of the group, how they are inveigled into coming together again to complete the black album that they abandoned that terrible night, and just what the haunted mystery of the abbey is all about.

It is gripping, edge-of-the-seat, nail-biting-down-to-the-elbows material. I haven't been as involved in a book for longer than I can remember, probably not since I read some of the early Stephen King. As the blurb remarks, Rickman has made the same discovery that King made -- the secret of a great book lies in the characterisation. In all honesty the plot details don't matter much; they are standard horror story stuff. But the characters are so beautifully drawn and you feel such sympathy with them because of the skill with which they are written down on the page that you simply cannot help becoming involved.

Many, many years ago I read the scandalous books of Leslie Thomas. **Virgin Soldiers**, **Onward Virgin Soldiers**, **Tropic of Ruislip**, and many others too numerous to mention. Then, as now, I found him a wonderfully funny, but at the same time serious writer. In many ways he is a mainstream Terry Pratchett. He is never averse to a silly joke, and you really have to admire a writer who has the panache to name one of his Chinese characters Fuk Yew. Well, I've bought and read every Leslie Thomas book as they came out and his new one is just out in paperback. It is called **Running Away** and concerns a man with a mid life crisis who runs away from it. It sounds unpromising material but in Thomas' hands it becomes a work of art. By turns funny and sad, poignant and moving, it is a book that tells a lot of truths as well as several very funny dirty jokes. I loved the one that begins with an old lady coming up to an old man in the pensioners home where they both live. She invites him up to her room where she says she will give him a cup of tea and hold his willie...

If you want to know the punch line, read the book. You won't be disappointed.

I finally got round to reading **The Nano Flower**, Peter F. Hamilton's sequel to **Mindstar Rising** and **A Quantum Murder**. Of the three, I think **The Nano Flower** is the strongest. I enjoyed the first two books, but this one stands head and shoulders above them. I particularly like the way that the hero, Greg Mandel, changes from book to book as he grows older and absorbs experience. The Greg of **The Nano Flower** is in his fifties -- it is probably twenty or thirty years after the events of the first novel. And Greg has grown and matured to match his age. Far too many lesser writers never allow their characters to change, to mature -- yes, damnit, to grow up. That Hamilton can do this marks him as a skilfull writer, a man to watch. **The Nano Flower** is excellent.

In between reading these books and repairing my house and cooking experimental meals, I spent far more time and money than is good for me playing with the world on the Internet. One of the hot things on the Internet is something called the World Wide Web. In somewhat oversimplified terms, the web can be thought of as one humungous document, full of lots and lots and lots of pictures, movies, sound and text. As you look at one of the pages in this document on a computer somewhere in the world you might see a reference to something that tickles your fancy. Click on it with your mouse and suddenly you are on another computer elsewhere in the world looking at something new. You can follow the links like these to your hearts content, jumping from computer to computer, country to country, continent to continent, world without end.

The programs that let you do this are referred to as web browsers and the pages of information they display are written in a special language called HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language). I recently acquired a browser called Mosaic, and I decided to learn a bit about it so I bought myself two books. The first of these, **The Mosaic Handbook** let me explore the complexities of the program, and the second **The HTML Source-book** taught me how to write documents that programs such as Mosaic can access (it turns out to be surprisingly easy).

One reason why I feel constrained to mention these books is because they are both *very thin*. I get depressed over how enormously *huge* and *fat* many computer books are. It is a positive disincentive to look through them. They make you think that there is just too much to learn, so why bother? Well I have read a lot of these books, and believe me ninety nine percent of them are absolute junk. But computer books are trendy, so we'll continue to see them on the shelves for a while yet.

My advice is to ignore them. Go for the smaller, thinner books that you will find lurking between the behemoths. They are generally much better value, much less frightening and with a lot more solid information in them than the overwritten and oversold dinosaurs that surround them.

The two that I mentioned above are perfect examples of good computer books. If you feel the need to learn about either Mosaic or HTML, I recommend them highly.

And now my holiday is over and hi ho, hi ho, it's back to work I go.

Sir Henry Rider Haggard	**Marie**
	Child of Storm
	Finished
Isaac Asimov	**Magic**
Maureen F. McHugh	**Half the Day is Night**
Stephen Baxter	**The Time Ships**
Poppy Z. Brite (editor)	**Love in Vein**
Doug Naylor	**Last Human**
Barbara Hambly	**Bride of the Rat God**
Piers Anthony	**Shame of Man**
Phil Rickman	**December**
Leslie Thomas	**Running Away**
Peter F. Hamilton	**The Nano Flower**
Ian S. Graham	**The HTML Sourcebook**
Dale Dougherty et al	**The Mosaic Handbook**

To Be Continued

Phoenixine Seventy-Eight, March 1996

One of the nice things about the new year is that all the bookshops have sales where you can mooch around through the bargains and get very depressed at the number of books going cheap that you paid full price for when they first came out. Sometimes, though, you do find bargains and in Dymocks annual sale I found a hardback of Brian Aldiss' new novel **Somewhere East of Life** marked down from its full price of nearly $50 to only $22.95. It was too good to resist and so I bought it which turned out to be a massive mistake because then I went to Whitcoulls where the same book was on sale for $10. Bummer!

It isn't even a very good book. The unifying theme behind the story concerns the hero's search for his memories. Ten years of his life have been stolen and the salacious bits used in pornographic virtual realities. Aldiss uses this as an excuse to take his hero on a travelogue through a near future Eastern Europe in search of his missing years. The stolen memories are really just a McGuffin -- Aldiss doesn't use the concept for anything very interesting and concentrates instead on the social and political aspects of the countries through which the narrative wanders. The book is constructed as a fix-up from various novellas and the joins show. All in all I found it to be one of his least satisfactory works.

Closely related to the depression induced by examining cheap books that you bought expensively is the extreme anger caused by buying books that you already own. Recently I narrowly avoided this hazard in my hunt for Poppy Z. Brite. I had been reading a collection of her short stories called **Wormwood**, published in America by Dell and I enjoyed them so much that I went looking for more of her work. I found three of her books in British editions (Penguin) in a local bookshop and fell on them with glad cries of glee. Literally seconds before the nice lady behind the counter filled in my credit card slip I discovered that the book called **Swamp Foetus** that I was about to buy was a cunningly re-packaged and re-titled **Wormwood**. I only found out because the nice lady behind the counter was a Poppy Z. Brite fan herself and we were discussing the books while she rang them up on the till. What a narrow escape! So I only bought **Lost Souls** and **Drawing Blood** and as I haven't read them yet I'll tell you about them some other time.

But the short stories in **Wormwood** (or **Swamp Foetus**, if you prefer) are beautifully decadent, elegant and more than a little bit sick. I loved each and every one. They display all of Poe's morbid preoccupation with death, decay, graveyards and grue, translated through a twentieth century viewpoint. Poppy Z. Brite is a major talent.

Another emerging major talent is Harry Turtledove who has a silly name, but since he writes good books I am prepared to forgive him. His major forte is the alternative history (I never could get interested in his semi-classical-historical fantasy novels) and he is currently in the middle of a massive multi-volume project which assumes that the Earth is invaded by aliens in the middle of World War II, thus causing the belligerent nations to forget their squabbles and align to defend Earth from the aliens. Purportedly the story will be told in four volumes, but only three have so far been published and only the first two are available in paperback. I read the first several months ago (**Worldwar: In the Balance**) and have just finished reading volume two which is called **Worldwar: Tilting the Balance**. The irritating similarity in the titles and the cover art prevented me from buying the book for quite some time -- I was convinced that I already had it. Turtledove's publishers, unlike Poppy Z. Brite's publishers, obviously want to sell as few copies of the book as they possibly can. Eventually, however, the penny dropped and I bought it.

One of the more impressive things about it is that despite the fact that it starts the story in the middle by taking up exactly where the first book left off, I never felt confused by either the characters or the storyline. It is several months since I read the first volume and I was sure that many of the plot details had evaporated from my head. I was wrong. It all came flooding back as if there had been no time at all between my readings of the two books; and now I am eager for more. If you like aliens-invade-the-earth stories, you couldn't do better than this.

A book I have been consciously avoiding for many years is Stephen Levy's **Hackers** because I am sick of reading reports and seeing films about nerdy kids with a Commodore 64 and a 300 baud modem breaking into the Pentagon and starting World War III. Well I should have known better -- despite its unfortunate title the book has absolutely nothing to do with that sort of thing. Rather to my surprise it turned out to be a beautifully written book about the early days of computing history and it told the tale of the lives and personalities of the pioneers of the computer revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. It evoked the atmosphere of the time brilliantly; its tone reminded me very much of Tracy Kidder's **Soul of a New Machine**. I have no idea whether or not it is still in print (I got my rather battered copy from a second hand bookshop) but if it is you should search it out. As an examination of the social and technical history of a crucial era in the development of the modern computer I doubt if it can be beaten.

One of the joys of reading is the discovery of new words. Neal Stephenson's anfractuous new novel **The Diamond Age** taught me one, and I am grateful for the lesson. A major attraction of this superb story is its anfractuosity -- an anfractuosity which is exemplified by the machinations of John Percival Hackworth, a nanotechnologist who is employed by Lord Finkle-McGraw to help with the upbringing of his daughter. Hackworth creates ***A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer***, an anfractuous combination of book, computer and theatre which is designed to introduce some subversion into the young lady's life. But Hackworth is greedy -- he causes a second copy of the primer to be created for the sake of his own daughter. Unfortunately it is stolen and a young girl who is unknown to the other protagonists eventually receives it and it takes over her upbringing instead. The stories that the primer tells her (many of which are excerpted in the book) are delightful as well as instructional.

Other characters include the mysterious (and anfractuous) Orientals Doctor X and Judge Fang. Although the Judge has only a small role to play, he is drawn with such loving feeling (and with such loving parallels) that I am absolutely certain that Stephenson is a fan of Robert van Gulik's Judge Dee novels. I enjoyed this small ‘homage' very much.

The name of Hackworth is well chosen. He is a computer engineer and what he does is recognisably hacking (as we understand it today). Stephenson delights in this sort of thing -- in an earlier novel the protagonist was called Hiram Protagonist. It is a cute conceit. Don't let it put you off. **The Diamond Age** is a superb book by anyone's measure. And it is anfractuous.

Were you bullied at school? Of course you were; and you dreamed of revenge. Probably you lay awake at night imagining exquisite tortures that you would love to inflict on your tormentors. I think a writer called Christopher Fowler was just like you and me, and his new novel **Psychoville** is that childhood dream writ large. The first half of the story concerns young Billy March and his family moving into the new town of Invicta Cross. Billy watches as his family is destroyed by the petty vindictiveness of their neighbours. Surburban angst and active indifference (no that is not an oxymoron). The second half of the book, told from a different point of view, is set ten years later as another new family moves into Invicta Cross. Soon those old persecutors start to die in some singularly gruesome ways. There is a delightful twist in the tail of the story which I won't spoil things by revealing. The whole book is classic wish-fulfillment fantasy with lashings of gore. Great fun.

A couple of years ago Nancy Kress took the SF world by storm with the superb novel **Beggars in Spain**. Now she is back with a wonderful and subtle sequel **Beggars and Choosers** and it is even better than the first (most unusual for a sequel). There are three classes of people in the

world of the novel. The ordinary people (you and me) are supported by the efforts of the intellectually superior gene-modified. But they themselves are running scared of the almost superhuman powers of the Sleepless. The novel tells a continuing story from all three points of view. The world is in crisis -- the nanotechnological industries are failing as genetically engineered organisms attack their mechanisms. A fanatical underground wreak terrorist havoc in the pursuit of vague political ambitions. Nothing changes, does it? But the book gripped me by the scruff of the neck and wouldn't let go. This is story telling of the highest order and the parallels with contemporary society add an extra frisson of delight. **Beggars and Choosers** has been nominated for a Hugo and I hope it wins. If I was eligible to vote, I would certainly vote for this one.

A most uninteresting book is **Protektor** by Charles Platt. Let's clear the air -- it has nothing whatsoever to do with the similarly named characters from the novels of Larry Niven. No -- a Protektor in the world of Charles Platt is a sort of high tech trouble shooter who keeps the technological world turning by searching out and nullifying saboteurs and hackers. Accompanied by his faithful auton (robot) he hunts out evil wherever it lurks. If I've made it sound a bit like a comic book that is not unintentional. The story is mainly gloss and glitter, cinematic perspectives and unsubtle (often arbitrary and coincidental) plot twists as the Protektor tracks down the systems hacker who is bringing breakdown and chaos to the systems of Agorima. The hero is lack lustre; a man to whom things happen rather than a man who makes things happen and the trustworthy robot is just too damned capable. The Lone Ranger and Tonto in the twenty first century. Platt has done much better than this in the past -- this is his weakest book and I cannot recommend it.

Walter Jon Williams is an annoyingly uneven writer. You read a book of his and rave about it and dash out and buy the next one and it's terrible and you wonder why you bothered. Then the next one tingles your spine again and enthusiasm is rekindled. Well I am pleased to say that **Metropolitan** is one of the good ones. The story is set in an indeterminate alternative future. Plasm is the fuel of magical power. It is regulated and distributed to the population by the equivalent of our electrical companies. Aiah is a clerk working for such a company. Through various circumstances she stumbles on a plasm well unknown to the distributing authorities. She manages to keep it secret and milk it for all it is worth. She sells the plasm clandestinely to Constantine, a failed revolutionary but a mage of great power. Not only does he provide her with money he also provides her with training in the use of plasm and soon they are constant companions. The revolution, powered by plasm, is just around the corner.

It is an absorbing, convincing and thoroughly exciting tale. This one belongs on your permanent Walter Jon Williams shelf and I've got all enthusiastic again and I am now actively looking for books missing from that area of my collection. Got any you don't want any more? As long as they're anfractuous, of course.

Brian Aldiss	**Somewhere East of Life**
Poppy Z. Brite	**Wormwood**
Harry Turtledove	**Worldwar: Tilting the Balance**
Stephen Levy	**Hacker**
Neal Stephenson	**The Diamond Age**
Christopher Fowler	**Psychoville**
Nancy Kress	**Beggars and Choosers**

Charles Platt **Protektor**

Walter Jon Williams **Metropolitan**

Luxury! Luxury!

Phoenixine Seventy-Nine, April 1996

Many of the books I'll be telling you about this time were read on a business trip to Melbourne. It's a three hour flight and I spent some frequent flyer points and got an upgrade to business class which is very luxurious with infinite legroom and mouth-watering menus that turn out to conceal ordinary aeroplane food. I felt I needed a special book to read on the aeroplane and so I took **Richter 10**, the new novel by Arthur C. Clarke and Mike McQuay. In point of fact, it is really by Mike McQuay. Clarke didn't write a single word of it. Inspired by the news of the 1994 Northridge earthquake, Clarke wrote an 850 word outline which he faxed to his agent and forgot all about. Mike McQuay wrote the novel from the outline without any consultation with Clarke whatsoever. Indeed, when Clarke received the manuscript he read it with enormous enjoyment and stopped work on all other projects because he wanted to find out what happened next!

The story concerns Lewis Crane who lived through the 1994 earthquake (though his family died). He grew up with an obsession and as the body of the novel opens he is a world famous seismologist who can seemingly predict earthquakes. Not only can he predict them, he claims to know how to stop them, and as the largest quake the world has ever experienced seems imminent, people had better start to listen.

Mike McQuay died of a heart attack shortly before the novel was published. In a moving epilogue, Arthur C. Clarke pays tribute to the great skill with which he wrote what turned out to be his last book.

Talking of Arthur C. Clarke, I recently came into possession of a slim booklet called **Four Heads in the Air** by Fred Clarke, Arthur's brother. It is a delightful collection of anecdotes about growing up on a farm between the wars. Arthur has his place in these, of course (generally finding ingenious ways to continue reading while performing his chores) but the book is primarily about other members of the Clarke family -- mainly their mother who had the job of raising all four Clarke children after her husband died from injuries received on active service in World War I. It is a warm and delightful book, full of humour and love.

Melbourne had a Grand Prix while I was there and the streets were blocked off and the trams were diverted and there was a waiting list for taxis and all day long you heard nothing but rrrrrr -- ooooo -- wwwwwww -- eeeeeeee -- ooooooooo as the cars sprinted around the practice circuits. The hotel was full of racing groupies (of all ages and sexes) from all over the world and the police were kept busy removing protesters who objected to all the above. It was enormous fun. I'm only sorry I didn't get to see the race itself, but that was the day after I left, so I missed out.

I told you a couple of months ago that I'd heard rumours of a prequel to Larry McMurtry's **Lonesome Dove**. Well it really does exist and it's called **Dead Man's Walk**. It is not quite as brilliant as the Pulitzer Prize winner itself, but is very good nonetheless. It concerns the younger days of Woodrow Call and Gus McRae. They are about twenty as the book opens and have just met. The story tells of their first two expeditions as Texas Rangers. If you like, they are learning their trade -- and what they mainly learn is how badly organised and inefficient the men they admire turn out to be. Perhaps it is a rite of passage book? Anyway, it is by turns amusing,

thoughtful, beautiful, crude and awesomely violent. It has one of the most vividly described torture scenes it has ever been my pleasure to read. The Commanche horse thief Kicking Wolf captures a scalp hunter and tortures him to death over several gruesome days. The book pulls no punches and tells it like I'm certain it was. If you even vaguely like stories about pioneering and exploration then this is for you. It is 477 pages long and I read it in two evenings.

I also read the new Hunter Thompson book in about an evening and a half but that was because it was thin and lacking in substance, not because it was any good. Entitled **Better than Sex** it purports to be about the 1992 American presidential campaign. Thompson is a self confessed political junkie who has written what is probably the definitive book about presidential politics (**Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail -- 1972**). I think he knew he would never beat that, and he didn't even try. At least half the book consists of barely legible photocopies of pages from his notebook and scribbled faxes to various acquaintances. Most of the rest consists of babbling fantasy sequences played out in Thompson's distorted brain -- quite what they had to do with what he was supposed to be reporting I could never really work out. I never thought I'd call a Hunter Thompson book boring; but that is the only word that describes this one. There is one small nugget in the mountain of dross -- the last chapter is Thompson's obituary for Richard Nixon. It is vicious and ranting and it pulls no punches. It is vintage Thompson and reading it makes you realise why he was once the political voice of his generation. But no longer, I'm afraid.

Another generational voice was Michael Palin who, firstly as a Python and later as an intrepid world traveller delighted millions. Now he is a novelist and **Hemingway's Chair** is his book. It concerns one Martin Sproale, an assistant postmaster with an obsessive hobby -- the life of Ernest Hemingway. To the village comes an American scholar called Ruth Kohler. She is looking for peace and quiet to write a thesis on the women in Hemingway's life. Upheavals in the post office combine with upheavals in Martin's general life and she encourages him to dive ever deeper into his obsessions. The book becomes progressively more bleak as it explores the nature of obsession, and this obsession in particular.

Though the book is worthy, I found it dull. Obsessives interest me (mainly because I am one myself) but the very private nature of an obsession in an area I am largely unfamiliar with (Hemingway's life and works) left me cold. I couldn't help thinking that David Lodge would have done it much more entertainingly than Michael Palin managed to do.

It was definitely time for Harry Harrison! Over the last couple of years Harrison (in collaboration with the pseudonymous John Holm) has been writing an alternate world/fantasy series set in the so-called dark ages. The second volume (**One King's Way**) has just been published. (The first was **The Hammer and the Cross**). The series promises to be one of the best things he has ever done. The hero, Shef, has fought his way from slavery to a Kingdom in an England ravaged by the Norse raiders. This volume follows his adventures as he carries the war back to the Vikings. Separated from his companions, he is forced to make a long trek through inland Norway, Denmark and Sweden. Meanwhile, unbeknown to him, a group of his enemies, a fanatical order of soldiers known as the Knights of the Lance are searching for the spear that pierced Christ's side on the cross. Once held by Charlemagne, it was the loss of this spear that precipitated the breakup of his Empire. With it, perhaps the Empire could be restored.

These diverse plots come together in the frozen wastes of the North in a totally satisfying, dramatic (and largely unexpected) manner. As with the McMurtry book I mentioned previously, Harrison pulls no punches about the realities of life in the era about which he writes. This is not a book for the squeamish. But it is a book to revel in and enjoy for the sheer story telling gusto of it. It held me enthralled, even through an attack of Rangoon Rot which struck me down half way through the Melbourne week. It can't have been the water, I drank beer. Perhaps I shouldn't have breathed the air?

Harry Harrison is famous for his whimsy and Alan Dean Foster is not. And yet **One King's Way**

is not in the least whimsical whereas Foster's new short story collection **Mad Amos** most certainly is. Don't you just love contradictions?

Mad Amos Malone is a mountain man from the old West. He rides a horse called Worthless and he has adventures out West with dragons and spirits and shamans and volcanoes and the whole thing is so utterly ridiculous that you can't help but laugh at it. I think Foster is a vastly under-rated writer. There are many excellent works in his vast output, he just camouflages them under a mountain of second rate movie adaptations and never ending series that I suppose he writes for the money. But Mad Amos is just plain fun. I particularly enjoyed the very understated scene where Amos adjusted the leather patch on his horse's forehead and reminded himself to file the horn down because it was starting to grow again.

Anyone who works with computers soon develops at least a passing interest in cryptography -- a subject of considerable interest and controversy at the moment. Indeed some of us have had an interest in it all our lives long. I vividly remember making up ciphers in my childhood and communicating with my friends in code. Consequently I devoured the various books that started to appear from the 1970s onwards about the British code-breaking endeavours at Bletchley Park in World War II. (I particularly recommend **Code Breakers** edited by F. H. Hinsley and Alan Stripp which is a collection of memoirs of some of the actual code breakers themselves). The writer Robert Harris evidently had the same sort of childhood as me because his new novel **Enigma** is set in the wartime Bletchley Park and the hero is one of the codebreakers. Around this historical and factual background Harris has written a detective novel/spy story. The book's enormous strengths lie in the incredibly realistic re-creation of the world of wartime Britain in general and Bletchley Park in particular. The writing is so vivid you would swear you were living through it yourself. He skilfully evokes the sounds and sights and smells of the era. Harris never stumbles here and the novel gives immense pleasure at this level. However the plot itself is rather weak, being merely a common or garden thriller with, unfortunately, a punch line at the end rather like an O'Henry short story which spoils it for a second reading.

One of the reasons cryptography looms so large in the mind of the computer geek is because of its applications in ensuring the security of network traffic (particularly across the Internet). It is needed because so many people out there on the information super-cliché appear to want to break in to things and do damage. One of those was a man called Kevin Mitnick who has been convicted several times for computer frauds of one sort and another. In 1995 he broke into a computer network belonging to Tsutomu Shimomura, a computational physicist at the University of California and currently a senior fellow at the San Diego Supercomputer Centre. **Takedown**, which he wrote in collaboration with John Markoff is the story of how Shimomura tracked Mitnick down and had him prosecuted.

I decided to read this on the flight back to Auckland. It was a nice feeling to sit upstairs on a jumbo jet, idly sipping champagne and stretching my legs and reading a most fascinating and quite witty book. When Mitnick first broke in to the network, Shimomura said "Looks like the ankle-biters have learned to read technical manuals. Somebody should teach them some manners." This phrase, popularised by journalist John Markoff when he wrote up the attack for the New York Times brought Shimomura his fifteen minutes of fame. And, I suppose, the book.

It is neither as screamingly funny nor as dramatic as Clifford Stoll's **The Cuckoos Egg**, a story about a similar incident. Shimomura lacks Stoll's dry humour and Mitnick was no KGB agent, just a sad, deluded and rather twisted nerd. But the parallels are still quite dramatic -- Shimomura got just as much co-operation from the FBI as Stoll had done before him -- virtually none. Somehow I'm not surprised; government departments never seem to learn. (Shimomura himself is quite scathing about the bureaucratic inefficiency of the National Security Agency for whom he has done some work in the past).

There is something here for most people -- a little technical detail to whet the appetite of the jaded Unix wizard, love interest for the romantics among us. But most of all there is simply the

pain staking gathering of clues and the primeval thrill of the chase. This has been a winning formula ever since Arthur Conan Doyle invented it for Sherlock Holmes and it is just as valid now as it ever was. (Shimomura even has his Watson look-alike, a somewhat inept graduate student called Andrew). I loved it.

I arrived back in Auckland and bought a bottle of Baileys in the duty free shop because they were giving away a free Irish Pub with it. Only a small one, mind you. About ... this big.

Arthur C. Clarke & Mike McQuay	**Richter 10**
Fred Clarke	**Four Heads in the Air**
Larry McMurtry	**Dead Man's Walk**
Hunter S. Thompson	**Better than Sex**
Michael Palin	**Hemingway's Chair**
Harry Harrison & John Holm	**One King's Way**
Alan Dean Foster	**Mad Amos**
F. H. Hinsley & Alan Stripp	**Code Breakers**
Robert Harris	**Enigma**
Tsutomu Shimomura & John Markoff	**Takedown**

The Mixture As Before

Phoenixine Eighty, May 1996

I have a secret ambition. One of these months I will read so many books that the entire article will consist of nothing but a list of titles, authors and publishers, with no room left for any comments abxout the books at all. I haven't quite made it this month but I'm approaching it asymptotically; so watch out in the articles to come!

I don't know whether it was an extra long month or an extra boring month, but whatever it was, I got through more than my fair share of books during it. Partly it can be explained by a business trip to Brisbane, a city where I know nobody and where, perforce, I can do little but read.

I flew cattle class this time (no luxury on this flight) and I compensated for that with the new Connie Willis novel **Bellwether**. For many years she has been amusing us with short stories set in a comically bureaucratic, inefficient society populated almost totally by untrustworthy vapourheads. These stories are generally told in the first person by the only sane character among the lot of them. Now she has extended this technique to a whole novel and I snorted and giggled my way across the Tasman, much to the consternation of my seat companions.

The story takes place in a research institute. Sandra Foster studies fads (barbie dolls, hula hoops -- where do they come from, why do they die out?). Bennett O'Reilly is a chaos theory investigator. Together with a flock of sheep they make several startling discoveries -- or rather they would if Management didn't keep having meetings and the photocopying didn't keep

vanishing. This book is well worthy of your attention.

Being in the mood for amusement, I followed it with **Bloodsucking Fiends** by Christopher Moore. I love vampire stories. I particularly love funny vampire stories. Jody Stroud is attacked by a vampire in an alley in San Francisco. She awakes the next night with a fortune in cash stuffed into her clothing, a burned arm (it has been lying in the sun all day and she has developed a hypersensitivity to light), and a hunger for the taste of blood. She needs help -- preferably from someone who can go out during the day, which she no longer can. Her car has been towed away, and the towing company is only open 9 to 5. How is she going to get it back? Enter Tommy Flood, an unpublished freelance writer who stocks shelves at the supermarket at night and plays ten pin bowling in the aisles using frozen turkeys as bowling balls...

Over the last twenty years or so, the novels of Patrick O'Brian have become somewhat of a cult. They are set in the British navy of the early nineteenth century and the characters of Captain Jack Aubrey and Doctor Stephen Maturin have entered the folklore. **The Unknown Shore**, an unconnected early novel dating from 1959 has just been republished. It concerns the adventures of the young midshipman Jack Byron, and surgeons mate Tobias Barrow on board the Wager, one of the ships in Commodore Anson's ill-fated squadron that attempted a circumnavigation in 1740. The Wager is shipwrecked on the coast of Chile, and the bulk of the novel concerns the trials and tribulations of the survivors. In hindsight, Byron and Barrow can be read as a trial run for Aubrey and Maturin. Their relationship is the same, and so are their professions. A delightful, eccentric humour permeates the book together with an incredible sense of place and time and a loving attention to detail. Even that early in his writing career, O'Brian had the skill of invoking an era so believably that you can smell it, taste it and feel it.

My other great love after vampire stories, is time travel stories. Therefore **Time Scout** a collaborative novel by Robert Asprin and Linda Evans appealed to me immediately. It concerns one Kenneth "Kit" Carson, once one of the best time scouts in the business but now retired and running a small hotel at the time terminal. Then he is approached by a stunning red-headed girl who wants to be trained as a time scout. Initially he refuses, but that doesn't put her off. She goes flouncing through an illicit gate, and Carson has to go after her.

The book is a simple sense of wonder story with no depth at all. That is not criticism, it is praise. Nothing can beat a simple, exciting story which is simply and excitingly told. I loved it.

One of the rising new generation of British SF writers is Eric Brown. For the last few years, he has been exploring the so-called nada continuum in a continuing series of novels and short stories. **Blue Shifting** is the latest collection and the stories are typical of what we have come to expect from Brown. They are emotionally wrenching and very lyrical.

One of the falling old generation of British SF writers is the late Eric Frank Russell. His reputation is still high today, despite the fact that he has been dead for more than 20 years and most of his books are out of print. He wrote funny stories which generally showed aliens at a disadvantage and Earthmen triumphant. Alan Dean Foster has taken an old Russell short story and expanded it to a novel called **Design for Great-Day** and in doing so has quite destroyed the old Russell magic. All the lightness of touch that characterised Russell has gone and Foster walks all over the jokes with lead lined, size 24 concrete boots. The result is dire. If Russell were still alive, he'd be spinning in his grave.

In my opinion Barry Crump is one of New Zealand's greatest writers. His latest book, **Crumpy's Campfire Companion** has done nothing to disabuse me of this notion. The book is a semi-autobiographical collection of anecdotes and it enthrals and amuses from beginning to end. I have a complete collection of Crump, and I have enjoyed every one immensely.

Bob Jones is another New Zealand writer that I admire, and recently, in a second hand bookshop, I came across a 1990 collection of essays called **Prancing Pavonine Charlatans**.

The articles are culled from his regular newspaper column and it makes interesting retrospective reading since his comments on the contemporary scene of the late 1980s contain several predictions which have now come to pass in almost every particular. Of course he blots his copybook with some clangers as well, but no prophet is perfect. Like or loathe his politics, you must admit that the man has a brain, a wonderful wit and a vastly entertaining writing style. What more could you ask of an essayist?

The same second hand bookshop disclosed a copy of **Insanely Great** by Stephen Levy; a history of the Apple Macintosh computer. Now let me confess that the Mac is a machine about which I know nothing and care less, so it seemed unlikely that Levy's book could interest me. However on the strength of **Hackers** (which I discussed in an earlier column) I decided to give it a go. Well, despite my total Mac ignorance (or perhaps because of it?), I still enjoyed the book enormously. Levy is a skilled writer who makes his subjects come alive.

Sometimes nothing will work but a quirky adventure and when I want quirky adventures I turn to Mike Resnick, a writer who has never disappointed me. Fortunately he is prolific and so I can enjoy him lots. **A Miracle of Rare Design** concerns an explorer, one Xavier Lennox, who has himself surgically altered to fit in with the inhabitants of the strange worlds he investigates. There are several natural narrative pauses in the story and every time this happened I started the next chapter convinced of the direction the story had to take -- and every single time I was wrong! And it is these hiatuses (hiati?) which for me converted the book from a rather traditional narrative into something quite special. However there is one irritation. In the first alien episode Xavier comes upon a mystery -- why do the fireflies throw themselves to their deaths from the summit of the pyramid? Although the reason is hinted at (very obliquely) it is never specifically resolved. This is annoying.

John Barnes' latest novel is **Kaleidoscope Century**. Joshua Ali Quare wakes in 2109 at the age of 140 with no memories of his earlier lives. The bulk of the novel investigates these earlier lives as his memories return and they are memories of a century growing ever more bitter and violent. Quare has taken part in many of the century's seminal events. Few of them are pleasant. This is a grimy, violent and depressing book. Just the way I like them.

I have long been a fan of Christopher Fowler, a masterful horror writer. He is generally seen at his best in the short story -- his novels often run out of steam towards the end. His latest story collection is called **Flesh Wounds** and is stuffed full of paranoia and blackness with a light leavening of gore.

Fowler has a quirky sense of humour. In one of the autobiographical snippets that decorate books of this kind, he once said that "...like a fire, I go out at night". Many of his short stories are set in and around London's night clubs. I don't think I want to visit clubs like that. Maybe I'll stay at home and read Paul J. McAuley's new novel **Fairyland** instead.

Don't let the title fool you. This is no sweetly icky novel. It isn't even a fantasy, it is hard science fiction of the best sort. Genetically engineered "dolls" are the new servant class, the playthings of the first world bourgeoisie. Alex Sharkey is a designer of psychoactive viruses, the new designer drugs. In collaboration with the super smart young Milena he genetically alters some dolls, turning them into the first of what come to be called fairies. The newly awakened folk, far from being the fey creatures of legend, quickly develop their own agenda. The battles that follow are cruel in the extreme as each side uses the other in cynical furtherance of their own ends. This is a gloomy, bitter book which makes telling points about nanotechnology and genetic dabblings. You may not enjoy it, but you will certainly appreciate it.

I like spy novels too (I think the word you want is "eclectic"). John Le Carré's latest is **Our Game** and it is a masterpiece. The new post-communist atmosphere has caused a shake up in the intelligence services and Tim Cranmer, the book's narrator, has been forcibly retired along with Larry Pettifer his long time double agent inside Russia. Somewhat late in life Pettifer appears to

have discovered morals and a sense of social awareness. These manifest themselves in a seemingly hopeless crusade on behalf of the rebelling Caucasian states (Chechnya, Ingushetya et al). He becomes involved in a massive fraud yielding 37 million pounds which he uses to finance the revolution. Cranmer seems to be implicated in this -- he isn't, but few are convinced. Propelled by the pressure of these suspicions he pursues Larry forward into the future and backwards into the past, a voyage of discovery that attempts to understand and illuminate both the man and his motivations. Old episodes are analysed with a new insight and new episode are explained (and predicted) by what has gone before. The truths we learn about each of them from this analysis are bittersweet ones. This is a masterful novel and it works on every possible level. It is writing of genius.

One of my favourite authors is Jack Vance. His elegant, mannered prose is always a delight and I wallow in it. He has written quite a lot outside of the SF/Fantasy field and recently I picked up a copy of **The Mad Man Theory** by Ellery Queen, a house name that Vance used on two detective stories in the mid 1960s (the other was called **A Room To Die In** and I have that as well). Both are actually rather disappointing, being merely routine thrillers with nothing to mark them from the pack. There are occasional Vancian touches (meals are very sensuously described) but they are few and far between. The commercial formula that was "Ellery Queen" seems to have overwhelmed Vance's original voice. Definitely for completists only.

Charles de Lint is one of the few serious fantasy writers that I can stomach. Normally I don't like fantasy very much and I avoid it. However I actively seek out de Lint's books. **The Ivory and the Horn** is another collection of his magical-realistic contemporary fables set in the city of Newford. As always, though many of the pieces are slight, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts and the overall effect is a delight. The Newford stories are invariably artfully crafted pieces.

Svaha, on the other hand was something of a disappointment. It is more of an SF novel than a fantasy. It is set in the twenty first century. The native American tribes have taken the American government to court and won a landmark decision. Granted tribal lands in perpetuity, they have retreated there behind "enclaves", technological barriers that keep the outside world at bay. There they live according the old traditions (and superstitions) mingled with the high technology which only they now seem to posses (they have satellites and skyhooks). Meanwhile the rest of the world goes to hell in a handbasket as the environmental factors we currently worry about peak and effectively destroy the outside society. Life for the have nots is nasty, brutish and short.

The uneasy juxtaposition of native American lifestyles and high technology contrasted with the moral and physical decay of the outside simply fails to convince. I think perhaps de Lint's voice is too loud. The book bogs down as it goes through the politically correct motions.

For many years I have admired the mannered Chinese detective novels written by the late Robert van Gulik. Told in the traditional Chinese manner (van Gulik was a Chinese scholar of note), they concern one Judge Dee, an actual historical person who lived from AD 630 to 700. For a long time I was convinced that only five of the novels existed -- mainly because in an essay appended to **The Chinese Nail Murders** van Gulik himself says exactly that. Imagine my surprise and glee when I found another called **The Haunted Monastery**. Imagine also my anger to note that the small print at the front refers to a novel called **The Lacquer Screen** WHICH I HAVE NEVER SEEN ANYWHERE!!! Grump.

The books are traditional whodunits and were they set in contemporary surroundings they probably wouldn't amount to much. It is the alien atmosphere of medieval China evoked so skilfully by van Gulik that gives them their charm and attraction. In many ways, reading these books is a science fictional experience. The evocation of alien surroundings is part of what science fiction is all about and van Gulik is a master of the technique.

Finally this month we have the first instalment of Stephen King's new episodic novel **The Green Mile**. An episode will be published monthly as a slim paperback from now until August. We have lots of cliff hangers to anticipate.

The book is set in an American prison in 1932, on death row and King declares it is an attempt to get inside the feeling of what it means to be condemned to be executed. What is it like to take that last walk to the execution chamber?

The first episode (called **Two Dead Girls**) is, of course, just a teaser for events yet to come. Sufficient horrible hints have been that I for one will continue reading with enormous eagerness. The only question that concerns me is whether or not my blood pressure will withstand my current enormous need to know!

This could well be one of King's more memorable books.

Connie Willis	**Bellwether**
Christopher Moore	**Bloodsucking Fiends**
Patrick O'Brian	**The Unknown Shore**
Robert Asprin and Linda Evans	**Time Scout**
Eric Brown	**Blue Shifting**
Alan Dean Foster & Eric Frank Russell	**Design for Great-Day**
Barry Crump	**Crumpy's Campfire Companion**
Bob Jones	**Prancing Pavonine Charlatans**
Steven Levy	**Insanely Great**
Mike Resnick	**A Miracle of Rare Design**
John Barnes	**Kaleidoscope Century**
Christopher Fowler	**Flesh Wounds**
Paul J. McAuley	**Fairyland**
Ellery Queen	**The Madman Theory**
Charles de Lint	**The Ivory and the Horn**
	Svaha
Robert van Gulik	**The Haunted Monastery**
Stephen King	**The Green Mile Part 1: The Two Dead Girls**

Ratios

***Phlogiston Forty-Six**, 1996*

Recently several people have, quite independently of each other, glanced through my book collection and remarked that there seemed to be rather a large preponderance of men writers. "Where are all the women?" they ask. "Are you, perchance, a male chauvinist pig?"

Since I tend to regard myself as a feminist, such observations are worrying, and need to be taken seriously. So I collected some figures. First I counted all my books and determined the ratio of men to women in both the SF and fantasy genres. Then I went to both Dymocks and Whitcoulls and counted the books on their shelves in the same categories. For good measure, I also gathered statistics on their mainstream fiction and their detective fiction. The theory was that the bookshop shelves would give a representative sample of the relative numbers of men and women writers in the world at large against which I could compare my own collection.

The first discovery I made was that if you stand in a bookshop counting the books on the shelves and making notes on pieces of paper, other customers keep well away from you (in case it's catching), and the staff glare at you suspiciously since you are obviously up to no good.

The second discovery was this:

	Men	**Women**	**%Men**	**%Women**
My SF Collection	557	40	93	7
Whitcoulls SF	66	8	89	11
Dymocks SF	66	9	88	12
My Fantasy Collection	67	41	62	38
Whitcoulls Fantasy	24	27	47	53
Dymocks Fantasy	28	22	56	44
Whitcoulls General	172	84	67	33
Dymocks General	241	127	65	35
Whitcoulls Crime	42	24	64	36
Dymocks Crime	59	53	53	47

In round figures, Whitcoulls and Dymocks both agree that the ratio of men to women SF writers is about 9:1. My SF collection has a slightly different ratio, about 13:1 with an obvious male bias. Whitcoulls and Dymocks both disagree about the fantasy ratios, but if we average them both we get about 1:1. Again, my collection shows a different ratio, about 1.6:1 and again the bias is towards the male writers. To an extent, therefore, my critics are obviously correct -- there

is a definite preponderance of male writers in my collection. Am I a male chauvinist pig? I suppose I must be, though only just (there's considerably less than an order of magnitude in it).

In all categories, female writers are outnumbered by their male counterparts both in my collection and in the Crime and General sections of my guinea pig bookshops, though as I browsed the shelves I was interested to note that female writers are amazingly more productive, particularly in the field of crime fiction. The shelves positively groaned with book after book after book by Agatha Christie, Ellis Peters, Ruth Rendell and Patricia Cornwall *et al*. I have no theory as to why this should be so. I merely present it and move hastily on.

It is also quite obvious that there are some fiction categories that women seem to prefer over others. A lot of women write fantasy and crime fiction, comparatively fewer write SF. Again, I have no idea why the figures should cluster around these categories, though I note in passing that I read comparatively little fantasy. I do read a certain amount of crime fiction, and my favourite writers in this genre are all female (Lindsey Davis, Ellis Peters and Sarah Paretsky, if you are interested).

I could offer some specious justifications for the bias my books exhibit, I suppose. A huge part of my SF collection dates from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s when SF was almost exclusively a male preserve (and often the few women writers that existed would take male pseudonyms or simply use their initials in order to disguise their gender). To an extent that is bound to skew the statistics. But that's just playing with numbers. What we are really asking, I suspect, is whether or not I find any difference between men and women writers and if so, what might that difference be. And why do I seem to prefer one over the other?

In an introduction to the James Tiptree Jr. story collection **Warm Worlds and Otherwise** Robert Silverberg remarked:

> It has been suggested that Tiptree is female, a theory that I find absurd, for there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree's writing. I don't think the novels of Jane Austen could have been written by a man nor the stories of Ernest Hemingway by a woman, and in the same way I believe the author of the James Tiptree stories is male.

Silverberg must have greatly regretted putting these words into print when, several years later, it was revealed that James Tiptree Jr was the pseudonym used by Alice Sheldon. Nonetheless the fact that he phrased this the way he did suggests that at some fundamental level he was reacting to the style of the prose presented to him and making deductions about the gender of the writer based on what he read. That he was wrong in this particular case does not mean that all such deductions are necessarily invalid.

To an extent we all make such extrapolations all the time and there is a tendency in some people to confuse the writer with the work and ascribe opinions stated by the characters in the books to the writers themselves. Such attributions are suspect at best and occasionally downright misleading at worst (particularly in the areas of politics and sociology with which a lot of modern SF concerns itself). Nobody would seriously argue against this (it's the premise behind ninety percent of the essays I've written). So why should deductions of gender be any more or less suspect than deductions of opinion? Both are value judgements and the value may well be less than the evidence supports, in a critical sense.

Silverberg claims that there is a difference between male writing and female writing; male insights as opposed to female ones. He further claims that Tiptree succeeded brilliantly in illuminating the male insights. However as events later proved, the deduction he made from his observations was wrong. Perhaps (with the wisdom of hindsight) a better deduction would have been that "Tiptree" exhibited brilliant insights and was therefore a writer of the first class. Stop

there and I think nobody would argue. The fault (if there is one) lies in the assumption that *only* a man could exhibit such an insight, and this is demonstrably false.

What is demonstrably true is that biologically I am male. I have a reasonable insight into what motivates and interests me. I know how my mind works and how I react to external stimuli. I am the only person I know that well -- I have never been inside the head of anyone else and I cannot explain any other person as well as I can explain myself. And the same applies to you. The person you know best (though often imperfectly) is yourself.

I can extrapolate my feelings and reactions and make predictions about other people I know (and sometimes I am right and sometimes I am wrong; so it goes) but in every case I feel more certain about the reactions and motivations of my male friends than I do about those of my female friends. This is hardly surprising, I suppose since I have lived as a male for umty ump years and it is easier to apply my own experiences to a situation than to try and do it from an external or foreign point of view. We all prefer the easier options. But easy or not, it is a direct function of how I perceive the world.

Therefore when I see such character insights in a story and when those insights push my buttons (yes -- that's *exactly* how the character should react) I get a little frisson, a genuine moment of transcendental knowledge. The writer has brought someone alive for me. Perhaps the ultimate test of a writer, and certainly a moment to which all real artists must aspire.

So the question reduces to this -- for any given writer, how genuine do the insights that the writer presents to me feel? How well has the writer penetrated the motivations and makeup of the characters I am reading about? The better the writer does this, the more likely I am to weep at the tragedies and rejoice in the triumphs.

However the plain fact is that any writer will always find it easier to convince *me* to believe in a male character than to believe in a female character simply because the writer doesn't have to work nearly as hard at it -- it's an outgrowth of my biology to believe in and understand male characters. That doesn't make it impossible for me to believe in and understand female characters. Just harder, both for me and the writer.

Notice that unlike Silverberg I make no *a priori* judgement about the gender of the writer in question -- I have deliberately used impersonal words in developing this train of thought. I don't believe that gender of the writer has any relevance to the question at all. Ursula Le Guin makes me believe in her heroes and Gene Wolfe in his heroines (to name but two) and that fact alone shows that it is always possible to transcend mere biology. It is simply a question of belief on the part of the reader; of how convincing the writer (male or female) is to that reader.

But for exactly these same reasons it will often be the case, as Silverberg implied, that a male writer will write about the male worldview and a female writer will write about the female perspective. That's the path of least resistance and it is a most unusual person who won't travel that path. Though a number of writers are unusual, and do take the opposite approach, and when they succeed, will definitely find their books occupying pride of place on my bookshelves.

Asimov, for example, has done it at least three times (but then he always was unusual wasn't he?). Probably one of his best characters, and certainly his own favourite, was Susan Calvin from the **Robot** stories, but there was also Arkady Darrell from the **Foundation** stories and Marlene from **Nemesis.** Gene Wolfe also presented a very believable female viewpoint in **Pandora by Holly Hollander**.

On the other side of the gender divide, Maureen F. McHugh managed the truly amazing feat of telling a male viewpoint story in the first person with the novel **China Mountain Zhang**. Ursula Le Guin, with the character of Shevek in **The Dispossessed,** also managed to present a most convincing male worldview (this book remains one of my all time favourites).

All of them exceptions, and all of them exceptional. But they prove the rule.

It doesn't always work, of course. There is considerably more to it than simply giving a character a name associated with the opposite gender. Heinlein tried many times to write from a feminine perspective but in my opinion he never once succeeded in being convincing -- at least not on the levels of presentation that we are examining in this essay!

Put all these thoughts together and the conclusion you come to is that the male writer is more likely to convince me (as opposed to you) of his male insights than the female writer is to convince me of her female insights.

Contrariwise, the female writer is *also* much more likely to convince me of her male insights than the male writer is to convince me of his female insights.

And no, damnit -- that doesn't mean that I only read books about male characters and neither does it mean that the only books I read by female writers are about male characters. It means no more than it says -- it is much more difficult to convince me outside of these areas. And therefore when it works outside of these areas it is correspondingly that much more rewarding than any other reading experience and is to be treasured as such. Look at Mischa in Vonda McIntyre's **The Exile Waiting** (also Snake in **Dreamsnake),** Kivrin in **Doomsday Book** by Connie Willis or Leisha Camden in **Beggars in Spain** by Nancy Kress if you don't believe me!

So taken as a whole, that's the closest I can come to an explanation of why the books on my shelves are skewed towards the male, though not exclusively so.

LaptopLand

Phoenixine Eighty-One, June 1996

I haven't read a lot this month. The reason is not hard to find -- I have bought myself a new toy and I have spent most of the month playing with it. Indeed I am playing with it now, even as we speak. It is a laptop computer and I am sitting comfortably in my lounge with my laptop on my lap (where else) writing this essay.

The machine is walking Windows 95, an operating system with which I am less than familiar and so part of the month has been spent exploring its possibilities. To this end I purchased two books -- **The Byte Guide to Optimising Windows 95** which appears to have no author other than the corporate one mentioned in the title, and **Windows 95 Secrets** by Brian Livingstone and David Straub.

The first is excellent and it taught me a lot about the way the operating system does things. The second is enormously fat and less than brilliant, but nonetheless contains the occasional nugget of gold. It is very over-written (which accounts for its size) and the CD that comes with the book contains far too much 16 bit software -- in other words, despite what the blurb says, not all the software is specifically for Windows 95.

However life is not all laptops (though had you been watching me this month you could have been forgiven for thinking otherwise) and I got distracted by the new Wilbur Smith paperback **The Seventh Scroll**. It is the sequel to his earlier blockbuster **River God** which was set in ancient Egypt and which described the Hyksos invasion and the subsequent flight of the Egyptian royal family into what is present day Ethiopia where the body of the Pharaoh Mamose was interred in a hidden tomb together with a vast treasure. The new book is set in the present day and concerns the search for that hidden tomb. It is nothing but a straight forward, thrilling adventure tale; but what's wrong with that? It grabbed hold of me on page one and it didn't let go until the end. It is a good old slam-bang romantic page turner and I loved it so much that as

soon as I finished it I went back and re-read **River God** and that one thrilled me all over again. Wilbur Smith has written some stinkers, but when he is firing on all cylinders there is nobody else in sight.

Did I read any science fiction this month? Well of course I did. Steven Brust has published a new Vlad Taltos novel. As with all of this series, the title is a single nonsense word (in this case **Orca**; I can never remember either the titles or the order in which they should be read, which is irritating and is, I feel, a less than inspired marketing decision). I approached it with high hopes but was a little bit disappointed. The early books in the series were written in the first person and told from the point of view of Vlad Taltos himself. This book and its predecessor (**Athyra**) are not and I find them much less interesting as a result. Vlad is a fascinating character and without the insight given by being inside his head in a first person narrative it becomes harder to feel involved with him. There is too much of a distancing effect. The plot of the current book does not help either -- it is a novel mainly about financial irregularities committed by the high and mighty. There is a certain novelty about a story whose central theme is creative accountancy, but the essential dullness and boredom of the subject soon comes to the fore and my eyes glazed over.

In recent years there has been an upsurge in alternate history novels, most of them by Harry Turtledove. In collaboration with the actor Richard Dreyfuss he has done it again in a novel called **The Two Georges**. The central tenet of this novel is that the American Revolution never happened and America remained a British colony. There was general unrest in the eighteenth century colony, but the rebellion was nipped in the bud when George Washington travelled to England and signed a peace concord with George III. This event was commemorated by the artist Gainsborough in a very famous picture called **The Two Georges**. The novel itself is set in the twentieth century. The Gainsborough picture is on exhibition in America, a prelude to a visit by King Charles III. However it is stolen by a revolutionary group known as The Sons of Liberty who believe that America would be much better off as an independent country and who view the painting as being symbolic of colonial oppression.

The main action of the book concerns the desperate search for the painting led by Colonel Thomas Bushell of the Royal American Mounted Police.

The book is a curates egg. The writers are far too self indulgent in their introduction of characters from our reality into theirs, just so that they can smile archly. There is, for example, a used car salesman called Tricky Dick (presumably from Yore Belinda) and a certain John F. Kennedy also makes an appearance. Martin Luther King is the colonial governor and consequently has a very large part to play in the action of the book.

Considering that the writers are American, I find it most impressive that they have managed to get so well into the skin of the British colonial mentality. The currency used in the colony is still pounds, shillings and pence and amazingly they get the arithmetic right (the British currency was deliberately designed to confuse Americans, and it succeeded brilliantly). They even successfully come to grips with the guinea and most properly realise that it was not only a unit of currency, it was also a measure of social standing. This subtlety often defeats American commentators, but Turtledove and Dreyfuss are spot on. However they fall flat on their face with some of the language: "...whom will you send out into the field to investigate?" (If only they'd swapped the words and said "whom you will" instead and changed it from a question into a statement).

This terrible mis-use of the accusative would never pass the lips of English speakers, (though it is common in current American usage) and I found it intrusive for it seems to be a construction of which Dreyfuss and Turtledove are inordinately fond.

The book as a whole is enormous fun. The society pictured is rather like that of the early years of our twentieth century. Airships cruise the skies and trains criss-cross the continent at frequent

intervals. The pace of life is leisurely. The hunt for the painting takes our hero over much of the colony and the travelogue aspects of the book are most enjoyable. The standard whodunit aspects are less than thrilling and the twist at the end is not unexpected. But the strengths far outweigh the weaknesses and I strongly recommend the book to all you alternate history fans out there.

The next instalment of Stephen King's serial novel is in the shops. Another $4.95 paperback with 92 pages and the most godawful cliff-hanger at the end. I'm not sure I can stand the tension for another month, but I'm going to have to I suppose. I am a big Stephen King fan and this one is shaping up to be one of his best. No doubt it will eventually be published as a single work, but meanwhile I'm going to have to read it in chunks and chew my fingernails in between times.

The indescribable Robert Rankin has written another indescribable book whose title is **A Dog Called Demolition**. The book has lots of verse as chapter headings (until just over half way through when the author gets tired of it) and comes complete with a sound track album on page 249. In between times several people with a bandaged left foot have adventures. It would appear that everybody on earth is being ridden by pale ghostly grey alien figures that control their every thought and action. Well at least that is one point of view. If you examine it from the point of view of the riders you could say that their world has been invaded by solid fleshy beings who have grabbed hold of their legs and won't let go. Danny, however, has no rider for various occult reasons, some of which are connected with the bandaged left foot of one Samuel Sprout at whose funeral Danny was a pall bearer. Since Danny is clear, he is hated by all other people (and their riders). However he is aided by one Parton Vrane who is a mutated cockroach with black teeth and an awesome plonker. Together with a gentleman who is also clear and Mickey Merlin who is a direct descendent and has a book of potent spells (but who is not clear) they go into battle. But all is not as it seems...

It all hangs together somehow and being indescribable is also indescribably funny. I have never found a Robert Rankin book I didn't like and this is one of those. But it doesn't have a split windscreen Morris minor in it and it only has a very indirect Brussels sprout, so it isn't perfect.

Enter any bookshop nowadays and you will find the shelves groaning under the weight of formulaic fantasy novels. They seem written to a recipe in the same way that Mills and Boone romances are written to a recipe and they sell in their thousands for exactly the same reasons as do the Mills and Boone books. There is comfort in familarity and unoriginality. If you are planning on writing one of these fantasy novels, you really should read **The Tough Guide to Fantasyland** by Diana Wynne Jones. In a series of short satirical definitions arranged in an authoritative A- Z she describes all the obligatory facets of a fantasy adventure. For example there will be STEW which will be thick and savoury (ie viscous and dark brown). There will be BEER which foams and is invariably delivered in tankards. It will be bought at an INN which will be made mostly of wood and which will be larger upstairs than downstairs. Downstairs there is room only for a taproom and bar (and maybe a kitchen where STEW will be cooked). Upstairs there are innumerable sleeping chambers (not bedrooms) arranged along never ending corridors so that people can creep through them and break in to search luggage or threaten the occupants with DAGGERS.

It should be noted that despite living entirely on STEW (which never seems to contain fresh vegetables and which is never, ever served with a side salad) no fantasy characters ever suffer from SCURVY or any other deficiency diseases...

The definitions are trite in themselves but taken together they amount to a devastating destruction of the fantasy cliché and if you have ever read any of those horrible novels you will laugh in delighted recognition at her witticisms and truisms. And you will know exactly how *not* to write a fantasy novel (though you might sell more copies of your book if you follow her instructions exactly).

I was reading the definition of HERO when my cat brought home a rather severly mutilated rat which she proudly deposited on the carpet. It tried to crawl away and hide and so I had to catch it and take it outside to dispose of it. I knew it was evil because it had the REEK OF WRONGNESS. Fortunately being a HERO I was able to beat it, though it wounded me since I lacked ARMOUR (it bit me on the finger).

Anonymous	**Byte Guide to Optimising Windows**
Brian Livingstone & David Straub	**Windows 95 Secrets**
Wilbur Smith	**River God**
	The Seventh Scroll
Steven Brust	**Orca**
Richard Dreyfuss & Harry Turtledove	**The Two Georges**
Stephen King	**The Green Mile Part 2: The Mouse**
Robert Rankin	**A Dog Called Demolition**
Diana Wynne Jones	**The Tough Guide to Fantasyland**

Genre?

Phoenixine Eighty-Two, July 1996

I buy a lot of books from a second hand book dealer in Sydney and for the last few months he has been looking for something rather special for me. Now the books have turned up and I spent the beginning of this month indulging myself in Lord Dunsany. Dunsany was immensely popular in the early years of this century, but following his death (in the 1950s, I think) his popularity suffered a sad decline and his books are now very difficult to find. He is probably most famous for several books of very tall tales narrated by one Jorkens, in a London club. These tales have influenced many other writers. Arthur C. Clarke's **Tales from the White Hart** owe much to Dunsany's Jorkens stories as do the **Tales from Gavagan's Bar** by Fletcher Pratt and L. Sprague de Camp. Perhaps less famously, Sterling Lanier's stories about Brigadier Ffellowes are also in the direct line of descent. There are four Jorkens books altogether, but I'm saving some of them for later and this month I read only **The Travel Tales of Mr Joseph Jorkens** which was 1931. Despite their age, the stories hold up well and can still be read with enormous pleasure. Some have been overtaken by events (or more sophisticated stories) and the tale concerning an intrepid aviator's flight to the planet Mars in his specially modified aeroplane and what he finds there reads rather awkwardly to modern eyes. But there is still a lot of mileage in many of the tales and if you enjoy enormous leg pulls told with a perfectly straight face, you will love these stories.

A surprise bonus in the box of Dunsany books was **My Talks with Dean Spanley**, a whole novel which is well described by the title. It simply reports various conversations that the narrator has with the Reverend Dean Spanley. So far so boring, you might think, except that Dean Spanley remembers being a dog in a previous incarnation and the talks concern how it feels to live life as a canine. This rather quirky approach to a novel succeeds brilliantly and while I have no personal experience of being a dog I'm absolutely certain that this is just how it would

have been. The habits of dogs (and their doggy reasons for doing things like turning round several times before lying down) are magnificently illuminated. I had never heard of the book before the dealer brought it to my attention, but I'm very glad he found it.

Shortly after finishing the Dunsany I came down to Wellington for a business trip. I brought **Mortal Remains** by Christopher Evans with me. The solar system has been settled. Biotechnology has provided a vast range of habitable environments. Sentient spacecraft voyage between the habitats and the souls of the dead live in the noosphere and are consulted at regular intervals by the living. This unusual blend of science and spiritualism sounds unpromising at first, but Evans uses his material brilliantly and this background serves as the focus of a kind of interplanetary whodunit when a strange womb is rescued from a living spaceship which crashes on Mars. The rival political factions chasing after this womb (and its contents) , their reasons for pursuing it so relentlessly and the cruel way they treat the people who inadvertently become involved in the chase makes for a truly nail biting story of pursuit and manipulation. I couldn't put it down and I read it far too fast and finished it in a sitting which turned out to be a mistake since I was then faced with a barren bookless week, unless I did something drastic.

I went to Unity books and with steadily mounting horror discovered there was nothing there that I felt like reading. I began to suffer an unnameable dread of almost Lovcraftian proportions. So in desperation I bought a detective novel.

It wasn't actually quite that random a choice. Several months ago a friend recommended a series of detective novels by a writer called Lindsey Davis. The novelty of the books is that the private detective who is the hero and narrator of the tales is called Marcus Didius Falco and he lives in Rome in AD 71 under the rule of the Emperor Vespasian. Imagine if you will, Raymond Chandler crossed with Robert Graves (of **I Clavdivs** fame) and you have a rough idea of the vastly entertaining style of these novels. The author brings the world of the Roman empire thrillingly (and cynically) alive. This is Rome as the common folk saw her, not the Rome of the history books and the dreary political and social essays of Edward Gibbon.

The books are by turns hilarious, cynical, violent, and brilliantly observed. Even the cast list of characters in the front of each of the books makes entertaining reading. **Venus in Copper**, the third novel in the series, involves in part:

Anacrites	Chief spy at the palace and no friend of our boy
Footsie the Midget and the Man on the Barrel	Members of Anacrites staff
A prison rat	Ditto, probably
Severina Zotica	A professional bride
Chloe	Her feminist parrot
Thalia	A dancer who does curious things with snakes
A curious snake	
Gaius Cerinthus	Somebody the parrot knows, suspiciously absent from the scene

I simply couldn't resist, which was annoying because there are currently six books in the series

and that's a lot of money. But I dug deep into my pocket and bought and read them all and I certainly didn't regret it. I can't remember when I last enjoyed a series more.

When I got home, I took a bit of a rest from detective novels and picked up a non-fiction book called **Nothing to Declare** by someone rejoicing in the name of "Taki". Apparently he is an upper crust gossip columnist for the London papers. In 1984, while passing through Heathrow airport, he was discovered to be in possession of cocaine and was sentenced to three months in prison. The book is his account of his life behind bars. I bought it because the blurb on the back says "...easily the best book to emerge from a stint in one of Her Majesty's jails since Oscar Wilde's **De Profundis** nearly a century ago". Well I should have known better than to believe the blurb. It's an appallingly bad book. Taki is an unutterable snob and very little of the book has anything at all to say about life inside. Virtually all of it concerns the name-dropping exploits of his fast crowd of chinless wonders and Sloane Rangers. Don't bother with it.

By now it was convention time, and I hopped on an aeroplane to Christchurch to visit Constellation, New Zealand's 17th annual SF convention. About ten minutes after the plane took off from Auckland it landed back at Auckland suffering from "a minor mechanical malfunction", to quote the pilot. Fortunately it turned out that it really was a minor problem and after sitting on the tarmac for about an hour listening to engineers thump things with big hammers we took off again. This time the flight south was uneventful and I passed the time by reading **The Bloody Red Baron** by Kim Newman. This sequel to **Anno Dracula** is set during the first world war. Dracula, having been driven out of Englandat the end of the previous book, has used the intervening years to make alliances with various of the royal houses of Europe and he plays them off, one against the other. Soon the continent is embroiled in a bloody war to end all wars. One of the heroes of the German offensive is the vampire air ace Manfred Von Richtofen. (whose biography is being written by Edgar Allan Poe). Opposing him are a small cadre of dedicated British air aces under the command of Edward Winthrop. They include Albert Ball, the shadowy figure of Kent Allard, and a certain James Bigglesworth and his pals Ginger, Bertie and Algy. Several other famous people also appear. Lady Chatterley's gamekeeper Mellors has a pivotal part to play in the affair and the spy Ashenden, fresh from his exploits in Switzerland, has a walk on part. Newman has enormous fun with these little touches, but behind the references and jokes there is a tense and exciting tale, brilliantly told. **Anno Dracula** was one the highlights of my reading last year. **The Bloody Red Baron** is one of the highlights of this year. And there may be more to come...

One of the events of the convention was the launch of a collection of short stories by members of the Phoenix SF Society. The book, edited by Phillip Mann, is called **Tales from The Out of Time Cafe**. The stories, each of which describes an aspect of the Cafe's existence, are uniformly excellent. Phoenix and its writers deserve to feel very proud of themselves -- there isn't a weak one in the bunch. The book demonstrates highly professional writing skills and it can hold its head up proudly in any company. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it. And I also enjoyed meeting Amelia Earhart, Elvis, Bob the duty manager (an inspired invention -- she is a brilliant character, brilliantly characterised) and all other people and things who drift in and out of the Cafe. One the great strengths of the stories is that the characters learn from their experiences and change and develop as the stories continue. This gives them an added dimension that brings them alive and makes the reader care. These aren't ciphers going through the motions (as are so many science fiction "characters"). So when we learn of Manny's ultimate fate, for example, it is genuinely moving.

On the way back from Christchurch I read Stephen Baxter's new book **Ring**. This is a super hi-tech novel in the grand old tradition. It has a convoluted plot, gigantic themes and devices and no characters about whom you can care at all. They go through the motions like robots, humbled into insignificance by the sheer overwhelming complexity of the universe. If you like your SF very, very hard you will love this book. Otherwise don't bother. There is no art in this book, no lasting values. It's a wiring diagram with dialogue.

The other Stephen (Stephen King) keeps on coming at you with his his serial novel. We are now up to episode th and the tension is nail-biting. The plot is developing pleasing levels of complexity. The murderer Coffey is more than he at first seemed (there are even suggestions that he may be innocent, but we do not yet know whether or not he will escape his date with the electric chair). We are obviously heading for a crisis -- Mr Jingles the mouse is in trouble and the first rehearsals for the execution of Eduard Delacroix have been held. The next installment promises to be a cracker! **The Green Mile** is proving to be one of Stephen King's best novels. I WANT TO KNOW HOW IT ALL WORKS OUT (sob!). But like everybody else, I will have to wait for three more months.

There is an internet discussion group about the novels of Stephen King. Recently someone posted a message hoping that Stephen King doesn't die before he finishes the last volume! Fans all over the world would explode with frustration if that happened. It doesn't bear thinking about.

Lord Dunsany	**The Travel Tales of Mr Joséph Jorkens**
	My Talks with Dean Spanley
Christopher Evans	**Mortal Remains**
Lindsey Davis	**The Silver Pigs**
	Shadows in Bronze
	The Iron Hand of Mars
	Venus in Copper
	Poseidon's Gold
	Last Act in Palmyra
Taki	**Nothing to Declare**
Kim Newman	**The Bloody Red Baron**
Phillip Mann (Editor)	**Tales from the Out of Time Cafe**
Stephen Baxter	**Ring**
Stephen King	**The Green Mile Part 3: Coffey's Hands**

Microsoftie

Phoenixine Eighty-Three, August 1996

I began the month with a particularly boring book which I only bought because it was on special, but I really shouldn't have bothered. **Microsoft Secrets** purports to take the lid off Microsoft's corporate strategy and to reveal the methods that have made it such a successful company. Well, I suppose that it does just that and to that I end I guess the book fulfils its stated purpose.

But it is written in such turgid, mind-numbingly boring prose that few people will ever manage to struggle through it. There are valuable lessons to be learned here and the book really and truly does contain many nuggets of gold. It certainly places Microsoft in its historical perspective and analyses quite keenly the tactical advantages that the company has gained for itself in its pursuit of its long term strategic goals. The way the thing works is eye opening (and the descriptions of just how the products are developed had its fascinations, given that I am a programmer and I have a natural interest in how these things work). How such a deeply interesting topic can be rendered so stultifyingly dull is quite a conundrum. But the authors succeed despite themselves. The book is a perfect object lesson in how not to write.

In urgent need of something to prevent my eyes glazing over I turned to **Wild Side** by Stephen Gould, an author you may well not have heard of. Every so often, I deliberately buy a book by an author I have never read before, just to keep the interest up. Mostly there are very good reasons why I have never heard of the author, but just occasionally I strike it lucky. About three years ago I read **Jumper** and was immediately hooked. Not that it did me any good, Gould immediately fell silent and produced nothing else. Imagine my delight when a new novel appeared. Even though it was a quite expensive hardback, I bought it immediately and I was not disappointed. Charlie has inherited a farm from his uncle. Just behind a heavy wooden door hidden at the back of an old barn, he discovers a tunnel into an alternate Earth where mankind seems never to have evolved. The world is a primitive paradise. Animals and birds long since extinct on our own world are here in abundant numbers in the unspoiled wilderness. This is the wild side and it is Charlie's to explore. But to explore a whole world you need equipment and money to buy the equipment. The secret is too big to keep and it isn't long before it leaks out. Then the fireworks really start as an unscrupulous government tries to take advantage of the situation.

The story is a good old fashioned sense of wonder, edge of the seat, nail bitingly taut thriller and I couldn't put it down. Indeed, having finished it and therefore being forced to put it down, I immediately went and pulled **Jumper** down from the shelf and re-read it. It concerns a young boy who is able to teleport. The implications of the idea are examined in fascinating detail as the hero uses his talent to escape from various nasty situations. How he uses it to make a success of his life is the theme of the first part of the book. The use(and abuse) of his talent becomes more and more blatent. The secret is too big to keep and it isn't long before it leaks out. Then the fireworks really start as an unscrupulous government tries to take advantage of the situation.

You may recognise the last two sentences. The last two paragraphs both finish with them. I am beginning to wonder if Gould is a one theme writer.

Despite this cynicism, I still heartily recommend the books. They are thematically linked, there is no doubt about that, but they both of them tell a rollicking good yarn, and I can forgive a lot of sins for that.

And then I arrived home from work one day and sitting on my doorstep was a parcel of books from England and my cup ran over. The parcel contained the new Terry Pratchett novels -- **Feet of Clay** (a Discworld novel) and **Johnny and the Bomb** (the sequel, sort of, to **Johnny and the Dead**). Not only that, there was Dave Langford's quizbook as well (subtitled **The Unseen University Challenge**). I became incommunicado and sat down and wallowed in Pratchettiana.

Feet of Clay is another story of the city guard. All our old favourite characters are here (together with a few new ones). They are investigating a series of killings that seem to have been carried out by a golem. The curator of the Dwarf Bread Museum has been done to death with some battle bread. The museum has exhibits of close combat crumpets and deadly throwing toast, and the curator has written the definitive work on offensive baking. Not surprisingly, Carrot finds it fascinating. Then he finds the body, and the game is afoot. The rest is vintage Pratchett. Trust me -- you'll love it (particularly the werewolf who suffers from pre-

lunar tension).

Johnny and the Bomb is also a book with all the old familiar characters in it. This time Johnny travels though time back to the second world war in an attempt to prevent (or at least minimise) some of the destruction caused by a bomb that was dropped on the village. In many ways it is a traditional time travel book, full of gleeful paradoxes. There is also a subtext (as there usually is with the **Johnny** books) and therefore much moralising about the rights and the wrongs of things. Just what is a moral action anyway? Who has the right to interfere in other people's lives?

The **Johnny** books are the best pure writing that Pratchett has produced. **Johnny and the Dead** bids fair to being the best book he will ever write. In this company **Johnny and the Bomb** has to come second. But a very close second; there isn't much in it. This is a great book.

The quizbook is equally fascinating and is one of the few quizbooks where the answers are sometimes even funnier than the questions. You won't be able to answer very many of them, but you will have enormous fun trying.

In the same parcel was the new Tom Holt novel **My Hero**. Holt is a patchy writer and is somewhat too prolific for his own good. When he is firing on all cylinders he writes truly hilarious books. But sometimes he is too hasty and the jokes don't work. Unfortunately nobody can be just a little bit funny. Either it makes you laugh or it doesn't. **My Hero** is one of his weakest books. It strains for effect and it never quite makes it. Jane, the heroine, is a writer and the book concerns the secret lives of her characters when they are not being written about. Eventually Jane's life and the characters lives come to intersect more and more closely (they talk to each other on the phone). Another author appears on the scene. He has become trapped in his fantasy world and he needs Jane to write him back to reality. This is real bottom of the barrel stuff and it didn't work for me at all.

You may remember that a couple of months ago I read a novel called **Time Scout** by Robert Asprin and Linda Evans. I praised it highly as a good old fashioned adventure story. Now comes the sequel **Wagers of Sin**. It is set in the same Time Travel station as the first and it involves many of the same characters. In a lot of ways it is not so much a sequel as a continuation of the same story and if you haven't read the first, you probably shouldn't bother with this one (you won't understand a lot of the allusions). but if you read and enjoyed the first you will lap this one up. Like the first it is a rollicking good yarn and the scenes set in ancient Rome (and Denver during the heyday of the wild west) are, as always, particularly well written. I hadn't realised this was going to turn into a series, but for once I don't mind. It's a lot of fun.

I used to like David Eddings. I loved the five books of **The Belgariad**, and I still think they are among the best fantasy that I have ever read. I was less than impressed with his other series, but on the strength of my memories of **The Belgariad** I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt and read **Belgarath the Sorcerer**, a prequel to the series and a book that promised to shed much light on one of the most fascinating characters from the original series.

I shouldn't have bothered. The book concerns the plottings of Gods and the machinations of their servants (of whom Belgarath is one). When you write on this scale and deal with the manipulations of whole races of people and the attempted destruction of the planet you necessarily paint on a very large canvas indeed. This is a very difficult thing to do and Eddings avoids the point by making far too much of the action take place off stage. We only learn about it as characters describe what happened in response to questions from other characters. This unavoidably lends a distancing effect to the story and ultimately I ceased to care. It was too much a Greek Chorus and too little a story. I found it dull.

Tim Page is a photojournalist. During the Vietnam war he was one of the elite crew who brought that terrible war very close to home. Now he has returned to Vietnam and Cambodia and in the

articles published in **Derailed in Uncle Ho's Victory Garden** he compares and contrasts the countries as they are today with the countries they were in the 1960s and 1970s when he lived there and reported the war. This is a harrowing book (particularly when it discusses the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge in Pol Pot's Cambodia) but it is a very important book. It puts history into perspective which is always a valuable insight to have, and it doesn't pull any punches.

Stephen King is up to volume 4 of **The Green Mile** and the plot complications come thick and fast. Mr Jingles plays a decisive part, and the grotesque events surrounding the bungled execution of the convict Eduard Delacroix are described in grisly detail. You'll need a strong stomach for this one. King has seldom done better.

Michael A. Cusumano & Richard W. Selby	**Microsoft Secrets**
Stephen Gould	**Wild Side**
	Jumper
Terry Pratchett	**Feet of Clay**
	Johnny and the Bomb
Dave Langford	**Terry Pratchett's Discworld Quizbook**
	The Unseen University Challenge
Tom Holt	**My Hero**
Robert Asprin & Linda Evans	**Wagers of Sin**
David & Leigh Eddings	**Belgarath the Sorcerer**
Tim Page	**Derailed in Uncle Ho's Victory Garden**
Stephen King	**The Green Mile Part 4: The Bad Death of Edu**

Living in an SF Novel

Phoenixine Eighty-Four, September 1996

I've been travelling again and this month saw another visit to Sydney. I took a big thick book for the flight -- **The Year's Best Science Fiction** edited by Gardner Dozois. It has 500 odd pages of short stories (some of them very odd pages indeed) together with a masterful essay summing up the year by Dozois himself. I've been collecting these omnibus volumes ever since number three (I missed the first two for some reason) and I've never been disappointed. I read very little short fiction, but I always make a point of buying the Dozois anthology -- he selects from strength and his tastes usually match mine quite closely. This year's collection is as good as any and I recommend it highly.

Sydney was fun -- the hotel I usually stay at is called **The Rest**. It's in Milson's Point which is just by the harbour bridge. I arrived there and booked myself in and half way through the week,

with no warning at all, it suddenly transformed itself from **The Rest Hotel** to **The Duxton Hotel**. I left the hotel to go to work in the morning and when I got back in the evening it was all changed. The new name was emblazoned in neon, there was a new logo etched on the sliding glass doors of the entrance, there was no trace at all of the old name. Even the staff were wearing different uniforms. I began to wonder if I'd fallen into a parallel universe...

I got up to my room (fortunately I still had a room) and all the old paraphernalia had vanished -- the letterhead had been changed, the price list for the minibar had a new logo (and the minibar had twice as many drinks as it had had under the old name). The soap and shampoo in the bathroom were different brands from what they had been that morning when I showered and there was a bright yellow rubber duck perched cheekily by the side of the wash basin; a pun on the new name of the hotel, I presume. It really was unsettling for a minute or three. I've obviously been reading far too much SF.

The flight back turned out to be delayed -- and the delay got longer and longer. Every time I looked at the departure board the estimated take off time got later. Eventually the plane took off, almost five hours late. Fortunately I'd brought several books to the airport with me and I sat in a bar and read. Then later I sat in the aeroplane and read some more.

The Widowmaker by Mike Resnick is the start of yet another series (Oh No!) which I didn't know until after I'd bought the book. But fortunately it turns out to be complete in itself (Resnick's series books often are) and I enjoyed it lots. It isn't anything special, just an adventure story, but what's wrong with that? Jefferson Nighthawk, a bounty hunter and killer known as the Widowmaker is suffering from an incurable disease and has himself frozen with instructions that he be woken only when a cure has been found. A century or so into his long sleep a prominent politician is assassinated and a clone is made from Jefferson Nighthawk, brought hurriedly to maturity and sent to find and eliminate the assassin. The cloned Widowmaker has all of the original's skills, but none of his experience. He is effectively a naive, alone on the tough frontier of the galaxy. And that is where the story really starts...

Resnick handles this nonsense very skilfully. The tension never slackens and the ending is truly surprising. It's a rollicking good yarn.

Richard Matheson was one of the seminal writers of the 1950s (who will ever forget his **Incredible Shrinking Man** and the classic film made from the book). His new book (**Now You See It**) is a very peculiar novel indeed. As the title implies, it is about a magician. The Great Delacorte is a stage magician whose career is failing. He invites several people to his home where an afternoon of magic, mystery, madness and revenge unfolds itself in his booby trapped study. Bodies vanish, severed heads talk. Murder is done. Or is it? Almost every chapter ends on a cliff-hanger, and the opening of the next reveals just how well the author has hoodwinked you. Nothing is what it appears to be (as with all the best magic tricks) and the convolutions of the plot defy belief. You can only read this book once. After you reach the end and realise just what is really happening the magic vanishes. But while the roller-coaster ride is in full flight it carries you away into mystery, marvel and the thrill of a lifetime. Just like a real magic show.

Australian writer Greg Egan is currently making quite a name for himself and his new short story collection **Axiomatic** shows why. Some of the stories are a little weak and their structure suggests that sometimes Egan has just wrapped some thin dramatisation around whatever scientific articles he happens to have read lately. But the bulk of the collection is definitely better than average. Egan is an interesting writer and these are interesting stories. Several of them share the common theme of speculation on the nature of time. These are quite mind spinning. Egan is a writer to watch.

Back in New Zealand, I went browsing through a bookshop and I found a biography of Chairman Mao written by Zhisui Li who was Mao's private doctor from the early 1950s until Mao's death in 1976. Nobody else was so close to Mao for so long and the book gives a unique

insight into one of the most charismatic dictators who has ever lived.

Like almost everybody in the late 1960s I had a copy of Chairman Mao's little red book (I've still got it) and unlike many of those people I have actually read it. Some of the essay extracts are quite thought provoking (***On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People***, for example). But time has not been kind to Mao and today his theories and actions are largely discredited, especially by the nation that he led for so long.

Li shows Mao to have been selfish and power hungry; a masterful politician playing the game of politics and paranoia to perfection, manoeuvring to keep himself in power for the very simple reason that he liked power. He was an Emperor in all but name and his court was an Imperial court in all but name. The people saw him as an Imperial figure and like the Emperors of old he was seen to be infallible (an ancient Chinese belief). However the Chinese are nothing if not pragmatic. The Emperor is infallible but he is advised by fallible men. Sometimes they may advise him badly. Perhaps it is more fair to say that within the limits of the knowledge available to him the Emperor is infallible. With such a belief supporting him Mao couldn't lose. It certainly explains his mass popularity which never faltered even during the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution.

The book is fascinating. As an intimate portrait of the man (warts and all) it will probably never be surpassed. Almost every page contains fresh insights. It is the final nail in Mao's coffin.

Those among you who have seen my library know that I collect books like other people collect stamps. I am a bibliophile. At least I always thought I was. But now I have read one more book and I have realised what I really am. The book is **Biblioholism -- The Literary Addiction** by Tom Raabe.

My name is Alan Robson and I am a biblioholic.

The depressing thing about this screamingly funny book is that I recognised myself on almost every page. What I really need now is a book that will tell me the twelve steps to a cure. Yes. Just one more book...

Nicholas Negroponte just has to be one of the most boring gurus of the computer age. **Being Digital** is an extended series of essays wherein he pontificates at great length but to little effect. The book discusses simple minded ideas and makes trivial predictions about the future. Those of us who are SF readers will find little to surprise us here. Indeed, perhaps the only surprise is just how conservative Negroponte's ideas really are compared to some of the wilder speculations of the wilder practitioners of the SF art. The book is supremely dull.

I'm not a New Zealander -- I've only lived here for fifteen years and my knowledge of some of New Zealand's history is a little sketchy as a result. I'm not too sure how much weight to put on Robyn Gossett's book **New Zealand Mysteries** but there is no denying it is a fascinating read. The author examines many unusual events (and artefacts) from New Zealand's past and present and brings a delightfully sceptical point of view to bear on the wilder things. Some of the mysteries are common coin -- I think most people have heard of the sixteenth century Spanish helmet dredged up in Wellington harbour. Is this evidence that New Zealand was first sighted by Europeans much earlier than otherwise supposed? The evidence (such as it is) is discussed but the most obvious explanation is that it was a family heirloom lost overboard from a much later vessel. I found the book enthralling, mainly because Robyn Gossett is an entertaining writer who has dug up a positive treasure trove of odd sightings and strange occurrences. Did a claimant to the throne of Scotland live and die on Campbell Island? Read the book and find out.

A book that never fails to put a lump in my throat is Helene Hanff's **84 Charing Cross Road** -- a compendium of letters from Helene (in New York) to a book dealer in London. I guess my Biblioholism has something to do with my fondness for the book, but I'm not alone in admiring it.

Consequently, when I recently came across another book of essays by Ms Hanff I fell on it with glad cries of glee. **Letters from New York** consists of a series of small essays about life in New York which were originally broadcast in England on the BBC radio programme **Woman's Hour**. When I lived in England I used to listen to this programme avidly. Despite its rather unfortunate title, it is most definitely not the radio equivalent of a cheap women's magazine. It always broadcast interesting articles of surprising depth about an enormous variety of subjects. The Helene Hanff articles date from the 1980s which was long after I had left England so all the material was new to me. Needless to say I loved the book. New York has had an unfortunate press -- far too many people think of it as dirty, violent, dangerous and frightening. To an extent it is all these things (I've been there). But it is more as well, and Helene Hanff's little essays give the place a whole new perspective. They are by turns humorous, sad, enlightening and always fascinating. Everyday life in a great city has never been so well described.

The occasionally otherwise named Iain Banks has a new Culture novel on the stands. **Excession** is a positive tour de force. The novel is 450 pages long and almost nothing at all happens and yet the fascination and tension and enjoyment never flag. It is a completely brilliant book. The Excession of the title is a mysterious alien artefact. It sits silently, resisting all efforts to contact it. The ships of the Culture see the Excession as an opportunity to advance themselves. Conspiracies and counter conspiracies abound. A minor war breaks out and ends again. The Excession goes away.

The real heroes and most fascinating characters in the book are the ships themselves. Banks' ships have always had a curious life all of their own and now for the first time we get a close look at the culture of their Culture as embodied in the paranoia with which many of the ships live their lives. The human (and alien) characters are of little importance compared to this. I simply couldn't put it down and I read it in a sitting. I've never been very impressed with Banks' SF in the past (though I love his mainstream work). But this one is just magnificent. Words almost fail me.

I have a degree in chemistry which doesn't mean much in itself but in studying for it I came to absorb a philosophy of science and an idea of just what "doing science" is all about. This makes me less than sympathetic to the mystics and new agers and children of the Age of Aquarius who seem to me to be too locked into their certainties, too unwilling to examine evidence, too dogmatic and often too imprecise. If I have a belief it is in Karl Popper's paradigm of disprovability -- the only ideas worth discussing are those which contain the seeds of their own destruction. If we have no way of challenging a theoretical structure, we can make the most outrageous statements about it. For instance I could say that I believe the universe sprang into being two minutes ago and all my memories of the past and all of the historical record were created by whatever it was that created the universe two minutes ago. You can't disprove that -- it is an irrefutable statement. And therefore it is completely worthless.

What has this to do with what I read on my holidays? Well one of the books I read was **Facing the Future** by Michael Allaby and it is a collection of essays that addresses just these points. Allaby takes on the cranks and mystics, the cultists of the age of neo-barbarism. And they come off very badly. This is an important book, and an exciting book. Read it.

Stephen King is up to number 5 of **The Green Mile** and there is only one more to go. I CAN'T WAIT!!! But I'll have to.

Gardner Dozois	**The Year's Best Science Fiction Thirteent**
Mike Resnick	**The Widowmaker**
Richard Matheson	**Now You See It**

Greg Egan	**Axiomatic**
Zhisui Li	**The Private Life of Chairman Mao**
Tom Raabe	**Biblioholism -The Literary Addiction**
Nicholas Negroponte	**Being Digital**
Robyn Gossett	**New Zealand Mysteries**
Helene Hanff	**Letter From New York**
Iain M. Banks	**Excession**
Michael Allaby	**Facing the Future**
Stephen King	**The Green Mile Part 5: Night Journey**

Youthful Vices

Phoenixine Eighty-Five, October 1996

The TV recently showed the miniseries of Larry McMurtry's **Dead Man's Walk** (the **Lonesome Dove** prequel that I mentioned in a previous essay) and I watched it and it was magnificent. It stuck very closely to the book (largely because McMurtry wrote the screenplay himself) but it brought home to me yet again that although I have read many McMurtry books, they have all been tales of the American West -- I have never read any of the novels set in more contemporary times. Determined to rectify this sad state of affairs, I purchased and devoured **Cadillac Jack**, a novel about a man called Jack who drives a Cadillac.

Jack is a wheeler-dealer. He roams the States from flea market to flea market hunting for bargains that he can buy cheaply and sell dearly. He appears to know every weirdo collector of weirdo objects and no matter what junk he buys there is always someone around to take it off his hands. Towards the end, an important plot point revolves around the whereabouts of a Luddite Truncheon (one of the few remaining police truncheons used in suppressing the original Luddite riots). A millionaire truncheon collector is desperate for it. Jack has it. Sparks fly.

My admiration for McMurtry's books revolves around the raving loonies that wander eccentrically through their pages. You can get away with this in a western -- something about the wide open spaces seems to encourage eccentricity, but I wasn't sure if he could manage the same thing in twentieth century America. I needn't have worried. He did it brilliantly.

One of the last projects the late Roger Zelazny was involved in was the design of a computer game. A novelization of this game has now been published (**Chronomaster** by Roger Zelazny and Jane Lindskold). While it might make a fun game, it makes a terribly tedious novel. The hero is a designer of pocket universes. Several such universes are now in stasis and he must enter them and explore them to find out why (has somebody got it in for pocket universes?). Since time has been suspended in these universes the only way he can enter and move around in them is to carry his own supply of "bottled time" with him. He is also equipped with a "universal tool" which suggested interesting Rabelasian possibilities to my dirty mind, but which turned out to be merely a sort of futuristic self-defining Swiss army knife.

The novel is episodic (as games must be) and is all surface and slam-bang action. The hero is heroic and the villains are villainous and it is all pretty black and white. I couldn't get involved.

Volume three of Harry Turtledove's irritatingly titled alien invasion novel is now available. Though the books are hard to tell apart by looking at the cover or reading the title, they are beautifully written. They are believable and exciting; what more could you ask for? Some heroes from earlier episodes are now revealed to be villains and some villains turn into heroes. Nuclear weapons are tossed around and things are looking bad for the aliens as they start to suffer reversals on the battlefield. Volume four (which Turtledove claims will be the last) will hopefully wrap all the loose ends up. I hope it does. This is all good stuff

Mostly I read novels, but I like short stories and therefore I fell with glee upon **The Road To Nightfall**, volume four of the collected short stories of Robert Silverberg. This volume reprints stories from early in his career. In the 1950s, in his teens and twenties, Silverberg spread like crab grass over every SF magazine in the world. His enormous (though often trivial) output allowed him to make a living as a professional writer and some of the best stories from this hugely productive time are collected in this book. Despite the almost machine like way he must have hammered out the stories, they still read well. Even that early in his career he knew how to tell a tale, how to construct a story and while of necessity these highly commercial pieces are classically structured (no experimental fiction here) they never fail to entertain and hold the attention.

David Brin is perhaps best known for his "uplift" novels and with **Brightness Reef** he returns to the theme. Let me say straight away that this enormous novel (705 pages) is merely the first volume of goodness knows how many and it is profoundly irritating in that it simply stops in mid story when the page count gets high enough. No conclusions are reached, no endings are explored. It just stops. As a result it is supremely unsatisfying.

The tale takes place on the distant planet of Jijo. It is under quarantine, left to lie fallow by the galaxy's patron races in the hope that the seeds of life left behind by the last race to live on it may mature into a life form suitable for uplift. But representatives of six races (one of them human) have sneaked in over the years for various reasons and an unofficial colony is growing. Then a spaceship arrives, seemingly to report on the current status of the world. What are the colonists to do?

The tale is told episodically from the point of view of representatives of each of the races, and it soon becomes clear that Brin is utterly hopeless at portraying aliens. Every single one of them comes across as merely a rather oddly shaped human being He simply cannot convincingly portray a mindset that is truly alien, though he is very good at bizarre biological adaptations (one of the alien races has wheels instead of legs!). I think I'm giving up on Brin. He is no longer worth the effort.

Well, six months ago tension, apprehension and dissension had begun. Now they are finished. The sixth and last book of Stephen King's serial novel has been published and now we know what Paul was doing in the shed and what happened when Coffey finally walked that horrible green mile.

As an experiment in publishing it has been a resounding success. As a novel, I think perhaps it is less so. Partly that is because of the preannounced limit of six books. The closer King got to book number six, the more obvious it was that the plot needed seven, eight or nine books and the last couple were very rushed with far too many incidents reported in retrospect that deserved the more immediate drama of being experienced as they happened

Six instalments is about six hundred pages (give or take) which is not a bad length for a story. But I can't help feeling that had King conceived and written it as an entity (as opposed to a serial) it would have been longer (say about nine hundred pages). But he was caught in the

strait-jacket of the marketing decisions that pre-dated the writing. Six instalments it had to be, no matter how rushed the later ones.

Don't get me wrong -- I enjoyed it tremendously. It is a powerful and moving story. The flaws are perhaps inevitable, but it was a worthy gimmick, enormous fun and one hell of a story.

Youthful vices are never lost, they just gain in intensity. One of mine is an inordinate fondness for the appallingly bad novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs (acronymically known as ERB), a writer I discovered as a child (the best time to discover him) and who I cannot resist reading despite a certain and sure knowledge that the words he put down on paper were unutterably rubbishy ones.

One of the more frustrating experiences of my reading life has been the knowledge that when ERB died (round about the time I was born) he left behind 80 pages or so of a Tarzan novel. I wanted to read it, but I never could. It remained unfinished and unpublished until this year. The fragment was completed by Joe R. Lansdale (a comic book artist and novelist) and has been published as a limited edition hardback called **Tarzan -- The Lost Adventure** (Ick!) which I paid far too much money for, but which I now proudly own.

I have to admit that it is not a very good book (though this is perhaps less than surprising). It consists mainly of Tarzan set pieces -- attacks by various wild beasts, fights among the great apes, Tarzan rescues the good guys and vanquishes the bad guys. A lost city is discovered. Ho hum.

It was nice to make a reacquaintance with Jad-Bal-Ja and Nkima and it was good to see them restored to their well deserved heroic stature, but overall the book was a disappointment; it was too predicable, too stereotyped and therefore, in the final analysis, too dull.

But like all ERB novels, the ending promises a sequel. The clues are unambiguous; it will take place in Pellucidar, that eerie land at the Earth's core. I always felt that ERB was most at home there. Apart from the Martian stories (which are in a class of their own) the Pellucidar books were his strongest. If this story is ever continued, I will be first in line to buy the book. I never can resist ERB; even when his stories are written by other people.

One of my most treasured memories is of sitting on the deck of a Mississippi riverboat watching an eclipse of the moon. It was my first ever eclipse, my first ever Mississippi riverboat and my first (and so far only) time in New Orleans, the city Poppy Z. Brite has claimed for her own in her stunning horror novels. To be sure, much of the action of **Drawing Blood** takes place outside of New Orleans (in the North Carolina town of Missing Mile, to be exact) but the spirit of that haunted and eerie city pervades the whole book.

Robert McGee, an underground comic artist who is losing his ability to draw, moves to Missing Mile with his family. He spirals down in a gloomy and all too predictable descent into drugs and drink which culminates with him murdering his wife and young son and then hanging himself. But for unknown reasons he spares one of his children. The boy Trevor, who seems to have inherited Robert's artistic skills, wakes in the morning to discover a house full of bloody corpses.

Twenty years pass, and on the anniversary of the murders Trevor returns to Missing Mile. Meanwhile Zach, an erstwhile computer hacker who has attracted the unwelcome attentions of the FBI takes it on the lam from New Orleans and also ends up in Missing Mile. He and Trevor meet and fall in love and together dig deeper into the gruesome reasons behind Trevor's survival. What they discover is, to say the least, disturbing.

I have never read a book which sustains its atmosphere so convincingly. It sucks you in and chums your emotions and won't let go. It contains some of the most gruesome images I have ever come across, some of the most erotic homosexual love scenes I have ever read. I am

unreservedly heterosexual, but even I was turned on by them. The emotionally wrenching climax of the book is a psilocybin-induced (perhaps) hallucination of disturbing and almost traumatic intensity.

This novel is not for the faint hearted -- it pulls no punches and leaves the reader emotionally drained. By no means can it be described as "entertaining"; but by God it is powerful and dramatic. If you like horror novels you will love this one, though be warned, you may find it offensive.

While we are on the subject of offensive books, consider **Anno Domini** by Barnaby Williams, a book that is guaranteed to offend every Christian in the world (no mean feat). The novel tells the story of an early Christian sect (portrayed as the heroes) and their battle against what eventually turned into the Catholic church, an organisation determined to stamp out heresy. In many ways it is a true story (where are the Albigensians today?), but its shock value comes in the fictional assumptions, the most extreme of which is that the leader of the sect is Jesus himself (who did not die on the cross). His most bitter enemy is Peter who is portrayed as a psychopathic killer known as The Fisherman. The dichotomous Saul/Paul is beautifully painted as a Roman secret agent. Other saints and martyrs are also shown in a less than saintly light with all their human foibles exposed. If you are at all attached to your religious beliefs don't even open this book.

Sir Peter Medawar was a Nobel prize winning scientist and a thoughtful essayist. Most of the essays collected in **The Strange Case of the Spotted Mice** pick away at the philosophical boundaries of what we mean by 'science'. They make wonderfully complementary companions to shelves of science fiction books, but they are not easy reading. The points he makes are subtle but are illuminated with candour and enormous wit, particularly when he turns his mind to debunking some of the more extreme nonsenses that masquerade under the name of science. He does a wonderful hatchet job on Teilhard de Chardin and even Arthur Koestler comes in for some stick. Were Medawar alive today I am sure he would be greatly saddened by modern society's wholesale acceptance of some of the more lunatic fringes. But he isn't and we are all the poorer because of it. We need more of this kind of sense and sensibility.

Larry McMurtry	**Cadillac Jack**
Roger Zelazny and Jane Lindskold	**Chronomaster**
Harry Turtledove	**World War -- Upsetting the Balance**
Robert Silverberg	**The Road to Nightfall -- The Collected S**
David Brin	**Brightness Reef**
Stephen King	**The Green Mile Part 6: Coffey on the Mi**
Edgar Rice Burroughs and Joe R. Lansdale	**Tarzan -- The Lost Adventures**
Poppy Z. Brite	**Drawing Blood**
Barnaby Williams	**Anno Domini**
Sir Peter Medawar	**The Strange Case of the Spotted Mice**

Connections

Phoenixine Eighty-Six, November 1996

Back in the 1960s a science fiction trilogy was published. That was nowhere near as common then as it is now but even though all the world's bookshelves currently groan under the weight of all the dead trees that have been turned into trilogies since that time, I doubt if there has ever been a trilogy as odd as this particular one. Each book had a different author and all three authors appeared as characters in the books.

The first of the books was **The Butterfly Kid** by Chester Anderson and I've owned that one for donkey's years. In it the three authors defeat an alien invasion of Greenwich Village with the aid of many good drugs (this was the 1960s after all).

The second book is **The Unicorn Girl** by Michael Kurland which I've just found after years of hunting. It concerns the events that transpire after the alien invasion. The characters are (sort of) kidnapped by trans-universal travellers, and a lot goes down when the BLIP hits the cosmic fan. Both books are very tongue in cheek and very funny indeed, poking merciless fun at what even then were SF clichés. Each book also has a fine old time insulting the two authors who didn't write it. Highly recommended.

The third book in the trilogy is called **The Probability Pad** by T. A. Waters and I don't own it, I have never read it, and if anyone knows where I can get hold of a copy I will name my first born after you.

In keeping with this oddly-authored theme, I was delighted to notice the simultaneous publication of **The Regulators** by Richard Bachman and **Desperation** by Stephen King; and initially at least I was expecting more of the same. However as all the world knows, one of these writers is merely a pseudonym of the other and so the situation is actually quite different from that of Anderson/Kurland/Waters who really were different people.

The King and Bachman books are very closely related to each other. Both have the same set of characters (or at least, people with the same names -- their ages and motivations and the parts they play do sometimes differ between the books) and both have almost exactly the same underlying theme despite some small cosmetic plot differences. Tak!

Desperation is a small town in Nevada. Several travellers are hijacked into the town by the local cop. The rest of the book details the murders, tortures and mutilations which the cop commits and chronicles their growing awareness that ALL IS NOT WHAT IT SEEMS. Tak!

In **The Regulators**, the similarly named characters live in Wentworth, Ohio. Soon the killing will begin (quite graphic killing at that) as the Regulators come to town. Is it merely coincidence that Audry Wyler's nephew is recently returned from Desperation where his parents died horrifically? Tak!

I read **Desperation** first and I thoroughly enjoyed it. It is as taut a horror-thriller as anything King has done, but I found **The Regulators** almost impossible to read. I had to struggle my way through it. It echoed so much of the first book that for me it contained no real surprises. It lacked the frisson that a good horror tale requires.

The one book acted as a spoiler for the other. It gave away too many secrets and the other was stale and dry as a result. I don't think it really matters which book you read first, but don't read the second one immediately after it.

While we are on the subject of connected books, Michael Moorcock has now completed the trilogy begun with **Blood** and continued with **Fabulous Harbours**. **The War among the Angels**

concerns one Rose Von Bek who travels London's byways, living strange lives in the multiverse. She is friend and companion to highwaymen, followers of the High Toby. Dick Turpin, Jack Karaquazian and Captain Quelch. Only Moorcock could get away with this. He is re-living and re-writing his youth (and yours and mine). I read the Fleetway Library penny dreadfuls that he wrote in the 1950s and Dick Turpin was my hero because of them. I read Frank Richards' **Billy Bunter** stories and was grateful that Quelch was not *my* teacher. (Bunter himself has a minor mention in the book). Almost every sentence resonates with symbols. It is the quintessential twentieth century novel and yet it could not exist without the nineteenth century romantics that Moorcock loves so much. In style it is firmly a hundred years old. In content it is pure Moorcock. Which is to say, brilliant.

If there is a theme to this essay, then so far the theme seems to be sequels and to this end allow me to point you at **Executive Orders** by Tom Clancy a sequel to his monumentally boring **Debt of Honour**, but don't let that put you off. The book opens where the previous one closes. Jack Ryan assumes the mantle of President of the United States after the incumbent president and most of the Congress are killed by a kamikaze piloting a 747. Ryan is politically naive and several world leaders take the opportunity to settle old scores with the USA, secure in the knowledge that they know more about the way the world works than Ryan does. The plots are Machiavellian and the book is 874 pages long and the tension never lets up. This really is a good old fashioned page turner, Clancy back on the top of his form (his last few books have been almost unreadably tedious). Towards the end, when the obligatory war breaks out, the book degenerates into incomprehensible military jargon and interminable descriptions of planes taking off and ships manoeuvring. You should stop reading on page 798 and resume again on page 868 to get the full flavour of the highly satisfactory ending.

My major complaint is that throughout the book, characters drive around in an HMMWV. Does anybody have any idea what one of those might be?

You do, of course, read Dilbert, don't you? If you don't, you are missing one the funniest of contemporary cartoons. Go immediately to your bookstore and browse the humour section for the cartoons of Scott Adams. You will meet Dilbert, Dogbert, Ratbert and Catbert, and in books with titles like **Bring me the Head of Willy the Mail Boy** you will find an hilarious expose of life in the modern office. You will find your fellow workers here, you will find your boss. If you are unlucky you will find yourself.

Adams' contributions to that stultifying shelf of books on management theory are **The Dilbert Principle** and **Dogbert's Management Handbook**. To give you the flavour, let me quote from the latter:

When we are born, all humans are clueless, self-absorbed and helpless. Most babies grow out of it. Those who don't become managers.

I can't get away from it -- so far this month has been sequels and connected stories. I went back to Lord Dunsany and another instalment of the Jorkens tales. Age has not treated these well. The sophistication of life at the end of the twentieth century has caught up with and passed these stories from its youth and sometimes they seem naive. But there is nonetheless a period charm about them that is hard to deny.

Talking of Dunsany, I recently came across **Fifty One Tales**. This slim volume (the tales are VERY short) was originally published in 1915. Mine is the second edition, published in 1916 and wartime austerity shows in its cheap binding and untrimmed edges. Still I doubt if many of today's novels would be as solid as this one is after such a long passage of time. They built them to last in those days. The frontispiece shows a very young Dunsany dressed in his army uniform. He looks quite gallant and dashing. The photograph is adorned with a facsimile signature. In style, the stories follow on from his earlier **Gods of Pegana**. In substance they are very slight but the language (flowery and purple though it is) is quite powerful and moving.

These vignettes (they are not really stories) are regarded by many as being his finest works. Certainly they are his oddest -- and I am not sure he ever reached such heights of intensity in such a small space ever again.

Lindsey Davis' latest novel about Falco (her private detective in ancient Rome) bids fair to be her best. I wasn't all that fond of **Last Act in Palmyra**, but I put that down to having read five of her novels in a row and becoming somewhat jaded. However subsequent discussion with other Davis fans revealed that I was not alone in that opinion so I approached **Time to Depart** with a certain trepidation. I needn't have worried. She is on the top of her form.

Balbinus, one of Rome's top criminals has been caught and must depart into exile. Falco supervises his placement on the ship that will carry him away. However the criminal vacuum he leaves behind does not remain empty for long and soon Rome is shocked by a series of enormous crimes (with, presumably, enormous profits for somebody). Falco investigates and the plot soon becomes thick. Along the way there are many satisfying moments, not least of which is that Lenia the Laundress finally marries Smaractus (Falco's hideous landlord) and Falco has to cast the oracle at their wedding. And that means he has to find a sheep...

One of my favourite contemporary novelists is David Lodge, a writer whose praises I have sung before in these and other pages. **Write On** is a collection of essays published between 1965 and 1985. Lodge is a lecturer in literature and his literary preoccupations show as he presents his opinions on writers as diverse as Lawrence and Salinger, Joyce and Mailer. He discusses films and rock music (he seems to be a fan of Shakin' Stevens), American culture and John Updike, the rabbit reviewer. This small but stimulating collection makes an excellent companion piece to his other essay collection **The Art of Fiction**. Damn! Another sequel.

Sometimes I wonder whether there exist books which are not sequels to other books. They are thin on the ground, I have to admit, but there are some. This month I found three. Not much of a ratio, is it?

Moving On represents my on-going attempt to catch up with Larry McMurtry's modern day novels. For once I was not impressed. The book is overlong and ultimately dull and I found it hard to care about Patsy and her footloose husband as they travel America looking for rodeos for Jim to photograph. There was a certain small interest in the descriptions of rodeos and the odd characters they attract (McMurtry's usual gallery of grotesques) but once Patsy gets pregnant and Jim goes back to college it quickly becomes tedious. Better by far is **Buffalo Girls** which is about Calamity Jane and Buffalo Bill. Did you see the mini series on TV2 earlier this month? It was a faithful rendition of the book and highly enjoyable.

I am rapidly coming to the conclusion that Poppy Z. Brite is among the best of the contemporary horror novelists. **Lost Souls** is the ultimate vampire book. Forget your soi-disant Lestat decadents. Vampirism is embodied in Zillah, Molochai and Twig. It is Mardi Gras in New Orleans and for the vampires this is just the latest incarnation of the party that has been going on for centuries fuelled by sexual frenzy, green chartreuse and blood. Zillah casually impregnates a young human girl and the baby she brings to term, being of vampire stock destroys her in its birthing. The baby is christened Nothing and this is his book. And a sordid, murderous, blood-soaked, evil book it is. There is no lightening of the tone, there are no jokes here save the sadistic blood and semen soaked amusements of Zillah, Molochai and Twig. And Nothing.

But what of science fiction? My favourite living SF writer is Frederik Pohl and his latest novel **The Other End of Time** has just been published and it is a little beauty. The Earth has received two enigmatic pictures of alien creatures transmitted from space. There is evidence that a derelict orbiting observatory has been visited by aliens. Five people investigate. Five people return to Earth with false memories. Five people are transmitted to another planet where they become specimens in a high tech cage, some of them several times in several different cages.

The aliens are the Beloved Leaders, at war with the Horch. Five people must choose sides and the evidence for and against is contradictory at best. Bitingly satiric (as always), this is vintage Pohl and they don't come any better than that.

Michael Kurland	**The Unicorn Girl**
Richard Bachman	**The Regulators**
Stephen King	**Desperation**
Michael Moorcock	**The War Amongst the Angels**
Tom Clancy	**Executive Orders**
Scott Adams	**The Dilbert Principle**
	Dogbert's Management Handbook
Lord Dunsany	**Jorkens has a Large Whiskey**
	Fifty One Tales
Lindsey Davis	**Time to Depart**
Larry McMurtry	**Moving On**
David Lodge	**Write On**
Poppy Z. Brite	**Lost Souls**
Frederik Pohl	**The Other End of Time**

New Things

Phoenixine Eighty-Eight, December 1996

It's been a busy month. I bought a yo-yo with a patented built in clutch and now for the first time in my life I can walk the dog and sleep at the end of the string. I feel quite proud -- I mastered round the world very early on in my yo-yo life, but my skills never progressed much beyond that. Now, thanks to the miracle of a patented built in clutch, whole new yo-yo horizons have opened in front of me.

Don't read the new Poppy Z. Brite novel **Exquisite Corpse** if you are the least bit squeamish. Never have the mechanics of killing, the taste of human flesh, and the feel of dead bodies as they move through the various stages of decay been so explicitly described. The plot, such as it is, revolves around the exploits of an English serial killer who has fled the country to America. He finds a home in the French quarter of New Orleans (Poppy Z. Brite's usual stamping ground) where he makes contact with a kindred spirit, Jay Byrne, the scion of an old family, grown bored by his heritage and seeking his decadent pleasures in torture and death. I have never read anything quite so revolting -- I loved it, and I worry a little about what that says about me.

My cats have decided that they like yo-yos and Milo (the big fat black one) actually managed to wake up for something that wasn't food and chased it. He caught it as well (it's all in the clutch, you know) and now I have to be very careful where I practice and develop my yo-yo algorithms. Ginger (the slim, athletic one) quickly lost interest after her initial burst of enthusiasm and returned to her favourite occupation of being a serial killer in the French quarter of Avondale, seeking her decadent pleasures in torture and death. Sparrows go crunch most satisfactorily when they are eaten. She's eaten a lot of them this month, and I heard most of them.

In search of lighter things I turned to Robert Rankin's new opus which rejoices in the title **Nostradamus Ate my Hamster** and which, unusually for Rankin, actually has some semblance of a plot. Since the plot involves time travel, movie making, Adolf Hitler, Marilyn Monroe and flying saucers you could be forgiven for taking it less than seriously. Rankin returns to his old stamping grounds, and Brentford has never been better served. Pooley and Omally and Neville the part time barman do have small parts to play in the book, but the majority of it belongs to Russell, a nice chap. This is vintage Rankin and I enjoyed every insane syllable of it.

In the course of my work, I constantly have to point at things -- usually things I have written on the whiteboard in the fond hope that my students will absorb them. Until now I have used a pointer which reminds people of a snapped off car aerial (and many and varied have been the rude comments). But now I have gone all high tech and I have a laser pointer that can point at the board from the opposite side of the room and which allows me to indicate the subtle truths written thereon while simultaneously chastising a recalcitrant student around the general area of the ear with a heavy technical tome for not applying them. I have also discovered that in a darkened room, my cats will happily chase the little red blob it generates for hours. In normal daylight they apparently have some difficulty seeing it and they evince little interest. As a result of all this activity I now need new batteries. Oh woe!

Perhaps I could learn a thing or three from the ancients. The utterly fascinating **Ancient Inventions** is a guided tour through archaeological wonders. I was astounded at the skills available to the ancients. Did you know that Roman surgeons routinely performed eye operations? (Removal of cataracts was particularly common). In the first century BC, plastic surgery was almost commonplace in India. Medieval Baghdad had a strikingly efficient postal and banking service, and the secrets of distilling whiskey appear to have been discovered in China around 700BC. This amazing book is endlessly entertaining and informative and I devoured it in about four hours of utter wonderment.

It appears to be my month for acquiring new possessions. I am writing this little essay on my new computer which is playing a CD at the same time as it processes my words (ah! The joys of multi-tasking). In my upstairs study I now have a network (I don't need one, but when did that ever stop me having fun) and my old Unix box, my laptop and my new 32MB multimedia PC can swap data backwards and forwards with gay abandon. Networks are a good idea. When a computer goes wrong and causes catastrophic damage to your favourite files, you should chastise it severely. This will cause it to pull itself together and behave better in future. If it happens to be on a network, it will also tell all its friends what you did to it and your reputation as someone not to be trifled with will spread and all the other computers will be so scared of you that they will start behaving themselves as well. That's why networked computers are so much more productive and efficient than isolated machines.

Both Frederic Forsyth and Mario Puzo have new novels out. I group them together because in many ways they are similar writers, though I think Puzo might object to being placed in the company of a "mere" thriller writer -- he tries to claim more for his books that that. Similarly Forsyth might be puzzled to be linked with a literary writer since he has never claimed to more than an entertainer. Both, I think, are fooling themselves.

Icon, the Forsyth novel, is as good as anything he has ever done. It is set a short while in the future, in a Russia reeling under the effects of Yeltsin's reforms and with many competing

influences looking to restore order out of the chaos. One politician who seems certain to win the forthcoming election and whose stated policies seem to offer some degree of hope is discovered to have a secret agenda. A document known as the Black Manifesto comes into the hands of British Intelligence. At first they simply don't believe it, but as its truth becomes more apparent they are faced with the difficult moral problem of interfering with the fledgling democratic process of the new Russia for the sake of what is perceived to be the greater good. How they resolve this moral dilemma, and the mechanics of the elaborate plan they put in to effect are the meat of the book and while at the pure mechanical level it is a nail-bitingly tense and perfectly managed thriller, the moral and ethical undertones (and overtones!) make it more than just a pleasant way to pass a few hours.

Puzo, on the other hand, tries to load so much significance into **The Last Don** that the book falls over under its own weight. As the title implies, we are back in heavy Mafia territory. However most of the novel is set in Hollywood and Las Vegas, and the larger than life irrealities and the fat veneer of glitz and glitter reduce the whole thing to the level of a Harold Robbins pot-boiler. And you know what? That is exactly what it is. I just couldn't get involved with it. Puzo seems to think that this world matters in some deep significant way, when the plain fact is that it is so shallow and superficial that it can't even stand as a metaphor. Puzo tries too hard and it shows.

Ben Elton was very funny about ecological catastrophe in **Stark**. He followed it with a series of books where he became progressively less funny about less serious subjects. Now in **Popcorn** he isn't funny at all and he isn't funny about the same things that Puzo isn't funny about -- Hollywood glitz. His hero is a Quentin Tarantino look-alike called Bruce Delamitri. Two psychotic killers of the kind he glorifies in his movies hijack him after the Oscar ceremony which is his crowning glory. From the heights, he is plunged into the depths and he gets a taste of the reality he has faked in his films for so long.

The book belabours its message, sings it, shouts it, underlines it, and then just in case you missed it, yells it out in capital letters. The whole thing is overwritten and dull.

Not satisfied with my other new toys, I went and bought a car. I wasn't sure what I wanted, but I did know that it wasn't going to be white. I have owned five previous cars during my stay in New Zealand, and four of them have been white. This one had to be different. I also wanted a manual gear change (none of this poofy automatic nonsense, thank you very much). My tour round the car yards was highly depressing and served mainly to convince me just how many white, automatic cars there were in my price range.

As I was about to give up, I found a grey Mazda Familia with electrical everything (it is stuffed full of gadgets, and I like gadgets) so I bought it. Its only drawback is that it has maroon upholstery and it looks like a tart's boudoir. But I can put up with that for the sake of the electric windows and the switch that makes the wing mirrors fold in to the body of the car so it is easier to park in narrow spaces. It also has a cup holder. But best of all, it has air conditioning and since we are now approaching the time of year when Auckland gets humid and muggy I am really looking forward to using it. Vroom, vroom!

Tor have recently republished L. Neil Smith's **The Probability Broach**. It is a sub-Heinlein adventure novel with a lot of libertarian preaching and paeans in favour of how it is every person's right to go around armed to the teeth and blow away anybody who gives you offence (Smith is big in the gun lobby). Despite all that I actually enjoyed the book a lot -- unlike many people with an ideological axe to grind, Smith can write reasonably well and he tells an exciting tale. The broach of the title is a gate between alternate realities and the narrator of the story accidentally stumbles through from our world to a libertarian paradise on the other side. The hero is a homicide detective and the book is a gritty police-procedural which never fails to entertain.

My only gripe is that the alternate world on the other side of the broach is an alternate America which has arisen because of some changes in events that took place during and shortly after the American revolution. Presumably all American children learn this history at school, but I didn't and the historical minutiae discussed by the characters meant nothing to me. Smith made too many assumptions about the nature of his audience here.

Full Spectrum 5 is the latest and least in what has been a distinguished anthology series. The enormously fat book (593 pages) contains only two stories of merit. Jonathan Lethem's ***The Insipid Profession of Jonathan Hornebom*** and Gene Wolfe's ***The Ziggurat***. Lethem's story is a deeply felt (and funny) homage to Heinlein's ***The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag*** and if you haven't read it, much of Lethem's story will pass you by. Wolfe's story is ... a story by Gene Wolfe.

Now that Robert Harris has made a name for himself as a best selling novelist, his earlier non-fiction works are starting to reappear on the bookshelves. **Selling Hitler** is the story of the Hitler diaries, one of the more notorious literary forgeries of modern times (it even eclipsed Clifford Irving's biography of Howard Hughes in notoriety). The story of how the diaries came into being is a fascinating story of greed and desperation. A journalist on **Stern Magazine** was a collector of Nazi memorabilia. He bought Hermann Goering's yacht when it came up for auction and rapidly went head over heels into debt trying to maintain and repair it and also populate it with Nazi paraphernalia. One thing lead to another. It is a story of greed and naivety. The only astonishing thing is that so many people were taken in for so long. A lot of distinguished people ended up with egg on their faces. That's what makes the story so fascinating. It isn't really about the Hitler Diaries -- it is much more a study of human frailties and our almost infinite capacity for believing what we want to believe despite the evidence to the contrary.

As I drive around feeling cool with the air conditioning on, demonstrating how to make a yo-yo sleep, pointing at things and indulging in interesting computing, I am occasionally asked what books to recommend to those who express an interest in SF but don't know what to read next. I have several stock answers, but now that I have read Jack McDevitt's **Ancient Shores** I have another book to add to the list. Tom Lasker, ploughing his wheat fields, digs up the remains of a yacht. Thousands of years ago, during the last ice age, his wheat fields had been on the shoreline of an ancient sea. When the yacht turns out to be made of strange materials, and when subsequent excavation unearths an igloo-like structure with possible portals to other worlds, the truth has to be faced. We have been visited by aliens. The ideas of the book are common coin to us old, jaded SF fans. But seldom have they been handled as convincingly as they are here. This is the sort of thing that got us hooked in the first place and the magic still works.

I started with a horror novel, so I'll end with one. Dean Koontz is incredibly prolific and his books tend towards a sameness of plot and character. I can seldom remember which I have read and which I have not and therefore I have mostly stopped buying them just in case I duplicate something already on my shelves. But **Ticktock** received glowing reviews which claimed that it was that most difficult of things, a screamingly funny horror novel. Well who could resist? Certainly not me. So I bought it and read it and I must admit that while I would not go as far in my praise as other reviewers, I did enjoy it. It is neither as funny nor as horrible as the reviews suggested, but it is certainly light-hearted. Tommy Phan, a Vietnamese national who has adopted America as his preferred homeland but who cannot escape the effects of his Vietnamese inheritance (and his Vietnamese family), finds a rag doll on his doorstep. Its thread eyes unravel and a demon with green eyes stares out at him. The chase is on! Tommy has until dawn to escape from a supernatural entity that grows larger and more fearsome as the night progresses.

The book has everything -- a beautiful, enigmatic woman, immense peril, high speed car chases, and a dog. It can't fail.

And I've got a yo-yo. Now if I hold it like this...

Poppy Z. Brite	**Exquisite Corpse**
Robert Rankin	**Nostradamus ate my Hamster**
Peter James & Nick Thorpe	**Ancient Inventions**
Frederick Forsyth	**Icon**
Mario Puzo	**The Last Don**
Ben Elton	**Popcorn**
L. Neil Smith	**The Probability Broach**
Various editors	**Full Spectrum 5**
Robert Harris	**Selling Hitler**
Jack McDevitt	**Ancient Shores**
Dean Koontz	**Ticktock**

Oh Frabjous Day

***Phoenixine Eighty-Nine**, January 1997*

It being Christmas, what better book to discuss than the new Terry Pratchett novel -- **Hogfather**. It would appear that every Hogwatchnight, the Hogfather journeys the Discworld in a sleigh drawn by grossly overweight pigs. He travels the length and breadth of the world, delivering presents to the good children (he knows if you've been good or bad). Unfortunately, this year the Hogfather has gone missing and as a stand in, Death leaves something to be desired. Particularly since Albert *will* keep drinking the sherry that has been left out for the Hogfather. But Death must do his duty. If the Hogfather does not deliver the presents, the sun won't rise the next day.

That's about it, as far as plot goes. The rest is just Terry having his usual fun with the Discworld. We find out where the tooth fairy takes all those teeth (and why she carries a pair of pliers). We meet the verruca gnome and the cheerful fairy. The wizards at Unseen University have a computer called Hex which is powered by ants. In other words, it has Anthill Inside.

Lots of good groans in this book, but really it is just more of the same. I hate to say it, but I think the Discworld is getting stale in the same way that the Stainless Steel Rat is getting rusty.

I read **The Stainless Steel Rat Goes to Hell**, but really I shouldn't have bothered. The books are now so formulaic that I suspect Harrison could write them in his sleep. In fact I'd be willing to bet that he *did* write this one in his sleep.

On Hogwatch morning in the Robson house, it was champagne and smoked salmon for breakfast, and the opening of the presents. The Hogfather brought me a CD rack with a Buck Rogers spaceship on it, a carving of a sleepy cat and some plastic insects that glow in the dark.

The cats treated their catnip mice with total disdain, and refused to scratch their new scratching post -- the furniture and the carpet still being preferred. Perhaps, from their point of view, it would have been better to have given them the smoked salmon and left the catnip mice for me.

Charles Sheffield popped up with a couple of good books this month. **The Ganymede Club** is a sort of a prequel to **Cold As Ice** (but is completely stand alone -- neither book depends upon the other). It is set in a solar system ravaged by the after effects of the great war. Lola Belman, although she doesn't know it yet, has fallen foul of the Ganymede Club of the title. The club was formed in secret by the survivors of the first expedition to Saturn in order to protect and use what found them there. (No there's nothing wrong with that last sentence). Lola Belman is a haldane, a sort of super psychiatrist, and one of her patients is on the run from the Ganymede club...

The novel is just a space opera; lots of slam-bang adventure, but there's nothing wrong with that and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I enjoyed **Tomorrow and Tomorrow** as well, though it is a much deeper book. It opens in the late twentieth century. Drake Martin's wife Anastasia is dying of an incurable disease. Drake has her frozen, to be revived when the disease can be cured. And because he cannot bear to live without her, he follows her into the cryowomb to journey with her into the future. He is awoken several times on his long journey into time, but for Anastasia there is no cure and each time he wakens alone. Millions of years in the future, he learns that there is hope that she will live again, at the eschaton, the omega point where the universe collapses in on itself, merging past and present.

This is obviously an idea whose time has come. Sheffield's novel is the second I have read recently which uses this theme (the first was Frederik Pohl's **The Other End of Time**). The idea of the eschaton and what it means is taken from a rather quirky book called **The Physics of Immortality** by Frank Tipler. The physics may be dubious, but that makes it perfect for SF and both Sheffield and Pohl have done Tipler proud.

Another good space opera is **Patton's Spaceships** by John Barnes. It turns out to be the first of a series (damn!) but that minor fault aside, it is a rollicking good yarn. The closers (whoever they might be) are waging a war of extermination among a million parallel earths. Opposing them are the Crux Ops teams, guerrilla units from an alternate Athens. A Pittsburgh private eye (the first person narrator of the story) stumbles across a Crux Op operation and is soon embroiled in the fight. There's nothing new about the premise -- Fritz Leiber did it in his Change War stories, Keith Laumer did it in his Imperium stories, and doubtless many others have done it too. But that doesn't stop it being fun when it is done well, and Barnes does it very well indeed. And now I'm going to have to buy the rest of the books as they are published. Blast! Blast! Blast!

Not too far removed in the space opera stakes is the new L. Neil Smith novel **Pallas**. I bought this one on the strength of his earlier book **The Probability Broach** which I enjoyed immensely, and I wasn't disappointed. Emerson Ngu escapes from a government run prison colony on the asteroid Pallas. Outside the colony he finds a semi-anarchic libertarian society. The slam bang adventure story of Ngu's escape and subsequent battle against the government regime is used to dramatise the libertarian ideals. Smith himself is a well known libertarian and survivalist and he uses his fiction as propaganda. Nothing wrong with that. Unlike many propagandists, he can actually write well and tells a good page-turning tale. The idealistic society he seems to yearn for strikes me as being fundamentally unworkable (he has a rather naive view of human nature) and his insistence that everybody should be armed strikes a rather sour note in the wake of tragedies such as Dunblane and Port Arthur. I detest his ideas, but I thoroughly enjoy his stories.

In search of grue, I picked up Geoffrey Abbot's **Lords of the Scaffold**, subtitled "A History of Execution". Abbott is a former Yeoman Warder at the Tower of London. As part of his duty of guiding tourists around the tower, he would embroider his normal lectures with the odd ghoulish,

macabre fact. These went down so well that he has now collected these into several books, of which this is one. No gruesome detail is omitted as Abbott gleefully discusses the gory details of various execution methods used around the world, the executioners who put them into practice and their successes and failures on the scaffold. The failures, naturally, make for the most interesting reading. Thus in 1571, a certain John Storey was hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn. He was cut down from the gallows while still alive in order to be drawn, and it is reported that while the executioner was 'rifling through his bowels', Storey sat up and dealt him a blow before being quickly dismembered. And who can blame him?

The name of Sharyn McCrumb is well known to SF fans. She is the author of two screamingly funny satires of the SF world, **Bimbos of the Death Sun** and **Zombies of the Gene Pool**. However she is also a well respected novelist in her own right outside the SF field and I have just read two of the four novels in her Appalachian series. All are set in the hillbilly country with an overlapping cast of characters.

The Rosewood Casket concerns the Stargill family. Old Randall Stargill is dying and his four sons come back to the family farm. There they build him a coffin and argue over what to do after he dies. There is an old scandal connected with the Stargill family. In his youth Randall had a sister who disappeared and presumably died in the thick forest. Now that Randall himself is dying his old childhood sweetheart Nora Bonesteel (who has the spirit sight) asks that a small box be buried with Randall. Inside the box are the bones of a small child.

She Walks these Hills opens two hundred years ago with Katie Wyler who ran across Ashe Mountain escaping from Indians who had held her captive. But she returned home to a greater tragedy. She still crosses Ashe Mountain today, but only people such as Nora Bonesteel can see her now. Hiram Sorley, who has escaped from prison and is making his way back home can see her. Jeremy Cobb who is studying the period for a thesis would like to see her. Deputy Sheriff Martha Ayres does not believe in ghosts. She needs to protect Hiram Sorley's ex-wife and daughter. After all, Sorley is a convicted murderer who could easily kill again. All these deaths, past and present, link together in the climax of the book.

I suppose, stretching a point, you could call these SF novels because of the small supernatural element that they embody. But really they are just enormously well written and absorbing books full of incident and character and grandeur. I read both books in a sitting, totally absorbed. And when I'd finished them I dashed out and visited every bookshop in Auckland looking for the other two books in the series but I couldn't find them anywhere and I'm annoyed. If any of you want to buy me a birthday present, I want **The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter** and **If Ever I Return.**

Falco, the detective in Vespasian's Rome is back again in Lindsey Davis' new novel **A Dying Light in Corduba**. Falco becomes involved in the politics of Olive Oil when he stumbles across a particularly gruesome murder in the back streets of Rome, a murder in which he could have been a victim, were it not for an amphora of fish-pickle sauce two slaves were carrying for him at the time. Despite the fact that Helen is eight months pregnant, they travel to Spain to sort out a price fixing cartel and find the murderer. As the case is triumphantly concluded, Helen goes into labour...

I found the plot of this one somewhat difficult to follow. There were too many characters with very similar names and rather too many obscure political and social ramifications. At times, Falco seemed to be building straw men, at others, tilting at very murky windmills. I'm still not sure who did what to whom, and why. In that sense, perhaps it is an unsatisfactory book. Falco was as cynical and wise-cracking as ever, and that was fun. But it is not one of the stronger Falco novels.

For many years I have been promising myself that I'd read the Brother Cadfael novels by Ellis Peters. The fortunate discovery of four Cadfael omnibus volumes in a second hand bookshop

forced my hand and I have just finished the first of them. It contains the first three Cadfael novels: **A Morbid Taste for Bones, One Corpse too Many** and **Monk's Hood**. Brother Cadfael is a Benedictine monk in twelfth century England. Over the course of more than twenty novels, Ellis Peters has him solve many murder mysteries. The strength of the novels lies not so much in the whodunit aspects of the plots as in their sense of time and place, the skilful invocation of the past. Under her real name (Edith Pargeter), the writer was an extremely well thought of historical novelist who specialised in this period, so there is no doubt that she was writing for strength. I felt the first novel was rather weak (though it has a brilliant title), but after that they really took off and I galloped through the next two. I have another seventeen (I think) to go and I am rather looking forward to them. No -- I won't review them one by one in this column. But I may well mention them in passing. Watch this space.

Edith Pargeter died last year. The new Lindsey Davis novel is dedicated to her.

So that was it for the Hogwatch month. As I write these words, I really am on holiday. Oh frabjous day, calloo, callay. (I put that in to torment the spell checker).

Terry Pratchett	**Hogfather**
Harry Harrison	**The Stainless Steel Rat goes to Hell**
Charles Sheffield	**The Ganymede Club**
	Tomorrow and Tomorrow
John Barnes	**Patton's Spaceships**
L. Neil Smith	**Pallas**
Geoffrey Abbott	**Lords of the Scaffold**
Sharyn McCrumb	**The Rosewood Casket**
	She Walks These Hills
Lindsey Davis	**A Dying Light in Corduba**
Ellis Peters	**The First Cadfael Omnibus**

The Name of the Game

Not previously published

"What's in a name?" asked Shakespeare, and went on to conclude that there probably wasn't very much in it at all. "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," he told us. Well far be it from me to contradict the bard, but when it comes to the names of authors, the whole topic assumes a degree of importance and interest that Shakespeare completely missed out on; probably because he was himself an almost perfect example of the thesis I want to explore here.

You see it is my contention that you cannot become a really successful writer unless you have a weird name. People with ordinary names just don't have what it takes. Nobody is going to

remember an *ordinary* name when they go to the book shop looking for that special book.

I first started thinking along these lines when I realised that the two most famous people in my own professional field are the plonkingly ordinarily named Ken Thompson and the slightly more oddly named Dennis Ritchie. They designed the Unix operating system, from which I make my living. Thompson has never written a book (several research papers, but no books). Ritchie has never written a book in his own right, but has appeared as a collaborative author on several, usually with his best buddy Brian Kernighan who has an even odder name still and a very distinctive (and enjoyable) writing style.

Despite Thompson and Ritchie's enormous contribution to the field, the technical books on my shelves have all been written by other people -- Cricket Liu, Simson Garfinkel, Gene Spafford, Evi Nemeth, Stan Kelly-Bootle et al. (Kelly-Bootle, a Liverpudlian, is a man of many parts, some public and some private. As well as producing semi-serious tomes such as **Understanding Unix** he is the author of the delightfully cynical **Computer Contradictionary** and the linguistically challenging **Learn Yerself Scouse**). I am also the proud possessor of the strangely titled **Understanding and Using COFF** by the magnificently named Gintaras R. Gircys -- which sounds much more like the name of a cocktail than it sounds like the name of a writer.

I'm not sure that all the novelists we know and love would necessarily always accept the thesis that strange names maketh the author, but how else do explain away the fact that the very ordinarily named David John Moore Cornwell chose to write his way to fame and fortune as John Le Carré? Wouldn't you? Of course, given that he writes espionage novels, was once a spook himself, and seems to have an inordinate love of the streetcraft of the spy, it could be said that he is merely indulging his vanity. The nameless hero of Len Deighton's early novels once claimed that there is nothing more authentically English than a foreign name, and who's to say he's wrong?

Science fiction, as always, takes the trend to inordinate extremes. How many Isaac Asimovs have you met socially? How many Robert Heinleins? (I once met a Ray Bradbury, but he lived in Birmingham and so he doesn't count). There can be only one of each because their names are *weird* and therefore memorable. Nobody called Jack Williamson could ever be a famous writer, the name is too ordinary. Ooops! Just blotted my copybook there. But you must admit that Williamson's more oddly named contemporaries do tend to eclipse him on the bookshelves and I doubt that it is only the vagaries of the alphabet that puts Frederik Pohl's name first on their collaborations.

Perhaps that is the whole secret. Ken Bulmer sold many more books as Alan Burt Akers and as Tully Zetford than he ever did under his own name. Take that, Shakespeare! I once heard Bulmer speak at a convention. He remarked that he had spent his latest honeymoon at a friend's house where he and his new wife made the interesting discovery that the bed squeaked very loudly. So rather than use it for its intended purpose, they spent the night taking it in turns to jump up and down on it much to the consternation of their eavesdropping friend (the noise went on for *hours*) and their own vast amusement. It was at this convention that I first began to gain an insight into the mentality of people who write books.

Many of the science fiction writers with odd names seem also to share a common desire to commit autobiography. Once again Asimov is the prime example with three enormous volumes of direct autobiography and several smaller autobiographical squibs in other books such as the delightful **Asimov Laughs Again** which is a collection of jokes interspersed with incidents from his life (sometimes it is hard to tell them apart) and also the linking material in the anthology series **Before the Golden Age**. But he is not alone. Though Heinlein never produced an autobiography as such, there are many personal anecdotes in **Expanded Universe** and the posthumously published books **Grumbles from the Grave** (a collection of letters), **Tramp Royale** (a travel book) and **Take Back Your Government** (a political tract), contain much that

is of biographical interest; so the field is obviously far from barren.

I began musing on these lines when I learned that L. Sprague de Camp had just written an autobiography. It is called **Time and Chance**, and I currently have it on order. I'm very interested in the book for several reasons. The most obvious, of course, is that L. Sprague de Camp has had an enormous influence on the field. Both alone and in collaboration with Fletcher Pratt, he reinvented the modern fantasy and produced literate, intelligent tales in the genre while his contemporaries were still mired deep in the barbarian swordsman cliché. Mind you -- de Camp produced his fair share of those as well!

But the major reason for my interest in the book is that de Camp cut his biographical teeth on the definitive **Lovecraft -- A Biography** and also **Dark Valley Destiny -- The Life of Robert E. Howard**. These, together with several smaller biographical essays on various fantasy writers (collected together in **Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerors**) make up a respectable and influential literary and biographical heritage and I am curious to see how he has applied the lessons he learned writing those books to the much more complex task of putting his own life down on paper.

Elsewhere de Camp has remarked that, proud though he is of his rather unusual name, he has sometimes wished that he had been called something ordinary. One of the major disadvantages of being called L. Sprague de Camp, is that he never knows where post offices etc are going to file his mail and whenever he checks in at a *post restante* address he always has the clerk check under 'S', 'D' and 'C', just in case. Mind you I think that is very wise. Even ordinarily named people often have their mail misfiled in *post restante* collection points, which are invariably staffed by illiterates who only speak Middle-High Cretin.

It occurs to me that maybe this is the reason for the success of the oddly named writers. Perhaps L. Sprague de Camp sells three times as many books as he otherwise would since all libraries and private collectors invariably buy three copies of everything -- one to file under 'S', one to file under 'D' and one to file under 'C'. That way librarians guarantee never to embarrass themselves by searching the index under the wrong letter since there *is* no wrong letter. All possible cases are covered and the writer is three times richer. That has to be a good deal for everybody.

Of course it wouldn't work for A. E. van Vogt since only two copies would have to be bought, and both would necessarily be filed under V, which makes multiple buying pointless. Obviously we must look elsewhere for the secret of his success, and what better place to look than his autobiography? It is a slim volume entitled **Reflections of A. E. van Vogt** and it was published in 1975 by Fictioneer Books, whoever they might be. From it we learn that van Vogt deliberately structured his writing into 800 word scenes -- every 800 words something new must happen; a birth, a death, a marriage, an alien invasion, the end of the universe. Whatever. Perhaps this accounts for the frenetic and somewhat breathless pace of some of his stories. But they sold, and they sold well. There was a time when Van Vogt's name was mentioned in the same breath as Asimov, Heinlein and Clarke. He fell silent, distracted into Dianetics, and when he returned to the field in later years it had passed him by and he no longer seemed able to make the same impact as once he had. But oh! The thrill of first reading **Slan**, the frightening evil of granny, the strong will of Jommy Cross, the power of ten-point steel and the mystery of the tendrilless slans. I was a young teenager when I first read that book and I think I must have read the whole thing with my jaw hanging open. Later in life I discovered sex, but it was nowhere near as intense an experience.

I can still quote from memory the opening sentence of **Voyage of the Space Beagle** and the closing sentence of **The Weapon Makers**, though it must be thirty years since last I read them. Boy, could van Vogt write a memorable sentence when he wanted to. That was his special magic.

He started life as a writer of true confession stories for women's magazines, but once he found his fictional *métier* he stuck to it and with only one exception, the rest of his enormous output was solidly science fiction. The one exception was a novel called **The Violent Man**, a contemporary novel about the attempted brainwashing of Westerners by the communist Chinese.

Should it really be the case that there must exist one library book for every letter of the writer's name, I would imagine that librarians the world over give thanks every day for the fact that Ramon Felipe San Juan Mario Silvio Enrico Smith Harcourt-Brace Sierra y Alvarez-del Rey y de los Verdes chose to write under the pseudonym of Lester Del Rey instead of insisting on his birthright. I suspect that publishers and printers are rather pleased as well. Imagine trying to fit all that on the spine of a book! Of course, given the incredible page count of modern blockbusters, with the concomitant increase of available space on the spine, it might not be such a problem today as it was back then.

Del Rey actually published under several names of which the most interesting is Erik Van Lhin. As Van Lhin, he wrote a novel called **Police Your Planet** which was originally published as a magazine serial in **Science Fiction Adventures** (beginning in March 1953). That magazine was edited by Lester Del Rey himself, hence the necessity for a pseudonym, lest he be accused of self-nepotism (if I may neologise). When the story was eventually published as a book, the name on the by-line was Lester Del Rey and Erik Van Lhin, thus guaranteeing at least four copies in every library. Doubtless both authors made a fortune. As far as I am aware, SF is the only field in which writers are known to collaborate with themselves. It has happened at least twice -- the other incident known to me is **The Outward Urge** by John Wyndham and Lucas Parkes, both of whom were, of course, the same person.

In **The Early Del Rey** the eponymous author interspersed the stories with a lot of autobiographical material (thus confirming the trend I mentioned above) and this partly accounts for the fact that the collection ran into two very large volumes. However I must admit that the stories had their attractions as well. Del Rey's early successes as a writer were far eclipsed by his later successes as an editor, which is a shame because, in all seriousness, he was a very good writer indeed, and in common with many such he now seems to be almost completely out of print. I suggest you haunt the second hand bookshops. Look particularly for **Pstalemate**, one of my favourites among his many novels. (Del Rey was also Edson Mcann, who was one half of Frederik Pohl in the novel **Preferred Risk** which was a satire of the insurance industry. Not a memorable name, but certainly an odd one, and the book isn't bad too).

Charles V. de Vet and Katherine Maclean have never written an autobiography and are therefore considerably less than famous. But they have written a novel together and it is called **Cosmic Checkmate.** It concerns an earthman who is sent to investigate a planet whose inhabitants' social and political status depends on their proficiency in a chess-like game. I have to confess that it is not a commonly seen book (though I have read it in at least two separate incarnations). Maclean is perhaps better known for a short story called **The Snowball Effect** in which the ladies of the Watashaw Sewing Circle take over the world. Whether or not they make a good job of it I will leave you to judge. Charles V. de Vet is less well known and there is a persistent rumour that Maclean actually wrote **Cosmic Checkmate** herself and shared the by line with de Vet (her husband) in order to give his career a boost. If so, I think she was less than successful.

Given the tenor of this discussion you could be forgiven for thinking that the oddly named are purely an historical phenomenon from the Golden Age of science fiction. Today we are more sophisticated and such things are beneath us. Well perhaps so, but don't forget that very few of the oddly named are pseudonymous.

Ursula K. Le Guin as yet has not autobiographised. However she certainly belongs to the oddly named and must therefore be famous and she is. (See! It works). Lately though I have taken to

wondering how deserved her fame might be. It is more than quarter of a century since she last produced anything memorable and to me she appears to be coasting on her reputation and many of her books give the impression that she was not really concentrating on the job at hand. I hate to say this, but I don't recall enjoying very much beyond the original **Earthsea** trilogy, the absolutely stunning **Left Hand of Darkness** and the utterly fascinating and absorbing **The Dispossessed**. Mind you, that is enough for anyone to be proud of. But **Malafrena** bored me and **Always Coming Home** was terminally tedious and occasionally twee. Currently **Four Ways to Forgiveness** is sitting waiting to be read, but I'm finding it hard to force myself. I think I bought it out of a sense of duty, which is a poor motivation for buying a book.

A question arises in my mind, and for all I know in yours as well. Are there any oddly named writers who are less than excellent in their literary output? Well I can think of at least one, His name is John de Chancie -- but even he has flashes of merit which just goes to prove that the advantage an odd name gives you is a very difficult one to overcome. But he tries hard.

I first came across him as the author of a trilogy of novels which can be loosely summed up as truckers in space. Unfortunately he lost control of the plot towards the end, largely because he stuffed so many contradictory ideas into it that they leaked out of the sides and corroded the paper. But it had its amusing moments and was highly enjoyable. He followed this with an hilarious little masterpiece of surreality called **Castle Perilous**, which is best described as a Zelazny *homage* (with golf and monsters). Unfortunately he then succumbed to an attack of Sequel Syndrome and wrote far too many increasingly dire follow-ups to it. Recently he seems to have discovered the Internet and he has published an alarmingly predictable book called **Magicnet**. Hands up all those who can't guess the plotline? Like the Piers Anthony that he is starting to resemble more and more closely, he has also developed a fondness for weak puns and consequently I doubt that he stands much of a de Chancie in the oddly named and famous stakes.

The same cannot be said of Charles de Lint, a man who just seems to go from strength to strength. I don't like fantasy books very much and I read very few of them, but one fantasy author whose books I snap up as soon as I see them is the aforementioned de Lint. He is a Canadian writer and many of his stories and novels are set in Canada (an interesting twist in itself). He seems to be equally at home with the modern urban fantasy (verging on the magical realism of Gabrial García Márquez) as he is with the traditional elves and magic and faerieland. Indeed, he has on occasion mixed the two genres to excellent effect. Unfortunately he suffers badly from the enmity of his publishers who all seem to have entered into a conspiracy to sell as few of his books as they possibly can, and actually *finding* a Charles de Lint book to buy is next door to impossible. They go out of print faster than the speed of light (which probably means that they all travel backwards in time and end up on the shelves of bookshops that I didn't go into. It's all a conspiracy. Fnord). By dint of much scouring of the bibliographic highways and byways I have managed to acquire fourteen of them and I think this is a world record -- certainly I have never met anybody else with as many as that. If you can prove me wrong, please do -- I want to borrow your extras. Now!

As for me, my future course is clear. From now on my name will be Alan de Triffid. As in "Dat's him, he's de Triffid".

Break In

***Phoenixine Ninety**, February 1996*

Some friends were staying with me, sleeping in the back room. One morning, around 12:45am one of them snuck into my bedroom and woke me up.

"There's a prowler out the back," she reported. "I can hear him and see his torch."

I went to investigate and found several panels removed from the louvre window and one more on its way and a hulking shape, disturbed by the lights and voices in the house, running away. I yelled at him as I watched him disappear round the side of the house and vanish into the night.

I called the police and they arrived within three minutes. A couple of minutes later a dog handler turned up. They searched diligently, but he was gone without a trace.

It was a frightening experience -- but there is no doubt the man was totally inept. I examined the damage the next day and found that before removing the louvre windows he had tried to lever the frame out instead! He only gave that up when it proved too difficult (and probably too noisy -- I suspect it was that which initially woke my friend up). But why did he try to break in to a house with people in it anyway? He must have known -- there were three cars in the drive and a rubbish bin placed out on the pavement for collection. What a wanker!

At the time this happened I was reading **Deception** by Eleanor Cooney and Daniel Altieri. It is a detective novel set in Tang dynasty China and the hero is Judge Dee, a real life person who was used by the Dutch Sinologist Robert van Gulik in a series of detective novels published in the 1950s. I have long been a fan of these novels and so I fell on this with glad cries of glee when I found it in a London Bookshops remainder sale. I must admit, though, that this novel falls short of the mark.

For example, on several occasions, characters ask the Judge how he deduced the guilt of this or that character. The Judge tells them, BUT HE DOES NOT TELL THE READER. We don't find out until much later, since if the clues are explained too soon, some suspense will presumably be destroyed. I find this technique infuriating. Furthermore, the plot of the novel revolves around arcane interpretations of Bhuddist lore, a subject which I find less than enthralling. These things taken together mean that I cannot recommend the book. Pity -- I really do like Judge Dee.

I boarded up the window the guy had tried to break in through (it was a superfluous window) and had the two remaining louvre windows replaced with real ones. I've had security lights fitted -- the kind that come on when movement is detected. These are currently causing the cats much consternation! Futhermore I have put locks on the few remaining windows that didn't have them. The place is like Fort Knox. The only way in is to smash something down (or chainsaw throught the walls). Do you think they will finally stop? After all, this is the fourth bloody time, five if you count the time the cars were vandalised and six if you count the graffiti on the house. Why me????

In between all the security work, I read the new Tom Holt, **Paint Your Dragon** and fortunately it was very good and very funny. I needed a laugh. Bianca Wilson has carved a monumental statue of George defeating the Dragon -- it is so good and so lifelike that George and the Dragon both reincarnate into the statue and fight it out all over again. It turns out that the first time round, George had cheated and the Dragon feels that evil got a raw deal. Add to the mixture a coach load of demons on holiday from hell and the farce is with you. I laughed like a drain. This is Tom Holt on the top of his form.

My guests left behind a copy of **Foreigner** by C. J. Cherryh which had an intriguing premise. Humans have landed on a planet and been soundly trounced in a war with the natives. Now they are restricted to one island, with the exception of one human known as the paidhi, a technological liason officer between the humans and the natives. An attempt to assasinate him fails and the aboriginals hustle him off to the interior "for his own protection". Though isolated (and finding it hard to distinguish friend from foe) he must still try to sort out the complexities of the plot against him.

It sounded good and I dived into it, but I quickly bogged down in the intricacies of half-explained politics, murky motivations and the irresistible feeling that far more was going on than appeared

on the surface. I couldn't finish it. I've had this problem with every Cherryh book I've ever tried to read. I simply don't understand what's going on. I think this must be a fault in me rather than a fault in the writer -- too many people whose opinions I respect love her books. But not me. Sorry.

Tiring of SF and mindful of the crime wave, I read **Pretty Boy Floyd**, part of my ongoing Larry McMurtry marathon. This is a thinly fictionalised account of the life and death of the eponymous gangster and it is vintage McMurtry, funny, tragic and peopled with a vast set of eccentric characters.

Sometimes, in between fortifying houses, I like to read horror novels. They give me ideas of what to do to housebreakers, should I ever be lucky enough to get my hands on one. **The Tooth Fairy** opens up quite quietly. It could almost be a novel by Richmal Crompton -- it concerns a gang of scruffy kids doing all the things that scruffy kids do. But one of them wakes one night to find a tooth fairy sitting at the edge of the bed. Both are somewhat surprised that he can see the fairy. Apparantly it violates some rule or other, and someone is going to have to pay...

The fairy is not the gentle myth figure that we normally associate with teeth, but a malevolent, nightmarish presence who opens up the dark side of the child. Things go rapidly downhill and the cosy world of childhood is left far behind. Murder is committed. And worse.

The book is nerve-wrackingly tense and I read it in a sitting. I simply couldn't stop and didn't go to bed until 3am. That's how good it is.

One of the weirdest books I have ever read is **Only Forward**. It is totally indescribable, so I won't even try -- but I will say that it starts out hyserically funny. But by about half way through the humour is becoming progressively blacker and it is downhill all the way from there on. The humour dies and tragedy replaces it, but the pace and the invention never flag. It is irreal and surreal and very, very peculiar. If Michael Marshall Smith ever writes anything else I'll be at the head of the queue to buy it.

For no other reason except that it was cheap, I bought **The Secret Life Of Laszlo, Count Dracula** at a sale. I didn't really know what to expect, except that I knew from the blurb that it wasn't a common or garden vampire story. It turned out to be a psychological study of a deeply disturbed (some might say sick) Hungarian aristocrat. The book follows him from his life as an impoverished medical student in Paris through to his degenerate (and degenerating) life as Count of the ancestral estates in Transylvania. Part detective novel, part horror story, utterly fascinating from beginning to end, this novel gets completely inside the mind of a psychopath (and even succeeds in making him seem almost sympathetic). It is utterly brilliant.

Paul J. McAuley is an up and coming young British writer. **Secret Harmonies** was his second novel (it dates from 1989) but already it shows the promise of things to come. It is a subtle, complex novel set on a planet called Elysium. The planet is seemingly a paradise, beautiful and bountiful, inhabited by a primitive and enigmatic native race.

Political machinations in the colony cause a lecturer from the colony's university and a man who has gone native and is living wild in the outback to ally in a revolution. Perhaps the alien aboriginals will finally wake up and notice that there are strangers on the planet...

The depth of this novel is awesome. It is an adventure story in the traditional mould, but it is also a sociological parable, a psychological thriller, and an anthropological study all in one.

The Aachen Memorandum is a satirical novel set in 2045. Waterloo Station has been named Maastricht Terminus, Nelson is gone from his column and the United States of Europe has all but snuffed out British Nationalism. But Dr Horation Lestoq, sniffing through the archives,

discovers something a little odd about the referendum that joined Britain to the United States of Europe. Then he discovers a dead body.

The novel's purpose is, of course, to point the finger at the pro-European faction in present day Britain. It suffers from many of the faults of a satiric novel (and a first novel at that). It is very self-indulgent, with a lot of very obvious jokes, and it makes its points with a somewhat heavy hand. But it has its points of interest, and it is rather fun in parts.

Recently I discovered that Terry Pratchett is rather fond of a crime novelist called Carl Hiaasen, a writer of whom I had never heard. On the grounds that if it's good enough for him, it's good enough for me, I picked up a copy of **Strip Tease**, and I soon found out why Pratchett likes him so much. The book is screamingly funny, and the tension never lets up. I enjoyed it so much, I went out and bought all the other Carl Hiaasen books I could find. Yes, it really was that good.

Erin is a stripper in a club called Eager Beaver. Her ex-husband has stolen her child. The ex-husband is a nasty piece of work, a junky who pays for his habit by dealing in stolen wheelchairs. Erin needs money to fight the custody case (though she draws the line at creamed-corn nude wrestling). Shad the bouncer also needs money and plants a cockroach in a tub of yoghurt so he can sue the company and retire a millionaire. All this comes together when a drunken congressman beats up a punter in the club. Someone recognises him and blackmails the congressman to intervene in Erin's custody case (because he is in love with Erin). That's when the fix goes in and things start to turn nasty.

The style of the novel reminded me very much of Joseph Wambaugh (if you haven't read **The Choirboys** go and do so immediately), and from me that is high praise indeed. I advise you to seek out the novels of Carl Hiaasen and put them on the top of your reading pile.

In order to get at the window I wanted to board up, I had to shift some old flowerpots. Sticking out of one them I found a large screwdriver. Obviously the burglarious implement. I took it round to the police, but they weren't too interested.

Eleanor Cooney & Daniel Altieri	**Deception**
Tom Holt	**Paint Your Dragon**
C. J. Cherryh	**Foreigner**
Larry McMurtry & Diana Ossana	**Pretty Boy Floyd**
Graham Joyce	**The Tooth Fairy**
Michael Marshall Smith	**Only Forward**
Roderick Anscombe	**The Secret Life of Laszlo, Count Drac**
Paul J. McAuley	**Secret Harmonies**
Andrew Roberts	**The Aachen Memorandum**
Carl Hiaasen	**Strip Tease**

Real Hols

Phoenixine Ninety-One, March 1997

I'm back at work now. I took a whole month off over Christmas and that meant, of course, that for all that time I never once wore a tie or even a pair of socks. The first week back was a strain. I felt like I was being strangled.

I put the month to good use, in terms of books read. **The Yellow Admiral** is the latest of Patrick O'Brian's seafaring stories of Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin. As the title suggests, Aubrey is much worried that his promotion chances may be compromised (particularly as the war with the French is obviously drawing to a conclusion) and it seems likely that his future will place him in the humiliating position of being "yellowed". A yellow admiral has no fleet responsibilities and is generally considered to be a failure in his chosen career. This is not something that Aubrey is looking forward to (of course) and Stephen, ever anxious to help his friend, pulls some political strings and a complex plot is brewed which should see Aubrey on secondment, serving as an Admiral in the Chilean navy.

And then something quite extraordinary happens.

In a sense the book is infuriating. The cliff-hanger ending left me gasping for more. I want to know the details of what happens next and I want to know NOW, damnit. But like everybody else I'm just going to have to wait patiently for the next book. O'Brian is an old man. I hope he lives long enough to write it. Otherwise my blood pressure may suffer.

Of course, the main attraction of an O'Brian book is the sheer elegance of his prose, the sharp social observation, the immaculately presented and very real invocation of the minutiae of eighteenth and nineteenth century life, and the wonderful wit and humour that enlivens almost every line. Not for nothing has he been compared to Jane Austen. I confess, I read the book and wallowed in all of this, and I was sorry when I came to the end.

Fortunately, the day after I finished it, and quite unexpectedly, I came across **The Golden Ocean**. O'Brian first published this book in 1956. And it has long been out of print. I have never even seen a copy before. I fell on it with glad cries of glee and devoured it far too quickly (because now I have no more O'Brian books to read and I am bereft). The book takes as its subject Commodore Anson's circumnavigation of the world which began in 1740. It was O'Brian's first maritime novel and the first he wrote about eighteenth century life. But you wouldn't know that to read it. The same wit, the same immaculate attention to detail, the same reality that pervades his later books are presented here whole and entire for the first time.

After Anson finally succeeded in rounding the Horn, his ships and his men were in a parlous state. Scurvy was rife and Anson determined to make landfall at the island of Juan Fernandez to reprovision. Eventually he crossed the latitude of the island, but because he was uncertain of his own longitude was faced with a dilemma. He did not know whether to travel east or west along the latitude line. He tossed a mental coin and set off. However after several days without sight of land he conceded that he may have been wrong and put the ship about. During the two weeks it took to retrace his steps many men died. Eventually, continuing along the latitude line, land was sighted. Hopes were dashed however, when it turned out to be the inhospitable coast of Chile and Anson realised that when first he put the ship about he had probably been only hours away from Juan Fernandez. It was a bitter pill. Now he had to put the ship about again, retrace his steps again. So much time wasted, so many lives unnecessarily lost, so many more that would be lost before Juan Fernandez was eventually sighted.

This famous incident was one of many tragedies of that era; all of them caused by the inability of those early navigators to calculate their precise longitude. The British Parliament was so concerned about this problem that in 1714 it passed the Longitude Act which offered a prize

equivalent to several million dollars in today's currency for a "practicable and useful" means of determining longitude. Dava Sobel's little book **Longitude** tells the history of this scientific puzzle and introduces us to the man who eventually solved it, the English clockmaker John Harrison. The book has been a world-wide best-seller, and deservedly so. The dry mathematical details are explained with wit and insight and the human drama of Harrison's struggle with the bureaucratic powers that be (who were most reluctant to part with their money) is sympathetically presented. I found the whole thing quite poignant, particularly after reading the O'Brian novel in which the Juan Fernandez tragedy played such a central role.

A voyage of a different kind dominates Stephen Baxter's new novel. It is a parallel world story in which John Kennedy does not die in Dallas. From this starting point, Baxter examines the politics and technology of NASA in this new era and shows just what might have been accomplished in terms of the space effort if only NASA had been able to draw on the kind of political support which took America to the moon in 1969. The voyage of the title is a manned mission to Mars which takes place in 1985. The novel is immaculately researched and presented. Every incident in it rings true, every character feels real. The book held me enthralled from page one. This surely must be Baxter's magnum opus and if he doesn't get showered with awards for it there is no justice.

The same cannot be said for the collaborative novel **Encounter with Tiber** in which real live moonwalker Buzz Aldrin explores some rather trivial SF ideas. The book is enormously long and monumentally boring. Every beginner's mistake imaginable is made. Heaven knows why John Barnes didn't clean up Aldrin's prose. Maybe he was the junior partner. The Doppler effect is mentioned. Immediately the story stops for a two page lecture on the physics of the Doppler effect. It is mentioned that there might be ice in the craters of the lunar south pole. Everything halts again for an extended lecture (complete with diagrams) of the moon's orbital mechanics and a discussion of how these account for the prevailing conditions at the lunar poles. A message is received from aliens (surely an exciting event!) but it is mentioned that the message appears to based on octal arithmetic and we are off again on a tedious description of different number bases and how they work. The whole book is nothing but lectures thinly interspersed with plot. And the lectures are unbelievably yawn-inducing, peppered with jaw-cracking acronyms and irrelevant diversions. Dull, dull, dull.

Fortunately there is always Carl Hiaasen whose novels set in the concrete jungle that is Florida never fail to provide humour, thrills and the occasional disgusting image. For example, in **Double Whammy**, one of the villains is attacked by a pit bull terrier which sinks its fangs into his arm. He manages to kill the dog, but the teeth remain buried in his flesh and he is forced to saw the head off the dog simply in order to get away. He carries the head on his arm for a while and it rots and smells and his infected wounds become gangrenous. In his fever and delirium, he renames the dog's head "Lucas" and he takes it for walks and buys it cans of dog food and gets annoyed when it won't eat, so he forces the food into its mouth with a spoon, where it rots and does his wounds no good at all. The whole thing sounds like something Peter Jackson might have put into **Bad Taste** or **Brain Dead**. I cannot praise Carl Hiaasen enough. Enormous fun, though gross.

Speaking of gross, have you ever heard of Shaun Hutson? I recently picked up several of his novels in the Whitcoulls bargain bin, which should have given me a clue in itself. Hutson writes horror novels whose sole purpose appears to be to gross out his readers. The books have no redeeming features at all other than the appalling fascination of wondering how on earth he can possibly be more disgusting than he was in the last book. If you like this sort of thing, you'll love Shaun Hutson.

WARNING!! THE INDENTED PARAGRAPH BELOW SHOULD NOT, I REPEAT NOT BE READ IF YOU ARE AT ALL SENSITIVE. I AM NOT KIDDING, AND YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.

Start of exceedingly revolting paragraph:

> My very favourite Shaun Hutson scene so far is a completely gratuitous episode in "Assassin" which describes in great detail the sight, sound,smell and taste of oral sex with a rotting corpse who ejaculates maggots.

End of exceedingly revolting paragraph.

To get back to normality, I was quite thrilled to come across **If Ever I Return, Pretty Peggy-O** which was the first of Sharyn McCrumb's Appalachian novels. You may remember that I raved about these a few months ago and complained that I couldn't find two of them. Well now I'm only missing one. It's my birthday in March and if anyone wants to give me **The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter** I'll love you forever.

I must admit that **Peggy** lacks some of the magic of the other Appalachian novels. The hint of mysticism that lifted those others out of the ranks of simple mysteries is missing here. **Peggy** is just an ordinary detective novel; though beautifully written and atmospheric.

Peggy Muryan, a 1960s folk singer moves to a small Tennessee town seeking solitude and a career comeback. Her idyll is shattered when she receives a seemingly threatening message from a man long believed to have died in Vietnam. Then a local girl, who looks very like Peggy looked in the 1960s when she was singing her protest songs, is killed. This is the latest in a line of killings all of which seem to have a Vietnam connection. The whole novel, though it is set in the 1990s, is bound in time and it belongs more to the mood of thirty years ago than it does to today. If like me you are a child of the sixties then the appeal of this novel (if only for the sake of nostalgia) will be enormous. But I suspect those of a later generation will find the book less moving than I did. It's just history and perhaps it has no impact if you weren't there at the time.

The peace movement was international. Countries began to seem less important in the 1960s -- old fashioned institutions. I had (and have) much more in common with my world-wide generation than with my government. Patriotism died with my contemporaries. It may subsequently have revived -- I regard this as sad. We ended a war and deposed two presidents; not a bad record. We were the generation who were so sure of ourselves. "Give us the world," we demanded. "We know how to run it equably, how to solve its problems." Of course that was thirty years ago, and eventually they DID give us the world. We really are in charge today, and we have proved to be no more capable than any other generation. Our answers and our certainties dissolved. That's why this book sings. It understands all that.

Incidentally, I guessed who did the killings and why about half way through the book, but that didn't affect my enjoyment of it one little bit. Despite the surface resemblance, it isn't really a whodunit at all.

Noted humourist Stephen Fry has written a serious novel. **Making History** is a science fiction novel which examines the alternate time track that eventuates when, with the aid of an ingenious machine, two of our contemporaries prevent the birth of Adolf Hitler. To us old, jaded SF fans there is nothing very revolutionary about this idea (though I bet it will really scroll the knurd of the literati when they fawn over the book. "So ingenious", they will murmur languidly). Actually, clichéd concepts aside, Fry really has done a remarkably good job with the premise. The book is constantly fascinating and innovative with several well planted stings in its tail. I found it convincing, enthralling and beautifully written (and also immaculately researched; the wealth of historical detail was astonishing). What more do you want, for heaven's sake?

I bought a new suit before Christmas and it was slightly too large, as these things sometimes are. But now, after my month long holiday, it fits perfectly. Perhaps it shrank in the heat?

Patrick O'Brian **The Yellow Admiral**

	The Golden Ocean
Dava Sobel	**Longitude**
Stephen Baxter	**Voyager**
Buzz Aldrin & John Barnes	**Encounter with Tiber**
Carl Hiaasen	**Native Tongue**
	Double Whammy
	Stormy Weather
Shaun Hutson	**Relics**
	Spawn
	Assassin
Sharyn McCrumb	**If Ever I Return, Pretty Peggy-O**
Stephen Fry	**Making History**

I Can't Lift up My Book

Phoenixine Ninety-Two, April 1997

I've been feeling OOSful. I had this pain in my shoulder and upper arm. I just ignored it -- only a pain, bound to go away. But it didn't, it just got worse and it became more and more difficult to use my arm for anything at all. Eventually things reached such a state that I could no longer lift it high enough in the shower to wash my armpit. Crisis! Soon the whole world would know.

What I needed was an anti-inflammatory -- so I chatted to my friendly chemist and a strong one was obtained. Instant success! Being now OOSless, it became possible for me to type this article. So I did.

Transmat is a first novel by Maxine Komlos. The transmat of the title is a matter transmitter, commonly in use as a transport mechanism in 2022. It is a simple and reliable device and its use has transformed society. But now things are starting to go mysteriously wrong. Sabotage is suspected. And the impact and implications of that prove quite startling. Rather too many rabbits are pulled out of rather too many unannounced hats for my complete comfort, (the transmat is a sort of 21st century philosopher's stone, a veritable wampum substance) but the book is certainly a creditable performance.

I do have some cavils. The society of 2022 is one that I am likely to see if I live out my threescore years and ten. That brings it quite close to home, and while I do expect changes, I don't expect them to be as revolutionary as those portrayed in the novel -- in other words the writer failed to convince me; failed to invoke that very necessary "willing suspension of disbelief". I think perhaps I would have been happier had a hundred years been added to every date in the story. Certainly I would have been more willing to suspend my disbelief.

Quite a large cast of characters are invoked, but Maxine Komlos does a Heinlein with them and they are virtually indistinguishable, one from another. There were times when I had enormous difficulty trying to work out who was speaking to whom. The love interest is also dragged in, kicking and screaming, and the love scenes are particularly ineptly written; page 44 simply cannot be read with the eyes open.

The novel has been privately published and therefore (I suspect) has lacked a firm editorial hand. That's a shame -- it is certainly as good as much that is published commercially, and better than many and with a little tightening here and there could hold its head up in most company. If anybody is interested in purchasing **Transmat**, contact the author at 270 Sportsmans Drive, West Lakes, South Australia, 5021.

A phenomenon of recent years has been the urge of many SF writers to commit autobiography. L Sprague de Camp has now indulged this urge and of all the writers who have succumbed to the temptation, he is probably the best qualified since he has written two full length biographies (of H. P. Lovecraft and of Robert E. Howard) as well as quite a lot of shorter biographical sketches of many another fantasy writer. Now he has applied the lessons he learned in these earlier efforts to his own life and a fascinating tale it makes. He washes no dirty linen and much that is private in his life remains so -- he is quite restrained in what he says and there are no great revelations. He has been far more outspoken in other forums. His obituary of Lin Carter was less than complimentary, but his comments on Carter in this book are quite laudatory.

Much of de Camp's life has been spent in travel to remote corners of the world and a large part of the book consists of traveller's tales (some taller than others). For more than 400 pages this story of his life held me enthralled, and the insights into his books and his travels are fascinating.

The book itself was very expensive; it is printed on acid-free paper with a special watermark, and yet despite all of this care and obvious high investment in the production values, the copy editing is abysmal and there are typos littering far too many of the pages. It deserves better than that.

One of my favourite hack writers is Mick Farren who was quite prolific in the 1970s and 1980s but who fell quiet in the 1990s. Well he's back, and his new novel **The Time of Feasting** was well worth waiting for. It's a vampire novel and in some respects quite a traditional one. Renquist is the centuries-old master of a colony of vampires living in New York City. By and large they keep themselves to themselves and live as best they can, stealing blood from hospital blood banks. But every so often comes the time of the feasting when they really must hunt their human prey and feast on the live, warm blood. At such times the vampires are barely in control of themselves as the raging beast that is their appetite demands to be appeased. Paradoxically they also then become more vulnerable to attack, because they become more visible to those who would hunt them. Renquist is facing a rebellion by some of the younger members of his colony who regard humans as cattle and themselves as indestructible. Renquist knows better, but since when did anyone pay attention to older, wiser heads? The grue is gruesome and Farren's old cynicism is still there. This is a good one.

Damon Knight has not been prolific and has made more of an impact on the field as an editor and critic than as a novelist. But his few novels have generally been worth waiting for and his new satire **Humpty Dumpty -- An Oval** bids fair to be his magnum opus. In itself it is no big deal. A tourist on holiday in Italy is shot in the head in a restaurant. The bullet that has entered his skull has also cracked open another layer of reality for him and he begins to hear voices foretelling his doom. He encounters a cabal of dentists and an extraterrestrial shoe salesman. Giant craters open across the face of North America. This is prime Philip K. Dick territory and yet Knight handles it beautifully. There is more than just a surreal story here (and in themselves these 'plot' things are actually not very important). Dick used this sort of thing mainly to ask questions about the nature of reality, Knight uses it more satirically to highlight the absurdities of

reality, so I suppose the spin is different. But either way, it's a great book.

A project is currently under way to publish all the material Theodore Sturgeon wrote at less than novel length. It is envisaged that when complete it will comprise ten very substantial books. Three have currently been published and they follow Sturgeon's writings (published and unpublished) from 1938 through to 1946. I first became aware of these books (and their importance) when the Phoenix Pres. showed me a copy of one of them that she had found in the remainder bin at London Books for a cost of next to nothing. It was a beautifully made book with scholarly forewords and afterwords and story notes and while there were many stories I recognised, there were equally as many that I did not. I was immediately consumed with an enormous jealousy and the next day I hied me hence to London Books but there were no copies left and I was distraught because I knew exactly what that meant. It meant that I would have to buy them all at full price, and so I did to the great pain of my credit card.

There are some wonderful stories here. Even in these very early years, Sturgeon showed the promise of what was to come and even the least of the stories (and some of them are VERY slight) are beautifully written. But I was absolutely astonished to find that brilliant Sturgeon classics such as ***Bianca's Hands*** and ***It*** and ***Mewhu's Jet*** dated from these early years. I had thought them to be much later works.

The Sturgeon project is an important one and I hope the money lasts and that they do manage to publish all ten volumes.

I have known John Brosnan on and off for several years. Many a pint have we drunk together in many a bar. I was with him when a fan presented a book to be autographed (one of Brosnan's excellent books of film criticism). John was thoroughly bemused -- nobody had ever asked him for an autograph before. But he rose magnificently to the occasion and signed the autograph with a flourish. I was proud of him, and bought him another pint. Over the years, under a variety of pseudonyms, John has made a nice living from hack writing (and he would not be insulted by that description -- he has no illusions about what he does). Occasionally he has published novels under his own name, and two of the latest are **Damned and Fancy** and its sequel **Have Demon will Travel**, which are billed as humorous fantasy, for that is exactly what they are.

John is Australian (though he has lived in England for lo! these many years) so it should come as no surprise that the books are full of fart jokes (and quite good ones, too). Also there are lots of in jokes -- there is a beautifully libellous description of the horror writer Harry Adam Knight. I will leave it as an exercise for the student to guess at least one of John's pseudonyms. And it isn't Leroy Kettle, though that's close. There's nothing outstanding about either of the books and the plots are terribly routine. But they are enormous fun -- absolutely perfect books to waste an hour or two with at a bar with a pint. Just like John himself, really...

There was a time, many years ago, when the name of Henry Kuttner was a name to conjure with. He was one of the first rank of writers and the reputation was well deserved. But he died, and his books went out of print, and now his name is largely forgotten, and his books are all but unobtainable and that's a shame. In some ways he was too talented. He was the ultimate hack -- he could write to order whatever was fashionable, and he did, loud and long. But within this narrow vision he somehow managed to put his own mark on the material and even the hackest of the hackwork had a little sparkle (though sometimes you had to dig deep to find it). When he was firing on all cylinders though, there was nobody else came within a country mile. If ever you find them (you won't), be happy to pay several small fortunes for **Fury**, **Mutant**, and **Robots have no Tails**.

But don't pay too much money for or attention to **The Book of Iod**. It is a collection of tales that Kuttner wrote in his youth; tales of the Cthulhu Mythos. As with most juvenilia they are formulaic in the extreme (but then so were most of the Cthulhu Mythos tales, no matter who wrote them). As such they are typical of their genre. But it is a crying shame that (as far as I can tell) these

slight and insignificant words are the only words of the many that Kuttner wrote which are currently in print. There ain't no justice.

As part of my ongoing Larry McMurtry odyssey, I read **Terms of Endearment** this month. They made a critically acclaimed film of it (which I didn't see) and the book itself comes covered in quotes that praise it to the skies, so somebody must like it, but I didn't, though I have to admit that the fault is more in me than in the book or the writer. The heroine is Aurora Greenway, who is widowed (though she has suitors). She lives in comfortable circumstances in Houston, close to her daughter Emma. All the critics rave about McMurtry's characterisation. Aurora, they say, really comes alive and they are not wrong -- she does. That's why I hated this book so much. Aurora is a scheming, cheating, manipulating, conscienceless old harridan. The book is undeniably brilliant but it made me feel so uncomfortable that I couldn't read it. I had a relative who was Aurora to the life and it brought back too many memories, too much pain. To me Aurora's manipulations lacked the richness and the comedy that the critics praised this book for -- I found no comedy there, only horrible memories. I couldn't laugh; I could only squirm. I suppose that effect is a measure of McMurtry's brilliance as a writer, but nothing is ever going to make me like this book.

John Barnes is proving himself to be a versatile, talented and prolific writer. He's popping up everywhere, writing brilliant books in every SF sub-genre. His latest is a fantasy called **One for the Morning Glory**. The young prince Amatus secretly sips the forbidden Wine of the Gods, and becomes half the lad he once was. His left hand side vanishes without a trace. Such mordant wit and literalism characterises the whole book. In many ways it reminded me of William Goldman's **The Princess Bride** (a comparison made by other commentators in the blurb). An enormously fun fable.

The young Australian Greg Egan is attracting much praise from the critics. Every new book appears to wilder and more extravagant compliments. His latest is **Distress**, a novel about everything. Well to be more exact, it is a novel about theories of everything (known as TOEs). Such theories are a vital part of contemporary physics -- a decent TOE will unify all the forces of the universe and resolve the contradictions that bedevil the attempts to reconcile quantum physics and relativity. The universe will become knowable. Egan plumbs deep philosophical depths here, but even when swimming in the deepest of waters he never loses his grasp on the story values of the book. The thriller aspects had me on the edge of my seat -- who is killing the world's physicists and why, not to mention how? And the physics was enthralling. The novel is quintessential science fiction as well as being brilliant fiction about science; a difficult mix to carry off successfully, but Egan does it without turning a hair and he makes it all look so easy. This one deserves a few awards and I hope it gets them.

See what happens when you are at a OOS end?

Maxine Komlos	**Transmat**
L. Sprague de Camp	**Time and Chance**
Mick Farren	**The Time of Feasting**
Damon Knight	**Humpty Dumpty - An Oval**
Theodore Sturgeon	**The Complete Stories Volume 1**: **The Ultimate**
	The Complete Stories Volume 2: Microcosmic
	The Complete Stories Volume 3: Killdozer

John Brosnan	**Have Demon Will Travel**
	Damned and Fancy
Henry Kuttner	**The Book of Iod**
Larry McMurtry	**Terms of Endearment**
John Barnes	**One for the Morning Glory**
Greg Egan	**Distress**

Moronicity

***Phoenixine Ninety-Three**, May 1997*

When I come into possession of a chicken carcass (as it might be, the remains of a roast) I usually boil it up with this and that, throw away the bits of used up yucky chicken fragments and cool the resultant liquor. Then I skim off the fat and I have a wholesome chicken stock which I can freeze for later, or use immediately as the basis of a soup or stew.

Last week the assembled multitudes gathered together in my kitchen watched me take the simmering pan of stock from the stove, sling the savoury liquid down the sink, and solemnly save the manky chicken bits in a sieve. In between mirthful, hysterical giggles they enquired as to the source of my stupidity. Why was I doing it all the wrong way round? I had no answer, being as bemused as they were.

It's been that sort of month.

It started with Arthur C. Clarke's latest last novel, the capstone of his magnum opus, **3001 -- The Final Odyssey**. It is a thousand years after Dave Bowman and Frank Poole embarked on their individual odysseys. Bowman's fate was described in earlier novels, but we always assumed that Frank Poole died when HAL the berserk computer set him adrift in space. However as this novel opens, Poole's frozen corpse is retrieved from space and revived. Poole proves to have a resilient personality and the culture shock is minimised. Soon he embarks on a tiki-tour of the new world he finds himself in, and here the book is utterly fascinating as Clarke throws off ideas like a berserk firecracker throws off bangs and sparks. The wit and wisdom are vintage Clarke and even though the story is thin the ideas enthral. Then the emphasis turns to the progress of life on Ganymede under the light of Lucifer, the solar system's second sun which once was the planet Jupiter. Contact is re-established with Bowman who has some disquieting things to say about the monolith that is supervising this great experiment. The plot becomes increasingly mechanical and the rather weak, almost deus ex machina ending fails to satisfy. Ultimately the book, in seeking to explain and define that which would better have been left mysterious, becomes almost trite. (Mary Poppins never explained anything and that's often a good rule to follow). It is impossible to call this a bad book, but it is a weak one.

When I get home from work it is my habit to change out of my work clothes into something more comfortable. Remove my suit, don a pair of jeans, slouch around like a couch potato in front of the telly with a book. Several years ago I came home one evening and carefully hung up my suit jacket, removed my shoes, took off my trousers and folded them. At this point my mind went utterly blank and I stood there in my underpants, trousers in hand, staring vaguely at the

hanger, and wondering what to do next. It took several seconds of concentrated thought (interrupted only by some increasingly bizarre suggestions from my wife who was always quick to pick up on, and take advantage of my moments of moronicity) before I managed to gather myself together sufficiently to hang up my trousers and put on my jeans. Throughout all these actions I was conscious of a feeling of great bewilderment. None of what I was doing made any sense to me at all. A bit like the new Wilbur Smith novel really.

Birds of Prey is set in the seventeenth century and concerns the adventures of Sir Francis Courtney and his son Hal as they plunder the galleons of the Dutch East India Company off the coast of South Africa. The book consists mainly of action sequences, massive coincidences, sweaty sex and lots of male bonding. When the page count reaches the size agreed in the contract, the book stops. There will obviously be a sequel but I won't read it.

After Joseph Heller's **Catch-22** I didn't think it was possible to write any more novels set in World War II that had anything serious to say. But the amazingly funny **Captain Corelli's Mandolin** has proved me wrong. The action takes place in 1941, on the Greek Island of Cephallonia. The somewhat half-hearted Italian occupying army is at odds with the local population. The doctor's daughter is less than pleased when Captain Corelli is billeted in her house, but he proves to be a civilised, humorous man and a consummate musician. You can probably guess the rest.

The book does not approach the brilliance of Heller's masterpiece, but does resemble it in the close juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy (sometimes within the space of a paragraph) and from that contrast it manages to extract a significance that makes it more than just a funny story of World War II.

Once I set out to drive from my parents' house to my uncle's; a journey I had made untold times before. Normally it took half an hour or so. After driving for more than three hours (and having failed to recognise any of the local terrain for at least two of them) I finally admitted defeat, rang my uncle and asked him where I was. He didn't know. How could he?

On a good day I can't do geography; on a bad day I don't even try. Once, on a very bad day, I set out to drive from Miramar to the centre of Wellington and ended up in Lower Hutt. If you don't live in Wellington, perhaps I can convey the monumental nature of my geographically challenged state by saying that the journey is somewhat akin to travelling from Australia to New Zealand via Finland, which is a journey that I actually made once but that's another story.

Harry Harrison has now completed the trilogy that he began with **The Hammer and the Cross**. His alternate world is now well established. Shef, the One King, and the semi-religion that is known as The Way holds hegemony over much of the north. But other armies are stirring in the Mediterranean and Shef finds himself caught between the forces of Islam on the one hand and the Christian army of the Holy Roman Empire on the other. The novel moves very slowly in comparison with the earlier volumes. There is much less derring-do and much more introspection. Often I found the political intrigues less than intriguing and the scientific rabbits pulled out of hats at vital moments were less convincing than before. However the pursuit of the Christian relics (a theme introduced in the second volume when Shef finds and then loses the lance that pierced Christ's side on the cross) continues with all parties searching for the Holy Grail itself. What they find and the use they make of it seems to me to introduce a genuinely original and fascinating theme that I would have liked to seen developed further. Ultimately though, the novel was too slow moving to be satisfying and too political to maintain the interest.

Jack Vance's new novel **Night Lamp** bids fair to be one of the best things he has ever done, as long as you don't read it for the story. The book is not quite devoid of incident, but there are long, long stretches where very little happens to propel the plot (such as it is). However that doesn't matter in the slightest -- this book is vintage Vance, Vance par excellence. There is a wild, wonderful wit and quirky, pointed social commentary and the most brilliant use of

language. And as with all the very best Vance novels there is a footnote on the first page.

Hilyer and Althea Fath come across a boy being beaten to death on the world of Camberwell, by Robert Palmer's star in the Gaean Reach. They rescue him and adopt him and call him Jaro (for such a mysterious voice proclaims his name to be -- the boy himself retains no memory of this or indeed of anything else that pre-dates his adoption by the Faths). Growing up on Gallingale under the tutelage of the Faths (who are both musicologists, though Hilyer specialises in the Theory of Concurrent Symbols) Jaro meets the mysterious Tawn Maihac, a man of whom the Faths disapprove but who will have a profound effect on Jaro's later life. At school he meets Skirlet Hutsenreiter, a young lady who belongs to a social club known as the Clam Muffins. Social status on Gallingale is defined by the club to which one belongs. Skirlet is of abnormally high status, the Clam Muffins being preferred even over the Val Verdes or the Sick Chickens. The Faths (and therefore Jaro) are nimps -- they do not belong to a club and take no part in the social status round. This causes some problems.

Jaro's mysterious origins and his attempts to unravel them with the help of Tawn and Skirlet are the main thrust of the plot (and the resolution is satisfyingly complex and twisted) but the main joy of the book is in the unravelling of the strange societies and outré customs of the Gaean Reach, all told in a language and with a wit the like of which there never was on land or sea -- except in other Vance novels of course. Vance is not to everyone's tastes but he is high on my list of favourite writers and **Night Lamp** is high on my list of favourite Vance novels.

Being geographically challenged, I have often claimed that I can get lost walking from the bedroom to the bathroom and few people ever believe me, except for those who were there the day it happened. I was staying in a hotel and I awoke in the night with an urgent need to pee. No problem -- the bathroom is over there. I strode confidently (and sleepily) towards it, opened the door and entered, valves all over my body opening in anticipation of the relief to come, strange and unsavoury liquids beginning to gurgle along mysterious internal pipes. You know how it feels. I looked in puzzlement up and down a long corridor. No loo, but lots of doors leading to other hotel rooms. Oh.

It almost made me wish I owned some pyjamas.

Clive Barker's new novel is something of a departure for him. For the first third of the book you would swear that it was a perfectly naturalistic novel about a homosexual photographer whose ex-partner is dying of AIDS. Will Rabjohns specialises in photographs of endangered species. He is attacked by a polar bear and suffers terrible injuries. In a coma he revisits his childhood and relives some of the important episodes that have made him what he is. We meet the mysterious Jacob Steep and Rosa McGee and get the first hints that all may not be what it seems to be. In Steep's company, Will is introduced to death -- first of moths, then birds and finally the death of the artist Thomas Simeon who is gnawed on by a fox. There are reasons to believe that Simeon died two hundred years before Will was even born. He seems to be a refugee from something called the Domus Mundi and a mad guru called Rukenau.

When Will regains consciousness the episodes of his childhood have assumed a new importance. He is haunted by the ghost of the fox that gnawed on Simeon and by the idea of the Domus Mundi. What is the connection between Jacob and Rosa and the Nilotic in a mysterious picture painted by Simeon before he died? The novel gets darker and darker and the transcendental climax in the Domus Mundi itself is truly awe inspiring. This is Barker's best novel to date.

Joseph Wambaugh is not a prolific writer, but his every novel is a treat. He writes stories about cops (once he was a cop himself and he knows how it works). His novels are blackly humorous and cynical in the extreme and **Floaters** is one of his darkest and funniest books. It is set in San Diego during the Americas Cup. Two harbour cops called Fortney and Leeds patrol Mission Bay ogling beauties and pulling decomposed corpses from the water. But their cosy routine is upset

by the Americas Cup. San Diego is aswarm with sailors, schemers, spies and saboteurs, not to mention the cuppies (cup groupies) who lust for a sailor. The story revolves around a randy cuppie called Blaze, and a dastardly plot to sabotage the New Zealand yacht **Black Magic**...

When I was seven years old I attended Withinfields County Junior Mixed School, a fancy name for a small and utterly insignificant village school in the heart of Yorkshire. On Friday afternoons we had "optional" -- we did what all young children love to do; we played with clay and plasticine, splashed paint about, hammered nails into wood -- fun stuff like that. We all looked forward to Friday afternoons.

The Yorkshire dialect that I grew up speaking was rich in double negatives, all of which we used to MEAN the negative, not the positive that a strictly grammatical analysis insisted it really meant. (In later years I knew that Mick Jagger was not really bragging when he claimed he couldn't get no satisfaction).

This common speech habit must have annoyed the teacher (a pedant at heart, his name was Mr Hanley and I remember him well) and one Friday morning he gave us a lesson in grammar and told us all about how double negatives REALLY worked. It was all very boring and nobody except me listened. Then he asked the $64,000 question: "Who doesn't want to do no optional this afternoon?"

My hand went up. It hovered there alone in the class and the whisper went round the room. "Eee, look at 'im! 'E dun't want to do no optional! 'E's weird!"

You can guess what happened. I got to do optional that Friday, but I was all alone. The rest of the class had ordinary lessons. I was not the most popular person in the world after that little exploit...

Jane Lindskold's novel **Smoke and Mirrors** is about a telepathic prostitute called Smokey. Her ability to sense and respond to the unvoiced desires of her clients have made her the richest working girl on the planet and the industrial secrets she steals and sells have gained her another fortune. But she is forced to leave it all behind when she comes across traces of a cold, hard alien mind hiding in one of her clients. Fortunately help is at hand -- by a strange coincidence her mother and father are visiting the planet and in the nick of time she escapes with them. Much of the novel can be summed up as "in the nick of time". Coincidence piles upon coincidence and really Smokey has quite a cosy time of it. Somehow the threat seems unreal and the ending is unresolved. The book is smoothly written and I enjoyed it immensely as I was reading it; but it turned out to be a bit like chinese food. An hour later I was empty again and wanting more.

In **Look at the Evidence** John Clute gives us another volume of critical essays covering the years 1987 to 1992. In looking at the evidence it becomes obvious (as if we ever doubted it) that Clute is one of the most insightful critics that the field has yet produced. This is a valuable and important book.

Many of these pieces were published in **Interzone** which is more of a mass market magazine than Clute's usual outlets. Perhaps for this reason he has moderated his usual florid language somewhat and now one seldom needs a dictionary to understand what he is saying (no more than half a dozen times per essay, on average). Clute has often been criticised for the excesses of his logomachic circumlocutions and I was amused to note that in the introduction to one of the essays he confesses that he has revised it for book publication by removing or re-writing the sentences that he himself no longer understands so as to make the essay say something approximating to what he thought he might have meant to say in the first place. Maybe.

Arthur C. Clarke **3001 - The Final Odyssey**

Wilbur Smith	**Birds of Prey**
Louis de Bernieres	**Captain Corelli's Mandolin**
Harry Harrison	**King and Emperor**
Jack Vance	**Night Lamp**
Clive Barker	**Sacrament**
Joseph Wambaugh	**Floaters**
Jane Lindskold	**Smoke and Mirrors**
John Clute	**Look at the Evidence**

Cats

***Phoenixine Ninety-Four**, June 1997*

My cat Milo has been in a fight. Nothing odd about that, you might say -- cats fight all the time. However in order to have a fight, a cat has to be awake and since Milo spends only 15 minutes awake out of each 24 hour period, his opportunities for fighting are severely limited. (If you are interested, 7 minutes in the morning for breakfast, a pee and a poo and 8 minutes in the evening; 4 minutes for dinner and 4 minutes for a bit of begging for the human food on the human plates).

In his fight, a huge clump of fur was ripped from his back, leaving a bleeding, leaking wound which wouldn't heal because he kept scratching and licking it, pulling off the scabs and chewing them with every evidence of enjoyment. A trip to the vet was indicated. I plonked him into his carrying cage and took him out to the car. He cried piteously all the way to the vet (and all the way back again) and I felt like a baby-killer out on parole. I kept expecting to be lynched by outraged citizens...

Jan Needle (a writer of whom I have never heard) has made a very creditable start on a series of stories set in deepest Patrick O'Brian territory. **A Fine Boy for Killing** is a novel of the eighteenth century navy. Unusually for this kind of book, the story is not told from the point of view of an officer, but from the point of view of an ordinary seaman (and a pressed man at that). And neither do the officers espouse the softer 20th century humanitarian virtues with which so many pale Hornblower imitators ruin their period pieces. Captain Daniel Swift is a firm disciplinarian, a believer in the lash and the brutality of life before the mast under such a regime is one of the book's major themes. This is not a book for the weak-stomached. And now I've got yet another series to try and keep up with, damnit.

For many years James White has been entertaining us all with his tales of Sector General Hospital where aliens of all kinds come for medical treatment. "The Galactic Gourmet" is the latest of these tales and it concerns one Gurronsevas, the galaxy's greatest chef who comes to Sector General as Chief Dietician. His mission is to make the hospital food palatable, and it could be his greatest challenge yet. What more can I say? It's a Sector General story, and I loved it.

The vet injected Milo with cortisone to help remove the inflammation that was causing him to

scratch at the irritation and gave me some vile green goo to smear on the wound. He also prescribed a course of antibiotics, one and a half pills twice a day. Milo's sister, Ginger, is asthmatic and has to have a pill every second day. For a while mealtimes became confusing -- which cat got which pill and how often? And would I survive unscratched?

The green goo proved less than successful. Milo appeared to regard it as dessert and gobbled it up eagerly during his post-prandial wash. The wound continued to leak over the furniture, leaving vile stains on the carpet. It was time to go back to the vet...

Return of the Dinosaurs is an anthology of dinosaur tales, mostly whimsical ones. As a bit of froth for passing an hour or two it isn't bad, but it contains nothing very memorable.

With **Washington's Dirigible**, John Barnes continues the story he began with **Patton's Spaceships**. In this latest instalment, Mark Strang visits an alternate 1776 where George Washington is the Duke of Kentucky and the American Revolution never happened. He also comes across an alternative Mark Strang in this reality and (of course) the two are on opposite sides of the conflict. There is a lot of thud and blunder and our hero wins through with glory and honour -- of course he does; there's at least another four books to come. As mindless entertainment goes, this isn't bad. But it is VERY mindless.

The vet gave Milo yet another cortisone injection and declared that the wound needed covering so that Milo couldn't get at it. "I have just the thing!" he pronounced in ringing tones and went into the back of the surgery from whence he emerged a few minutes later carrying an enormous purple pullover. He cut off a huge swathe of sleeve and put two small holes in it. Then he pulled the sleeve over Milo's body and pulled his front legs through the small holes to hold it in place, thus effectively covering the wound, and most of Milo's body as well. Milo was so stunned by this that he didn't cry once on the way home...

Terence Green's **Shadow of Ashland** is a most magnificent and moving book (if it doesn't make you weep, you have no soul; you're a robot). Leo Nolan's mother is dying. She is convinced that she has been visited on her deathbed by her brother Jack who disappeared more than fifty years before. He left home, looking for work. It was the time of the depression and the whole of North America, it sometimes seemed, was looking for work. Jack moved to Detroit and was never heard from again. Jack has not really visited his sister, of course. She dies and Leo is left with a mystery. What really did happen to Jack? He starts to gather the family history.

And then his quest gains a new momentum as letters start to arrive from Jack in Detroit. Letters dated 1934 and addressed to his sister (Leo's mother), letters arriving fifty years late.

The atmosphere and the feeling of this book are pure Jack Finney. His haunting classic **Time and Again** is evoked on almost every page. And yet **Shadow of Ashland** is no petty homage, no pale imitation of that precursor. It is a strongly moving, marvellously inventive and thoroughly magical book that happens to share a theme and a purpose with the earlier work. Both Finney and Green complement each other perfectly.

When I arrived home with Milo, Ginger took one look at the strange purple monster into which he had metamorphosed and fled in utter panic. Milo looked hurt at this treatment but what else would you expect a sister to do? He sat glumly for a while and then got up and tottered weakly sideways like a crab, taking large exaggerated steps, obviously trying to step out of the enveloping sleeve. When that failed to work, he cowered by the wall, leaning against it for protection as he walked and refusing point blank to come into the middle of the room at all. Then he decided to give up on walking completely. His back legs became completely paralysed and he "walked" by digging his front claws in to the carpet and pulling his whole body forwards. The Paralysing Purple Pullover (PPP for short) had claimed another victim.

The stories in Joe Haldeman's anthology **Vietnam and other Alien Worlds** are not new and if you have other Haldeman collections you will recognise them all. But the book also contains some journalism -- articles about his Vietnam experiences, and they make harrowing reading. Included also are some story poems which appear again in **None So Blind**. In addition this latter collection includes (yet one more time!) ***The Hemingway Hoax*** which I have now read far too many times in far too many incarnations. The remaining new(ish) stories are uniformly good (after all, this is Joe Haldeman we are talking about) but they form only a small part of the total page count and make me wonder whether the money was really justified. There is so much familiar material in both these anthologies that I can't in all honesty urge you to go out and buy them.

The late Nevil Shute was not only a brilliant novelist, he was also a skilled aeronautical engineer and a large part of **Slide Rule**, his autobiography, is concerned with that aspect of his life. He makes small mention of his literary career. A major reason for concentrating on the engineering is that Shute was one of the chief designers of the R100, the last of the great airships. The British Government (for convoluted political and ideological reasons) commissioned two airships. The R100 on which Shute worked was designed and built by private enterprise. The R101 was designed and built by the Government. When the R101 crashed and burned up on her maiden voyage to India, with enormous loss of life it effectively marked the end of the commercial airship and the R100 was scrapped shortly afterwards. All the evidence suggests that the design of the R101 was flawed from the start. But the R100 suffered by comparison. Shute was very bitter about this (with reason, I think). **Slide Rule** is his justification of his vision.

After two days of Milo's increasingly piteous behaviour I couldn't stand it any more . The PPP had to go. I cut it off and Milo was instantly cured of his paralysis. Another miracle! However his joy was short lived as the PPP was immediately replaced with a rather natty brown sleeve from an old cardigan of Sally's. This came only half way down his back, thus preventing paralysis of the rear legs, and presumably smelling of something rather more friendly than the vet. Ginger condescended to come back into the house and remain in the same room. Milo wore his sleeve for the next two weeks (though it became steadily more disreputable) and then it was time to go back to the vet for a check up...

With **Higher Education**, Sheffield and Pournelle venture into the territory of the Heinlein juvenile, an honourable tradition. Nobody did it as well as Heinlein did. Whole generations of us grew up on those brilliant books and they will be remembered and cherished and re-read long after the excesses of his later career are forgotten. But now, for the first time in forty years, Heinlein has a rival. **Higher Education** is enthralling in the same way that those early Heinlein novels were enthralling. Rick Luban gets kicked out of school when a practical joke backfires. He has nowhere to go and it seems he is destined to be a bum. But he gets a second chance when he is persuaded to sign up for a career in asteroid mining. The novel details his days in the training school and on the asteroids. It is a typical rite of passage novel (Heinlein wrote it a thousand times) but familiarity with the theme doesn't destroy the magic. The book is powerful, moving and above all FUN.

Allen Steele's new novel **The Tranquillity Alternative** is an alternate world novel set in the near future. In this alternative twentieth century, the second world war culminated with a battle in low Earth orbit as a Nazi spaceship heading for America is destroyed. This boost to America's space effort paid dividends in the immediate post war years, although military applications took priority of course. But now it is the 1990s and space is old hat and expensive and America is tired. On the dark side of the moon six missile silos stand in silence. The war they were built for never happened. The moonbase has been sold to private interests in Europe and one last American mission will be flown to disarm the missiles. But a terrorist group has other ideas...

It's just a thriller really. The alternate history is well worked out and convincing, but it's only window dressing. The book is just a very ordinary thriller. Steele is seen in much better form in his anthology **All American Alien Boy**. The stories all take place on Earth, in the American

mid-west and each is prefaced with a little autobiographical squib discussing how the story came to be written. The stories and articles complement each other well and the collection is a very satisfying read.

The Ringworld Throne is boring.

The Encyclopedia of Fantasy is the companion volume to the **Encyclopedia of Science Fiction**. Like the earlier volume it is a superb work of scholarship, a brilliant reference book and a damned good read. What more do you want, for heaven's sake?

The vet expressed admiration at Milo's stylish new pullover and wielded the cortisone needle again. The wound was healing well; the scabs were almost gone and hair was starting to grow again. The pullover, however, should remain for at least another week. Milo drooped visibly when he heard this. For the next three or four days all was as before while (as became obvious in retrospect) Milo hatched his cunning scheme.

One morning he ate breakfast as normal and stared in utter bewilderment at the cat flap as usual (he has always found the cat flap an intellectual challenge) and then went outside. A little later he returned strutting proudly without his pullover. I have no idea where it went (or how) but it seemed best to accept the status quo.

That was a week ago. Today the site of his wound started to bleed again. Another pullover would appear to be indicated. It only remains to decide on a colour...

Jan Needle	**A Fine Boy for Killing**
James White	**The Galactic Gourmet**
Mike Resnick and Martin H. Greenberg	**Return of the Dinosaurs**
John Barnes	**Washington's Dirigible**
Terence M. Green	**Shadow of Ashland**
Joe Haldeman	**None so Blind**
	Vietnam and Other Alien
Nevil Shute	**Slide Rule**
Charles Sheffield and Jerry Pournelle	**Higher Education**
Allen Steele	**The Tranquillity Alternati**
	All-American Alien Boy
Larry Niven	**The Ringworld Throne**
John Clute and John Grant	**The Encyclopedia of Fan**

Food

***Phoenixine Ninety-Five**, July 1997*

Nunc Dimittis. I've found the last of Sharyn McCrumb's Appalachian novels that I've spent the last year or so trying to track down. And yes, it was worth the wait. **The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter** is the best of the four; moving, lyrical and grim with just a touch of mysticism. This one kept me up all night. Four members of the Underhill family lie dead. Josh Underhill has killed his parents and his young brother and then turned the gun on himself in a gruesome murder-suicide. Mark and Maggie Underhill return home from a rehearsal of the school play to find the grisly remains.

There is no mystery here; this is not a whodunit. The only minor unexplained detail is why Josh took a shotgun to his family, and even this is resolved almost as an aside towards the end of the book. The main magic of the story lies, as always, in the interactions of the characters as they try to remake their lives in the shadow of tragedy. Laura Bruce, the parsons wife, eight months pregnant, who stands *in loco parentis* for Mark and Maggie Underhill. Sheriff Arrowood who takes on the cares of the community; his deputy Joe LeDonne the Vietnam veteran who can't get a dead rabbit out of his mind, and Nora Bonesteel who has the sight. **The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter** is magnificent shiver-down-the-spine material.

To keep the wolf from the door I teach people how to use their computers to the best advantage. Such intense intellectual effort over the course of a very long day requires that the brain and body be suitably refreshed. Until recently we took our students to a lunch bar known as **Peppercorn Park** wherein they imbibed soothing food and drink, to the benefit of all. However one recent Friday morning at 8:55am we received a telephone call from the proprietors of **Peppercorn Park** informing us that they had gone out of business and would be closed until further notice. Panic! We had a lunch crisis! What to do?

We ordered pizzas. What else would you do? But the chapter of events of that evil Friday was not yet done. The pizza delivery man crashed his van on the way to the office and no lunch eventuated. Hungry students ask *vicious* questions.

Larry Niven and multiple collaborators have brought us a sequel to their 1987 novel **The Legacy of Heorot**. As I recall the original novel, it was rather dull. Once the central mystery of the grendels was solved it turned into just another thud and blunder book. I'm pleased to say that **The Dragons of Heorot** is much better. The new generation of pioneers on the colony planet of Avalon want to leave the safety of their island and explore the mainland. After all, didn't they come here to explore and colonise a planet? However their parents, still running scared from being almost wiped out by the grendels when they first landed, are opposed to the idea. The stage is set for inter-generational conflict and the politics of the colonising mission are explored in fascinating detail. Add to this a truly alien biology and biochemistry and you have the makings of a fascinating straight down the middle of the road science fiction novel. Which is exactly what **The Dragons of Heorot** is; and what's wrong with that?

Niven's new solo novel, **Destiny Road** is set in the same universe as the Heorot books. It describes another colonisation attempt on a planet called Destiny. The story takes place some 250 years after the original landing on the planet. The colonisation ship *Argos* is long departed. In Spiral Town the hulk of the lander *Columbiad* supplies electrical power. Mechanisms are starting to fail and cannot be repaired; there is an air of decrepitude. Generations before, the other landing shuttle *Cavorite* left Spiral Town, using its fusion engines to melt a long road into the rocky landscape. The ship never came back and now the road stretches off seemingly into infinity. Jemmy Bloocher kills a man in a tavern brawl; the only safety lies along the road...

Actually this isn't a novel, it's a series of three interlinked novellas. It stands head and shoulders above anything Niven has produced lately but is still severely flawed. Niven's total inability to

convey any sense of place renders the geography of Destiny highly confusing and his irritating habit of introducing anything up to eight characters within a single paragraph makes it impossible sometimes to figure out who is doing what to whom and why. But all that aside, it still isn't a bad quest novel, and the invention of alien lifeforms never flags.

Food is one of nature's great pleasures and eating it in company even more so. When in Wellington I often dine with friends. In the course of one convivial evening certain universal truths were revealed. "Once I started to shop", said the lady across the table, "my feet stopped hurting." I was so absorbed in the philosophical ramifications of this statement that I failed to notice the minor attack of St. Vitus dance that seemed to be afflicting the lady on my left. After a final enormous wriggle that broke through my reverie she held out her left arm. "Pull!" she ordered in stentorian tones. A slim strand hung from her sleeve. I pulled, and it lengthened and lengthened, revealing itself eventually as a bra which fell seductively into my hands. *And it was still warm!* Fair melted my ice cream, it did.

Firestar by Michael Flynn is a *tour de force.* If you read no other SF novel this year, read this one. It is everything that Ben Bova's **Moonrise** should have been but wasn't. It is set at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Mariesa van Huyten, heir to an industrial empire, has a dream of space. She has her own private reasons (and some might consider those reasons irrational) but they are reasons nonetheless and she sets out to realise her dream. The huge novel follows the threads of several projects that Mariesa initiates to put humanity back into space. These vary from educational initiatives in which her industrial empire takes over and runs state schools as private institutions, to high tech research and development on single stage to orbit spacecraft. But through all of these projects we never lose sight of the people involved -- the children and their reactions to the new teaching methods (some of these children will have a significant role to play in the years ahead); the test pilots of the experimental spaceships known as "planks" and all the myriad of friends and enemies that help and hinder Mariesa's plans. This is a book about humanity for humanity and despite the often very high-tech scenarios this humanity is never forgotten. It is above all a people book and I found it profoundly moving. I can even forgive Flynn his errors -- he confuses the Balkan Macedonia with the Greek province of the same name and conjures up an utterly unlikely and unconvincing war as a result. But even this absurdity is of little momentin the face of the magnificence of Flynn's vision.

Robert Silverberg's **Reflections and Refractions** is a collection of Agbergian essays that span almost quarter of a century. Not unnaturally some are now a little dated and many, having seen life originally as guest editorials and the like are necessarily a little shallow. But there is gold here to be mined if you dig deep enough and it is probably the best insight we will ever have into the mind and methods of one of this centuries more important (and prolific!) SF writers.

Recently someone asked the members of the Usenet newsgroup rec.arts.sf.written to post examples of American authors making bad mistakes in their (British) English dialogue. So I pointed out my favourite example from a story called **Fire Watch** by Connie Willis wherein several "English" characters discuss vegetables and the word "rutabaga" is used. This is a word that would never sully the lips of a (British) English speaker, though it seems to be a common (American) English word. I confessed myself puzzled as to exactly what a rutabaga might be. This led to a heated discussion as we all attempted to pin down the elusive rutabaga. After a brief digression into white hairy carrots (quickly revealed to be parsnips) opinion solidified that the rutabaga was almost certainly a swede, although there were occasional puzzled interjections from a certain Scandinavian gentleman who failed to understand why his countrymen were being described as round and leafy.

Jon Swain is a journalist and I will never forget reading his reports from Vietnam and Cambodia in my teens and twenties. He brought that horrible war into our living rooms as few other journalists have ever done. Now in **River of Time** he writes of those years from a personal perspective. What was it like to be a journalist in those places at those times? This book is

heart-breaking in its grim honesty. Despite the often sickening events that Swain describes there is still some hope. The mysterious appeal of war and death contrasts sharply with a profound humanity and an immense love -- south-east Asia has marked Swain for life. This book shows how the scar tissue was formed. I know of nothing else to compare it with save perhaps Michael Herr's **Dispatches**, and that is the highest praise of all. The word "classic" is so often overused and abused that it trivialises its subject; but no other word will do. This book is one of the great ones. Read it and weep.

Leslie Thomas is one of this century's best comic novelists. What makes him so great is that behind the surface farce of such famous books as **The Virgin Soldiers**, grim reality is always waiting to break through. His books pull you up with short, sharp shocks as comedy turns into tragedy in the blink of an eye. Normally he has this finely balanced, but in his new novel **Kensington Heights** the comedy is thin and cruel and the tragedy outweighs it too much. Frank Savage has been discharged from the army. He was shot in the head in Northern Ireland, his comrades on that fateful patrol were killed and for a long time it seemed that he would die as well. Now he wants to be alone and the top flat of Kensington Heights seems just the place to retreat from the world. But the world has a habit of breaking in on even the most reclusive of people and Frank is not well equipped to deal with it. The novel is sad rather than funny and I found it difficult to read because I can take no pleasure or enjoyment out of misery and pain. This is the comedy of cruelty and I have never liked it. I felt like a voyeur at Bedlam two centuries ago and my conscience hurt. To that extent this is a good book -- it is certainly moving, but it isn't funny.

Terry Bisson is also a great comic novelist -- he works in the SF tradition so he will probably never be as popular as Leslie Thomas, but that makes him no less of an artist. In **Pirates of the Universe** we see Gunther Glenn a twenty-first century space ranger. He hunts the Peteys, enigmatic "things" (for want of a better word) that traverse the solar system and whose skins can be harvested and processed into a substance more valuable than gold. With one more skin he should be rich enough to disappear forever into the virtual reality heaven of the **Pirates of the Universe** theme park. But things go wrong and Glen falls foul of the bureaucracy and his world disintegrates into a Kafka-esque nightmare. Bisson writes fables, but the fables have depth.

Recently it rained and I made the less than thrilling discovery that I had a hole in my shoe. I discover this about once a year, on average. The hole is always in my right shoe and is invariably a split right across the centre of the sole. Why this should be I have no idea since I do not recall ever using my right foot for anything I don't also use my left foot for (save only one -- see later); and yet every year my right shoe breaks and my left shoe does not. Perhaps it has something to do with the muscular tensions (and hence the pressure on the shoe) as I make constant minute adjustments to the throttle pedal in my car. I have no other explanation.

I was away from home when this crisis overtook me and I only had the one pair of shoes. Fortunately I came into possession of a women's magazine (don't ask) and so I ripped out several pages to line my shoe and protect my sock from the ravages of water. So for half a day or so I wandered the town walking on photographs of Princess Di, which afforded me much pleasure. Then I went into a shop and confessed my shoe crisis and bought a new pair, instructing the shopkeeper to dispose of the originals, together with Princess Di. This occasioned a few raised eyebrows, but my credit card was good and so nothing was said. Now my feet are dry, but I have blisters.

If Scott Adams had omitted the last chapter of **The Dilbert Future** he would have had another brilliant book to his credit. Doubtless it will still be a best seller, but it is flawed. That last chapter will come back to haunt him, mark my words.

Adams uses his crystal ball to predict that the future will arise from three immutable truths. Namely that humanity is stupid, selfish and horny. Apply these truths and the future is self

evident. The cover of the book has a picture of Nostradogbert on it (he acted as consultant) and therefore this must all be true.

In a series of wittily profound observations, Adams makes a good case for the future as an extension of the present only more stupid. Scattered throughout are Dilbert cartoons that illuminate the theme. If you don't laugh at this you have no humour; if you don't recognise its essential truth you have no brain.

But in the last chapter, Adams puts the humour away and writes a serious essay about here and now, then and there. And in it, I'm sorry to say, he comes across as a gullible crank. Without the wit there is no wisdom. I don't think he's been listening to himself properly.

Sharyn McCrumb	**The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter**
Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle and Steven Barnes	**The Legacy of Heorot**
Larry Niven	**Destiny Road**
Michael Flynn	**Firestar**
Robert Silverberg	**Reflections and Refractions**
Jon Swain	**River of Time**
Leslie Thomas	**Kensington Heights**
Terry Bisson	**Pirates of the Universe**
Scott Adams	**The Dilbert Future**

Snot

Phoenixine Ninety-Six, *August 1997*

There are two things that a man with a beard and moustache should never do. One of them is eat cream cakes and the other is catch a cold. I gave up cream cakes long ago; coagulated cream in the beard looks silly and after several days it wafts foul odours up the nostrils. But colds are unpredictable and appear whenever they feel so inclined. The nose drips uncontrollably and no matter how many tissues you use, the moustache hairs clog together in a matted and slightly damp tangle. If you are in the habit of sucking the ends of your moustache in moments of stress, having a cold can add a whole new taste sensation to your day. You'd be better advised to read a book.

Those of you too young to remember Captain Beefheart and his Magic band will be puzzled by the title of the new Robert Rankin novel. It is called **Sprout Mask Replica** and it isn't his autobiography, though you might be forgiven for thinking otherwise, concerning as it does several members of the family Rankin such as the great to the power two grandfather who died at the Battle of Little Big Horn. He was holding a sprout-bake and tent meeting in the field next door to the battle and went over to complain about the noise. But most of the book, such as it is, takes place in Rankin's beloved Brentford and concerns our hero himself and the lady who is always to be seen at rock concerts perched on the shoulders of the man in the middle of the crowd.

Rumour has it that Rankin's next novel (due out around Christmas) will be called **The Brentford Chain Store Massacre**. He's getting good at titles, isn't he?

The amazingly prolific Tom Holt has written yet another novel in which he plays fast and loose with classical characters. In **Open Sesame** he takes on the tale of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. It all starts when the leader of the forty, one Akram the Terrible is about to die as boiling water is poured into the jar in which he is hiding. At the moment of death, it is said, one's life flashes before one's eyes, which is sort of what happens to Akram as a man carrying a red book proclaims **Akram the Terrible; This is Your Life**. Certain truths are revealed and Akram resolves to escape from the story, which he duly does. Meanwhile, in Southampton, Michelle puts on Aunt Fatima's ring and is a little surprised when her answerphone, washing machine, spin drier and other household gadgets begin to talk to her. Escaping from this and suffering from a toothache, she visits her dentist, one Alistair Barbour. You can work the rest out yourself.

Sometimes these things get very laboured. Tom Holt is so incredibly prolific that often he seems merely to be ringing the changes on the same old boring themes. And to a certain extent he is -- but **Open Sesame** is sufficiently lightly handled to maintain the interest and the jokes are fresh (and often you can't see them coming). Despite the tiredness of the approach, this one is lots of fun.

The background blurb on every Tom Holt book proclaims that he published his first book at age thirteen, a slim volume of verse called **Poems by Tom Holt**. I have now come across just that volume and in the introduction Edward Lucie-Smith analyses the poems drawing comparisons with the infant Mozart, William Blake, Arthur Rimbaud and T. S. Eliot. That would be enough to blight most literary careers, but Holt seems to have survived pretty much unscathed. What are the poems like? Rather good actually -- considerably better than most thirteen year old adolescents would be able to manage.

I developed my cold on a Sunday and turned up to work on Monday hoarse-voiced and dripping, ready to teach a Visual Basic programming class. Fortunately I only had one student, and by Wednesday I was feeling much better. My student, however, was beginning to sniffle and by the end of the week his nasal passages were in full flow and I felt great. I was pleased to note that he did not have a beard. I wondered whether to suggest that he grew one.

I remember that when I was a child I was constantly being told off by my parents for wiping my nose on my sleeve. "Use a hanky," they would exhort, and sometimes I did. There were children at my primary school who must have received the same advice but who ignored it (or who did not possess a hanky). Some of these poor kids also seemed much snottier than the norm and we used to call them "Silver Sleeves". One who did possess a hanky was often to be seen blowing his nose incredibly vigorously and then examining the residue closely, presumably looking for traces of brains.

Recently my friend Kath espoused the virtues of a book about the archaeology of the middle east. I've read some of these in the past, and I was dubious. But she insisted and showed me the book, inviting me to flip though and read here and there. I did, and was immediately captivated by the author's style which just grabbed hold of me and dragged me in. This conversation with Kath coincided with my taking the plunge into Internet book buying with Amazon.Com and on the strength of Kath's recommendation and my own brief flip through the book I ordered Charles Pellegrino's **Return to Sodom and Gomorrah**. About two weeks later it duly arrived, beautifully packaged and safely delivered and Kath was right -- it was utterly fascinating from start to finish and I resented having to put it down and go to work. Pellegrino brings the Old Testament alive as he talks about the people and events illuminated by the archaeological discoveries. There's even a New Zealand connection, if you want one. Pellegrino lived here for a time (and thoroughly enjoyed himself, it would seem) and he draws many interesting parallels, particularly with the oral traditions of the Maori. Few such societies exist today, though once they were the norm.

One of the fascinations of the book is that Pellegrino is a true renaissance man; he is a synthesist, taking information from genetics, geology, archaeology and myth to paint a picture of cultures that are truly remote from us in sociological terms (though not really that remote in terms of time). He paints on a wide canvas and yet never forgets the minutiae of detail. This is a truly wonderful book; thank you Kath, I'd never have found it on my own.

In **The Silence of the Langford** we find several years worth of essays from multi-hugo-award-winning Dave Langford, the deaf man of science fiction and one of the funniest essayists I have ever read. Everything contained herein will make you smile and much of it will make you laugh out loud. The photograph on the front cover shows Langford in typical pose clutching a pint of beer. The essays in this book are best read in exactly that position.

In the days when I was a regular smoker I could always tell when I had a cold coming on. The smoke would begin to change its flavour about two days before the cold kicked in. It would start to taste heavy with menace and develop an almost cloying sweetness. I used to use this as a signal to switch to menthol ciggies for the duration of the illness. Normally I couldn't stand the menthol taste, but it cut through a cold like nothing else. If you do nothing about a cold it will normally go away in seven days. If you dose yourself with patent cold cures or go and see a doctor you will be able to cure it in a week.

Had he lived, Cyril Kornbluth would probably be one of the most famous and best loved SF novelists of his generation. But he died tragically young of a heart attack. He was only 34 and his career was scarcely yet begun. If he is remembered at all today, it is for his collaborative novels with Frederik Pohl (**The Space Merchants**, **Wolfbane**, **Gladiator at Law**, **Search the Sky**). **His Share of the Glory** collects together all his short stories, 56 of them published originally under a variety of pseudonyms in various ephemeral pulp magazines. Most of them have never appeared before in book form. This is a large book, full of wonderful stories, many of them achingly brilliant (though some, it must be said, are showing their age). The book is a definitive collection of the art of the science fiction short story and as such I found it truly fascinating. But it left me feeling sad, wishing for what might have been. Kornbluth's early death was a tragedy.

Orson Scott Card's novel **Pastwatch** is subtitled **The Redemption of Christopher Columbus** and it is a quasi-historical novel told from two points of view; that of Columbus on his voyage of discovery and that of Pastwatch, a group of people in the far future who use the technology of their time to spy on and influence the events of Columbus' voyage. They have their motives (and fine ideological motives they are, as well), but Columbus also has his own agenda. The novel operates on many levels as all the best books do, and one of these is the superb way in which Card brings his protagonists to life. The character of Columbus is wonderfully realised; he springs to life, leaps off the page and walks around in front of the reader. It is this reality which adds a poignancy to the moral dilemma facing the Pastwatch operatives.

I have no hesitation in recommending this novel -- it is Card's best book; streets ahead of his other works. Even the award winning **Ender's Game** does not begin to approach the brilliance and subtlety of **Pastwatch**.

For most of my life, even when cold free, I have sniffed and snorted. My mother always insisted that I be well supplied with handkerchiefs and every week she would be presented with mountains of them to wash because sometimes I was getting through five or six or more a day. Eventually they became so saturated that they began to leak and my trouser pocket got soggy and I knew that it was time to get another hanky. By the time washing day came round, of course, the hankies would have dried out and sometimes they became so stiff that I thought they might shatter if they were screwed up.

The secret of washing a slimy mucous-impregnated handkerchief (wet or dry) is to soak it for a time in a solution of salt. After that it can be washed safely and will come out white and pristine.

Every week bowls of soaking snot rags would festoon the entire house as my mother struggled to keep up with my leaking nasal passages. Even more amazingly, after they were washed and dried, she would iron every single one. I never understood why; though she claimed it would make them gentler on my nose. Mind you my mother used to iron underpants, sheets, pillowcases, socks and similar unnecessary things. I think she just liked ironing.

Once I moved away from home and became responsible for my own washing I ceased to use handkerchiefs at all. Like every other sensible person I use boxes of tissues and I am never to be found without an adequate supply about my person. However the definition of adequate tends to vary with the state of my nose for I have never really outgrown that childhood tendency to leak.

In **The Steampunk Trilogy** Paul di Fillipo offers three short novels that give a very twisted slant on the nineteenth century. In **Victoria**, the young queen becomes disenchanted with the throne and runs away. In order to conceal this from the public she is replaced by a crossbred human/newt which is quite docile (and very sexy) but which tends to eat flies in public. In **Hottentot**, strange Lovecraftian monsters threaten Massachusetts and in **Walt and Emily**, Emily Dickinson hooks up with Walt Whitman and travels to a dimension beyond time where she meets Allen Ginsberg. I found this last to be the least successful of the three, probably because I know very little about Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman and the nuances of the storyline escaped me. But the other two stories with their crazy technologies had me hooked from page one. The nineteenth century was never like this, but it might have been more fun if it was.

Jonathan Lethem has made a name for himself with two very successful surrealistic novels. **The Wall of the Sky, The Wall of the Eye** is a collection of short stories and very dark and perverse they are. If you feel like a good gloom, these are the stories for you.

Nothing, however, could be less gloomy than Alan Dean Foster's novel **Jed the Dead**. Ross Ed Hagar wants to see the Pacific Ocean, so he sets out to drive across America. On the way he comes into possession of the corpse of an alien. He calls the alien Jed and sits him in the passenger seat and talks to him, though the conversations tend to be a bit one sided. Jed attracts a lot of attention, but Ross Ed bluffs his way through. And then the government gets in on the act, and so do several other interested parties, some of them more or less sane, some of them more or less legal and some of them more or less human. But Jed doesn't care. He's dead. Nobody could possibly call this silly farrago literature, but my goodness me it is brilliantly entertaining and I loved it.

Looking back, I suspect that my vast consumption of handkerchiefs in childhood can be blamed on various allergies which were unsuspected at the time. I realise that allergies are conveniently trendy things to exhibit, and they form a nice catch all explanation for otherwise mysterious events, but they do really exist. When I moved to Auckland about ten years ago I was smitten with the worst sneezing attacks I have ever experienced. There were times when I could get through two or even three large boxes of tissues in a day and sometimes the non-stop sneezing was so debilitating that I just lay in bed in utter exhaustion almost unable to move. At times like these nasal drips cease to have any amusement value at all and so I sought medical advice. Not that it helped -- the doctor recognised the real nature of the attacks and was even able to provide treatment (for the rest of my life I must spray my nasal passages twice a day to keep them calm and relatively mucous-free). However the less than lucid diagnosis of chronic non-specific rhinitis simply means that I sneeze a lot and nobody really knows why. Auckland is apparently notorious for this sort of thing, though again the reasons are mysterious. Perhaps the atmosphere is full of volcanic dust. I would imagine that ground sufficiently fine (which it probably would be) the conditions would be right to form a nice colloidal suspension which means that it would never settle out. Hence those of us prone to these things get almost permanent dew drops and constant leakages.

John Le Carré is at the peak of his form with **The Tailor of Panama**. Gossipy Harry Pendel, the tailor of the title, clothes everyone who is anybody in Panama. To his shop comes Andrew Osnard, a spy with a secret agenda who is also privy to the dark mystery of Harry Pendel's past. The stage is set for masterful political manoeuvrings and deep corruptions. Le Carré has never done it better.

The late Anthony Boucher was best known to SF fans as the founding editor of the **Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction**, one of the most influential of the SF magazines. But he was also a masterful writer of detective stories, and a great Sherlock Holmes fan and in the recently republished **The Case of the Baker Street Irregulars** he combines the two interests to great effect. This is a classic detective novel in the strict sense, and while the deductions may be a bit far fetched and the plot (and motivations) utterly unrealistic, nonetheless it has its charm because of its adherence to the customs of the form, though you probably have to be a bit of a Holmes aficionado to appreciate it properly. Fortunately I am.

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Robert Rankin	**Sprout Mask Replica**
Tom Holt	**Open Sesame**
	Poems by Tom Holt
Charles Pellegrino	**Return to Sodom and Gomorrah**
Dave Langford	**The Silence of the Langford**
C. M. Kornbluth	**His Share of the Glory**
Orson Scott Card	**Pastwatch**
Paul di Fillipo	**The Steampunk Trilogy**
Jonathan Lethem	**The Wall of the Sky, The Wall of the Ey**

Alan Dean Foster **Jed the Dead**

John Le Carré **The Tailor of Panama**

Anthony Boucher **The Case of the Baker Street Irregulars**

Tower Blocks and Graffiti

***Phoenixine Ninety-Seven**, September 1997*

I was in Brisbane recently. Our office there is in a rather elegant high rise with a wonderful panoramic view of the city. The only thing that spoils the building is that as one approaches it, one sees great swathes of canvas (like swelling sails) attached at the first floor level. They look rather ugly and completely destroy the beauty of the building.

But I refused to be distracted. The view from the 10th floor was magnificent and I jammed my nose up close against the window making "oohs" and "aaahs" of appreciation. The other people in the office, utterly accustomed to the view, nudged each other in the ribs and made "look at the loony" gestures.

"By the way," I asked, "What are the canvas sails for?"

"To catch the windows," someone said. "They keep falling out and hitting pedestrians."

I stepped back hastily. "You're kidding, right?"

"No -- it happens all the time."

Brisbane is a city of hidden dangers. But there are other cities in the world.

Edward Rutherford's **London** is a venture into darkest James Michener territory. It tells the tale of England's capital city from just prior to the Roman invasion up to the present day. The tale is told through the eyes of the families who live in the area. Through all the turbulent times, in a series of fascinating vignettes, we watch the city grow.

Rutherford has done this before. He applied the same techniques to his first bestseller **Sarum** which told the tale of old Salisbury. For his second novel he ventured further afield and in **Russka** he attempted the tale of eastern Europe. Unfortunately that turned out to be a very dull book in which it was impossible to get involved. Perhaps that is why he has returned to England with his third book.

This enormous novel held me enthralled from beginning to end. The characters both great and small, historical and fictional, leap from the page and the historical events he dramatises have a fascination all their own. This one has bestseller written all over it, and deservedly so.

Nobody really knows why our office windows fall out, but the theory is that something in Brisbane's fierce sunshine causes some sort of reaction inside the glass (probably with the pigments) and every so often, at utterly unpredictable intervals, something goes ***sproing*** and the window cracks like crazy paving, disintegrates into tiny fragments, and vanishes in the direction of down. I am told by those who have seen it happen that it is most disconcerting. One second the window is there, the next it is gone without warning.

Amusingly, the current owners of the building decided to save a bit of money when they bought it and so they paid a lower price and absolved the builder from any warranty liability. Doubtless

whoever made that decision got promoted and the builder laughed all the way to the bank.

I first discovered Michael Marshall Smith with his bleakly funny novel **Only Forwards**. Now, with **Spares**, his second novel, he has entered my list of writers whose novels I must have as soon as they appear in the shops. **Spares** is a brilliantly funny, twisted and surreal novel. It opens in the city of New Richmond, a flying Mega-Mall whose engines have failed. This has forced it to remain permanently grounded and over time it has grown; metamorphosing into a city. On the lower levels live the scum, the crooks and hoodlums and drug addicts. But in the higher levels of the city live the aristocracy of New Richmond (a bit of an obvious allegory, but you can't have everything).

To the city comes Jack Randall. It seems that in the past he lived in New Richmond and he seems to be on intimate terms with many of the low life. He arrives with a group of spares from one of the farms. The spares are clones of the super rich. They represent the ultimate health insurance -- if you lose a limb in an accident, no problem; just have one grafted on from your spare. Since the spares are genetic clones there is no chance of tissue rejection. A cure is guaranteed. You will be back to normal before you know it. Pity about the limbless clone.

By convoluted means and for reasons unknown the spares are stolen from Randall and when he goes looking for them he stumbles into mystery, murder and mayhem.

The plot of the book is reasonably routine and when examined with a jaundiced eye it has little original to say. The attraction of the book lies in the brilliantly controlled use of language and the juxtaposition of the real and surreal. Sometimes achingly funny, sometimes bleakly depressing, this is a book that pulls no punches.

In the snobby higher levels of New Richmond, Jack Randall passes "... a shrubbery so refined that it was probably eligible to vote." The whole book is full of lines like that. How can you fail to enjoy it?

With **Lifehouse**, Spider Robinson has written a deeply self-indulgent book. June Bellamy goes for a walk in the park and returns with missing memories. Soon she is on the run from evil super-humans. Ho hum. The book is filled with self-referential SF in-jokes. Nobody but a rabid fan could like it and even they will probably find as dull and predictable as I did.

Being an enormous tower block, the Brisbane office has lifts and like many modern lifts they are wont to talk to you, advising you of the floor you have reached and on occasional loquacious moments informing you about the outside weather and temperature ("Sunny" and "Hot"; this is Brisbane after all).

I've always been suspicious of lifts ever since I discovered that the headquarters of the Otis Elevator Company in Wellington was a two storey building with no lifts in it. This suspicion was reinforced when my boss entered a lift in our Auckland offices. She spent the next couple of hours happily travelling up and down as the lift point blank refused to bother itself with the boring necessity of stopping somewhere and opening the doors.

The best graffito I've ever seen was scrawled on the side of a lift. It said: "This Otis Regrets It's Unable To Lift Today, Madam."

The second volume of Mike Resnick's **Widowmaker** trilogy sees another clone of Jefferson Nighthawk sent out to the frontier to wreak derring do and rescue fair maidens. All is not as it seems (of course) and in a thrilling chase of cross and double-cross, fighting against odds of a million to one, the Widowmaker and his companions (both alien and human) attempt to remove a corrupt politician and steal a fortune to protect what remains of the life of the original Jefferson Nighthawk as he dreams in his cold-sleep, waiting for science to discover a cure for the disease that is destroying him. Like its predecessor, it is a rollicking good yarn and I had a rollicking

good time reading it.

Jane Lindskold's new novel is a quest for the source of magic. A generation ago magic was in common use throughout the world. But then for no readily discernible reason the magic went away and is now but a myth. Slowly the world is recovering but hardships are many. Hulhc, a farmer, has spent a lifetime poring over his father's books of magic and he is convinced that magic still exists in the mountains of the North. He persuades a travelling circus to journey with him to the mountains in search of the magic and the book is the tale of their journeyings.

The book feels unfinished, all surface and little depth, and towards the end it becomes very rushed as if the author was hurrying to meet a deadline. In fact it reads more like a first draft than a finished piece and I was very disappointed with it. In her previous books Jane Lindskold has displayed a consistently high standard of writing and world-building. Read them instead of this one.

Not all graffiti is verbal. Sometimes the pictorial ones are even better. When I lived in England I worked on the campus of Nottingham University. The toilets that we used were just across the way, and one day I trotted over there with a copy of **New Scientist** as was my invariable habit when I intended to be there for some time. However that day the magazine remained unread because the most magnificent picture had appeared on the wall and I was lost in admiration. It was an enormous and incredibly detailed rendering of a steam train coming out of a tunnel. It was painted in gorgeous living colour as *trompe l'oeil* and the effect was just stunning. The bricks of the toilet wall were cleverly incorporated into the structure of the tunnel and the curls of steam seemed to writhe around the mortar; you could almost hear the sound of the whistle and the train seemed to be heading right for you at enormous velocity as you sat there contemplating your immediate prospects. It was quite appropriately bowel-loosening.

The most amazing thing was that it had appeared overnight. It must have taken untold hours of concentrated effort to produce and I marvel at the single-minded intensity of whoever had felt inspired to paint it (I also worry about their mental stability and the nature of their obsession). I never found out who did it -- the perpetrator remained forever completely anonymous, but the fame of the production spread far and wide across the whole of the campus and our toilet block became a place of pilgrimage. The fact that this eighth wonder of the world was in a male toilet was no barrier to the curious and often one would experience strange internal rumblings and trot over the way with **New Scientist** conveniently clutched in the armpit, only to find a strategic boyfriend and cries of feminine delight emanating from the third cubicle on the left.

In **Jumpers**, R. Patrick Gates introduces us to Anna, a young child who is seriously injured in a sledding accident. Near death, she has an out of body experience where she sees a radiant beam of light taking the souls of the dead to (presumably) heaven. However she herself is pursued by the shadow monster, a darkness that engulfs the souls of those refused by the light. She discovers others who share her ability to exist in the twilight where the shadow monster lurks and together they join forces to fight it. The novel cuts between desperate, horrific scenes in the real world and mirror images in the limbo as the battle rages on both sides of the curtain.

The blood and gore and grue and the involvement of children is vintage Stephen King as indeed is the battle against the shadow monster. But enjoyable though it is, it is only a pale imitation of the real thing. R. Patrick Gates doesn't quite have the proper Kingly touch.

The fifth volume of Robert Silverberg's collected short stories covers the years 1963 to 1987 and shows Silverberg at the peak of his remarkable powers. Many of the stories are familiar -- I think I've read every single one before, some of them more than once, but collected together in one place they represent an awesome display of talent.

Now where did I put my copy of **New Scientist**...

Edward Rutherford	**London**
Michael Marshall Smith	**Spares**
Spider Robinson	**Lifehouse**
Mike Resnick	**The Widowmaker Reborn**
Jane Lindskold	**When the Gods are Silent**
R. Patrick Gates	**Jumpers**
Robert Silverberg	**Ringing the Changes The Collected Stori**

Monomania

***Phoenixine Ninety-Eight**, October 1997*

It has been an odd month. I had a disturbing encounter with an aeroplane; the only books I have read have all been by the same author; I violated the laws of probability; and my cat's gone bald.

It all started when the **Dominion** sent me the new Patricia Cornwell novel for review. I'd never read any of her books before, though I'd seen her sprawling all over the thriller shelves and I had realised that she was a popular and prolific writer. I read the novel (**Unnatural Exposure**) in a sitting. It was so good that I simply didn't want to let go. When I finished it I realised that I wanted *more* and I wanted it *now*. Nothing else would do; no other writer could scratch my literary itch. So I immediately went out and bought every Patricia Cornwell book on the shelves which turned out to be all of them since they remain constantly in print.

Then I had to go to Wellington on business -- here was a heaven-sent opportunity to spend my evenings catching up on Patricia Cornwell. I decided to forego the usual social whirl that generally marks my visits to the capital, and I packed a suitcase full of Patricia Cornwell.

About half way to Wellington the pilot announced chirpily that the airport was closed because of the weather. Nothing had been able to land for the last hour or so and the visibility was getting worse.

"But we've got plenty of fuel," he said cheerfully, "so we'll circle a bit in case it clears up. If the worst happens, we might have to divert to Palmerston North."

We began our descent and the cloud cover rolled in, thicker and thicker, no sign of any airport, just solid mist. Then, with no warning at all, the engines roared out at full throttle and we shot up into the bright blue sky above the clouds again.

"Sorry about that," said the pilot. "It's still a bit thick on the ground. I think I'll try again; from the North this time, there might be better visibility. And anyway we are a four engine jet with lots of power. We can get MUCH closer to the ground before we have to abort than other types of planes can."

I could hear the "so there, yah boo sucks!" tone in his voice. Obviously other types of planes were for wimps -- real pilots flew British Aerospace Whisper Jets.

By this time I had begun to realise that we had an obsessive-compulsive in the driver's seat. His job description said that the plane had to land at Wellington and land at Wellington it damn well would! A little thing like the weather was not going to be allowed to interfere with the proper running of the universe.

Besides, the crew were all Wellington based (they had told us that on take off) and doubtless they wanted to get home. Diverting to Palmerston North was not in their plans. It would spoil their day. They'd miss their favourite show on the TV.

The plane droned on, obviously lining up for an approach from the North (we'd come in from the South last time, across the strait). Then we began our descent again and the view outside the window became solid, thick and grey once more.

The pressure in my eardrums told me that we were going down and down, but still there was no break in the clouds, no sign of any land at all, just solid unending grey.

Then suddenly the ground appeared, almost immediately beneath our wingtips -- we were so low I'll swear I could have jumped out and run alongside the plane! I could almost count the blades of grass bordering the runway. We swooped in and touched down to a perfect landing within seconds of the ground appearing. Everybody applauded wildly.

"Welcome to Wellington," said the cabin chief drily. "I bet the competition couldn't have done that."

As I collected my luggage, the clouds continued to roll in and obscure the view. We were the only aircraft to land that afternoon -- nobody else was mad enough to try and get through such thick low cloud.

The taxi driver expressed surprise when I opened the door of his cab.

"Has something landed?" he asked, bewildered.

"Yes," I said. "The pilot had to get home. He thought he might have left the gas on."

With one exception the Cornwell books concern themselves with the tribulations of one Dr. Kay Scarpetta, a forensic pathologist in Virginia. In a sense the plots are somewhat formulaic -- someone is done to death in a gruesome manner. Dr Scarpetta conducts a post mortem (we are spared no details here) and everyone agrees that the case is puzzling, odd and bizarre. Further horrible things happen, Kay's family and friends become involved, a culprit is identified and a satisfying conclusion is reached. If that was all there was to them, the books would quickly become repetitively dull.

Fortunately there is much more. There is the obvious attractiveness of the secrets of the post mortem -- Cornwell herself has worked in a pathology laboratory and she pulls no punches with the gory details. The icky bits are magnificently evoked; don't read these books while eating your tea.

The character development is also first rate -- the people leap off the page, perfectly realised, their faults and foibles searingly exposed under Cornwell's searchlight prose. Furthermore they change and grow as their experiences mould them, and these changes are faithfully reflected as book follows book.

And the stories themselves are satisfyingly complex, no formulaic thud and blunder here, just taut, well-observed action that is sometimes quite emotionally wrenching.

So there I was, all alone in Wellington, indulging in Patricia Cornwell, when I met a man called

Andrew Mason.

Now as it happens, I already know a man called Andrew Mason, and he knows me. I would imagine that every so often he tells new acquaintances, "Hey, I know a man called Alan Robson", and they probably nod knowingly and agree that this is indeed a privilege.

Anyway, the Andrew Mason I met was not the Andrew Mason I know. It was a completely different Andrew Mason (still with me? Good). During the course of conversation with this new Andrew Mason, I was quite stunned to discover that he was well acquainted with a man called Alan Robson who is not me, but is someone else entirely.

It gives me statistical shivers to realise that in New Zealand there exist two Andrew Masons, neither of whom knows the other and each of whom knows an Alan Robson. And furthermore, the two Alan Robsons have never met each other either! Take that, Gods of Probability!

A constant theme in the Patricia Cornwell books concerns the progressive computerisation of the various arms of the police force, both on the front line and behind the scenes. We see ever more elaborate computer systems as the series progresses, with ever more exciting developments pushing the edge of the envelope. Again, to an extent, she is using her own background here. For a time, according to the blurb biographies, Cornwell herself worked as a computer analyst in the chief medical examiner's office in Virginia. There is no doubt that she is well acquainted with computer technology. Her descriptions of what computers can do and the things you see on the screen while they are doing them are invariably accurate and incisive. However the technogibberish she uses to describe just *how* the computers perform their routine miracles is such complete and utter nonsense that either she is deliberately dumbing down for her audience, or else she has no proper understanding of the technology she used for so long in real life (maybe that's why she started writing novels).

In some ways this is a very small nit to pick. Few except the specialists, nerds and geeks among us will ever notice her errors. The majority of readers will doubtless be impressed with yet more evidence of her technical expertise. But therein lies the flaw. If her research and experience in this area let her down so badly, it is tempting to ask just how much reliance one can place on her expertise and research into other areas; most notably the medical evidence on which so many vital plot threads hang. I found the medical information convincing and absorbing, but I am strictly a layman here. Would a real pathologist be as convinced? The seeds of doubt have been sown, so perhaps the nit is not so tiny after all.

On the other hand the books are novels, not text books. I do not read them to learn about the inner workings of a computer's plumbing (or the inner workings of a person's plumbing for that matter). I read them for entertainment and grue and on that level they succeed magnificently; hence their enormous popularity and hence Patricia Cornwell's correspondingly enormous riches. There is no doubt that she has tapped a popular vein. So to speak.

I came home to discover that my ginger cat (called, with complete lack of imagination, Ginger) had a lump. It was so large that she looked distinctly lop-sided and while it appeared to be affording her no discomfort, a visit to the vet was obviously called for. Much to her disgust she was bundled into a cage and off we went.

"Looks like an abscess," opined the vet after poking around. "I'll just see what's inside it." She stuck a syringe into the lump and pulled on the plunger. The syringe filled up with a custardy liquid. "Yes," said the vet in tones of deep diagnostic satisfaction, "full of pus. Definitely an abscess. We'll have to drain it. Come back in an hour or so."

I filled the next hour by wandering around the bookshop in the shopping mall across the road. I didn't buy anything because there were no new Patricia Cornwell books to be had. She hadn't written anything in the last week. Pity that.

When I reappeared at the vets I was shocked to find that Ginger had been shaved all down her left side and she had two holes at the top and bottom of the abscess. A plastic strip poked coyly out of each, connecting them together, and it was secured in place with a couple of rough stitches; the idea being to keep the wound open and let it drain. "Bring her back next Wednesday," instructed the vet, "so we can remove the stitches and the drain."

I took her home. She dripped unmentionable fluids.

The next day being Sunday with the vet presumably enjoying a well-deserved day of rest, Ginger decided to pull the drain out. She succeeded in rupturing the stitches and bit off the top of the protruding plastic. What had once been a neat little oozing hole became a gaping wound that flowed with foulness. There was nothing for it -- we had to visit the emergency, after-hours, hideously expensive vet. I packed a couple of credit cards and off we went.

The vet took his glasses off, the better to peer at the wound. "Draining nicely," he observed, and took Ginger into the back room. When he emerged again a few minutes later the wound was nicely stitched and Ginger was wearing an Elizabethan collar -- a large plastic ruff around the neck. "That'll stop her getting at the wound again," he said smugly. "Keep her indoors until Wednesday. Probably best to keep her in the cage."

This was duly done, though it was not without incident. The Elizabethan collar had to come off for meals since not only could she not get at the wound while wearing it, she couldn't get at anything else either. I'll draw a veil lightly over her toilet arrangements. Suffice it to say that she didn't like them, and made her displeasure copiously plain.

Wednesday saw the stitches and drain successfully removed. The holes soon scabbed over and healed, but the fur on her naked side is taking forever to grow back. Currently she sports a light coating of uneven fluff and looks remarkably silly. Baldness does not suit cats. Mind you, neither do lumps.

I have one more Patricia Cornwell book to read. It is called **Hornet's Nest**. It is not about Kay Scarpetta -- indeed it has no connection at all with Cornwell's other books except for the trivial connection that it too is a thriller/police procedural. I am told by those who have read it that the style is quite different from the Kay Scarpetta stories. Other than that I cannot say, since I appear to have overdosed for the moment on Patricia Cornwell and **Hornet's Nest** is still sitting unattractively on my "to be read" shelf. In retrospect, eight books non-stop was probably a rather foolish reading marathon to set myself.

Patricia Cornwell	**Post Mortem**
	Body of Evidence
	All that Remains
	Cruel and Unusual
	The Body Farm
	From Potter's Field
	Cause of Death
	Unnatural Exposure

Where's the Tooth Fairy When She's Needed?

***Phoenixine Ninety-Nine**, November 1997*

I was in one of my favourite restaurants with a couple of friends, chewing on a lamb samosa (not normally regarded as a dangerous food), when I felt a stinging pain and with a clearly audible crack! a lump of tooth fell into the masticated mass of my samosa. It being impolite to spit in company, I swallowed bravely (though somewhat lumpily) and poked my tongue around my mouth to see what had happened.

On the right hand side bottom jaw, towards the back, I could feel a large jagged hole. Since the hole was on the inside of the tooth, the sharp edges rasped on my tongue every time I moved it. They felt like razors.

I struggled through the rest of the meal, poking the tooth occasionally in the vain hope that I might have been imagining things. No such luck -- to my tongue the hole felt like an enormous cavern and I vaguely thought that perhaps my entire head would fall in to it and vanish if I wasn't careful...

With the two **Endymion** novels, Dan Simmons takes the story he began in the two **Hyperion** novels into deepest A. E. van Vogt territory and the story turns into an excessively recomplicated space opera. In **Endymion,** every plot point developed and explained in **Hyperion** turns out to be untrue or irrelevant or both. In **The Rise of Endymion**, the explanations of **Endymion** are given the same treatment.

The story begins with the eponymous Raul Endymion rescuing Aenea when she re-emerges from the time tomb she entered at the end of **Hyperion**. The remainder of the page count of these two enormous doorstopping novels recounts Raul and Aenea's (often arbitrary) adventures as together and apart they battle the plots of the Pax and the Technocore. Twisted theologies, power politics, genocide and architecture(!) drive the story together with a travelogue through some of the most inventive landscapes and societies in the genre. The shrike is both a seen and an unseen menace. But the story is too long; too many revelations piled upon revelations. I got bored.

Theological concerns also drive **St. Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman**, which despite all rumours to the contrary is *not* a sequel to the stunningly brilliant **A Canticle for Leibowitz**. It is merely a continuation of the middle sections of the previous book. In some ways, the novel reads almost as if it consists of out-takes; the boring bits that were edited from the original manuscript.

The world is slowly recovering from the catastrophe that almost destroyed it and the Church's influence is making itself felt again among the temporal leaders of the tribes that roam the devastated country that was once the USA. Brother Blacktooth Saint George and Cardinal Elia Brownpony are on a mission -- but as usual all is not what it seems. Brownpony has a secret agenda and a Crusade is in the offing.

The book is so theologically and politically dense and introspective that I quickly lost sympathy with it. While it doubtless reflects Miller's own concerns (he was a devout man who thought deeply about these things) it does not reflect mine and I found it completely uninvolving.

The next morning I explained about my tooth to the class that I was indoctrinating into the mysteries of Visual Basic. My words were less than distinct since I was trying hard to keep my

tongue away from the jagged edges of the broken tooth which appeared to have got sharper and more belligerent overnight. However the class seemed to understand my mumblings and were duly sympathetic. Somehow I got them to a point where they could do a lab exercise and then I left them to it and shot off to an emergency dental appointment on the other side of town.

"Nice clean break," said the dentist enthusiastically. "Beautiful edges, good and sharp!"

"What caused it?" I asked.

"Hard to tell, but probably it was a bit of internal pressure from an old filling and it just cracked along a weak spot -- like a fault line."

Ah -- so now I was having earthquakes in my teeth. I wasn't reassured.

"Can you do anything with it?"

"Oh yes, fix it in a jiffy. Nice clean break, no sign of decay, soon get it back together. Do you want a local anaesthetic?"

Yes I wanted a local anaesthetic. I'm a coward about these things. GIVE ME DRUGS! Drugs were duly forthcoming...

Stephen Baxter's **Titan** tells a profoundly moving story of the swansong of the American space effort. Paula Bennacerraf is in charge of the dismantling of the shuttle fleet. The space race is over, the glory days are gone and so is the money. But in these dying days, the Cassini probe reports anomalous findings on Titan, and Paula and Isaac Rosenberg (a scientist at JPL) suspect that life may have been discovered. Paula's budget is not large, but by playing politics here and calling in favours there, she and Rosenberg put together one last planetary mission. Rusting Saturn rockets, mothballed Apollo capsules and the few remaining shuttles are pressed into service.

The novel is a grittily realistic account of a space mission; all the way from woe to go (and it forms a fitting companion piece to Baxter's earlier novel **Voyage**). The politics, the personalities and the technologies are brought vividly to life. The book grabbed hold of me and wouldn't let go -- though I could have done without the saccharine last chapter and the epilogue.

I've always enjoyed the mainstream novels of Iain Banks (without the 'M'), but **A Song of Stone** simply doesn't work. It is set some time after a mysterious war. Armed gangs of ex-soldiers roam the land and refugees are an almost constant stream along the road by the castle. The occupants of the castle join the refugees, hoping to escape. However they are caught by the lieutenant of an outlaw band and returned to the castle where they are forced to minister to the outlaws. The novel explores the microcosm of this conflict (perhaps in relation to the macrocosm outside the castle walls). However the narrator is so cold and distant and unfeeling (other than in a very analytical way) that the novel never catches fire. It is unemotional and as a result is quite dull.

In **The Moon and the Sun**, Vonda McIntyre tells one of the best alternate history stories I have ever read. To the court of Lois XIV in seventeenth century France comes Father Yves de la Croix, the Sun King's natural philosopher, returned from a voyage of discovery. He has brought back a living sea monster with a double tail, webbed hands, long tangled hair and a gargoyle face. The novel is partly about the scientific investigation of the sea monster by Yves and his sister Marie-Josephe, and partly about the politics of the Sun King's court. I remain ambivalent about the King -- all the way through the book I could never decide if he was weak or strong, wise or stupid. Was his conviction that immortality was the gift of the sea monster only an affectation, or was he genuinely a believer? Both interpretations can be convincingly argued. I suppose that makes him a consummate politician -- impure and far from simple.

Yves proves to be a weak and stupid man, too easily manipulated by the political cynics at court. His sister Marie-Joseph, despite her naiveté was far wiser, and a considerably better scientist. The relationship she builds with Sherzad the sea monster is the core of the book, and with Sherzad Vonda McIntyre has again demonstrated her usual enormous skill at making the alien and unfamiliar acceptable, understandable and even sympathetic.

Soon my jaw was numbing nicely and the dentist bustled around preparing the usual assortment of devices that gave every appearance of having been patented by Torquemada. Then it was time to begin.

"Open wide."

First we had the ultrasonic drill and the water spray. That wasn't too bad. Then we had the grinding of a more ordinary drill.

"Feels like a Black and Decker this end," remarked the dentist. "What's it feel like at your end?"

"Eee aah iiikke aat ooo", I said.

"Thought so," he replied.

Then he inserted a pin and began to build up the filling around it, like a sculptor building around an armature. About half way through this operation, for no readily discernible reason, he called for varnish. The nurse obliged, and my mouth filled with the taste and smell of shellac. Then we had a few more scrapings, plane it square, rub it down with sandpaper and slap on a coat of paint and the thing was done.

I paid over enormous sums of money and went back to my class. My numb jaw felt as though it had swollen to the size of a big red bus (though the mirror assured me otherwise). I still had difficulty speaking through the numbness, and I think I dribbled, but we managed...

Donnerjack is the book that Roger Zelazny left uncompleted at his death. It has been finished by Jane Lindskold and in places the joins show. The collapse of the world net has allowed access to (or possibly created) the worlds of Virtu. Our world is known as Verité. Donnerjack bestrides these two worlds -- and he is powerful and important in both. He marries Ayradyss and loses her to Death, the Lord of the Deep Fields. After striking an Orphean bargain with Death, he brings her back to Verité. But the price he agrees to is the life of his first born child. Somewhat to his surprise a child is born of the marriage (liaisons between Verité and Virtu are regarded as sterile). Donnerjack attempts to cancel his bargain, but the Lord of Deep Fields has his own agenda.

The initial sections of the book are filled with dark designs and darker humour and the Zelazny magic has never been better presented. But gradually the novel becomes more mundane (if such a word can truly be used about a construction as weird and surreal as Virtu); and here I think we see evidence of Jane Lindskold's work. She is a great writer -- but she lacks Zelazny's bizarre mastery of the *outré*. And yet even here there are words, sentences and sometimes whole paragraphs which are pure Zelazny -- thus proving that at times she really did get into the skin of her collaborator. The novel is flawed by long stretches of almost mediocrity, and it is badly in need of some editing to tighten it up. But it has so many moments of sheer brilliance that these can almost be forgiven. And who can fail to love a novel which has a sentient train called the Brass Baboon, and a phant called Tranto in it?

Joe Haldeman's **Forever Peace** is *not* a sequel to his 1975 novel **The Forever War**, and the book opens with a *caveat lector* to this effect. It is thematically related, in the sense that its main concerns are with war and its effect on the people who fight (and the people who don't), but there the similarity ends.

In 2043, the Ngumi War rages. It is largely fought by "soldierboys", almost indestructible war machines under the remote control of soldiers many hundreds of miles away from the battle. And yet the psychological effects of this war-at-a-distance induce traumas just as deep as those of the more traditional confrontational wars of history. War is still hell.

Julian Class is one of these soldiers and he is coming apart under the strain. He and his lover Dr. Amelia Harding have made a discovery about the nature of war and the nature of the linkage to the soldierboys that threatens to change human nature and which may bring an end not only to this war but to war as a whole...

These are large matters, and it is a measure of Joe Haldeman's skill that not only does he deal with the themes convincingly, he also deals convincingly with the science-fictional Mcguffin that makes the whole story work in the first place. And at the same time he tells an enthralling tale full of satisfying plot and counter-plot, sufficient to keep the pages turning. I must have turned them very rapidly because I read it in a sitting.

Over the next few days it became obvious that there was a small roughness in the filling. My tongue rasped over it and it was shredding my dental floss, making it less than easy to dig out the carcasses of rotting cows and pigs, along with the occasional chook that were hiding in there and holding parties. I went back to the dentist.

"Oh yes, I see it. No problems there! Fix it in a jiffy."

A couple of pneumatic drills, a lathe, three sticks of dynamite, pitons, crampons, climbing rope and a full set of bungee-jumping gear vanished into my mouth. The army were put on full alert and Civil Defence was informed. The dentist pulled his parachute harness tight.

"Open wide."

It did no good -- the rough spot is still there. Obviously I'm stuck with it until I eat another samosa whereupon I suspect my entire jaw will fall off onto the floor and I will have to spend the rest of my life eating curry intravenously.

In **Hornet's Nest**, thriller writer Patricia Cornwell turns away from her usual style (and her usual cast of characters) to write another brilliant book; one which is utterly unlike anything else she has done. Violence has come to Charlotte -- businessmen visiting the town are being shot in the head and left in their rental cars with their trousers pulled down and an orange hourglass spray-painted on their genitals. As if this isn't enough, deputy chief Virginia West has to play chaperone to Andy Brazil, a rookie reporter on the local paper, though he turns out to be less of a liability than she feared he might be. Most of the time, anyway. The book is a comedy, but the humour is very dark (Americans are often very good at black comedy) and it succeeds on every level. It is by turns gruesome, humorous and tense.

Callahan's Legacy revisits very familiar territory. Fans will love it, newcomers will wonder what all the fuss is about. The puns are wonderful, the story is trite and saccharine. The menace is unbelievable, the solution to the problem is hackneyed. In short, business as usual.

Harry Turtledove has finally brought his monumental alternative second world war to an end and **Striking the Balance**, while it does complete the story, also plants so many fishhooks that I would not be at all surprised to find that he comes back and adds to the series in later years. The books do not stand alone. This really is one continuous tale that just happens to be four books long.

I never thought I'd say it, but **Slippage**, Ellison's first story collection in nearly a decade is dull. Many of the stories are quite old, and there are good reasons why they have not been collected before. Only the novella **Mephisto in Onyx** really stands out and that is readily available in

other editions. The book was a big disappointment to this long time Ellison fan.

For many years I have heard rumours of **The Armageddon Rag** by George R. R. Martin. The critics all praised it but I had never seen a copy. However recently I discovered that one of my friends had not only read it, she had a copy hiding on her bookshelf. I smiled winningly, and she allowed me to borrow it, and it was just as good as all the reports said it was.

It concerns a rock group who had been the idols of the hippie era. But the music died when a mysterious assassin shot the lead singer at a concert. The book takes place in the 1980s, and an ageing rock journalist (who has long sold out to the establishment) retraces his youth through the stories of the remaining band members. He tracks them down to interview them and (inevitably) is one of the influences that brings about a reunion gig.

The last half of the book is a little melodramatic and the eeriness surrounding the replacement lead singer is never adequately dealt with. But the major strength of the book is the way it encapsulates an era. The 1960s and 1970s have been written to death, but very few commentators have managed to capture the feelings, and almost none have ever really come to grips with just how *important* the music was. (Perversely, one of the few novelists who got it right was James Michener, a writer at least two generations removed from the people he wrote about -- read **The Drifters** to see what I mean). Martin describes the times with uncanny accuracy. For me the book was awash with nostalgia (and probably both Martin and I are wearing rose-coloured glasses), but a healthy cynicism shines through as well. For example, Martin's comments on the seriousness of modern day students are well observed. We were serious too, of course -- but we were serious about war and poverty and humanity. Today's students are serious about accountancy and business studies. For them, *relevance* means career-planning. That makes them shallow in my eyes, and Martin agrees.

It is the little bits of business that make the book -- my favourite concerns the children brought up with starry-eyed idealism in what is probably the last of the hippie communes. Vegetarian, peaceful, lots of good vibrations. But the children sneak away to play with toy guns, read super-hero comics and eat hamburgers. We all rebel against our parents, don't we?

Dan Simmons	**Endymion**
	The Rise of Endymion
Walter M. Miller Jr	**Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse W**
Stephen Baxter	**Titan**
Iain Banks	**A Song of Stone**
Vonda N. McIntyre	**The Moon and the Sun**
Roger Zelazny and Jane Lindskold	**Donnerjack**
Joe Haldeman	**Forever Peace**
Patricia Cornwell	**Hornet's Nest**
Spider Robinson	**Callahan's Legacy**
Harry Turtledove	**Worldwar: Striking the Balance**

Harlan Ellison **Slippage**

George R. R. Martin **The Armageddon Rag**

Tony

***Phoenixine One-Hundred**, December 1997*

When I lived in England I worked for a man called Anthony Kelso Kent. He was a jovial, rotund man, and was much amused when it was pointed out to him that his name was an anagram of Hank's Ten Ton Yokel. But the nickname didn't stick; he remained just Tony...

I don't like fantasy, but every so often some compelling reason or other makes me start reading a fantasy novel (or on very rare occasions, a series) and sometimes I quite enjoy them for one reason or another. The "Wiz" novels by Rick Cook repelled me for many years but recently, persuaded by some reviews I had read, I decided to try them and I was very impressed indeed.

The basic premise is that a world where magic works is suffering a crisis -- the usual Dark Lord is winning the usual fights and in desperation the good guys send a mighty summoning and conjure up a computer programmer from our world to help them. The programmer, Wiz Zumwalt, is magically inept and seems initially to be of little use. But he discovers that the rules of magic are susceptible to a programming approach, and he devises a magic compiler (based on a programming language called "Forth") which allows him to write spells in much the same way that he wrote programs in our world.

From there on in the story becomes predictable and if it was treated seriously I suspect it would be exactly like every other fantasy novel ever written. But to Rick Cook's credit, he does not take it seriously and the whole series exhibits an enviable lightness of tone which makes it very entertaining indeed. And for those of us who are computer nerds, there are a lot of computer jokes to enjoy as a bonus.

Tony Kent and I both worked for the Chemical Society (later the Royal Society, but what's in a name?). By the time I joined, Tony and his team had done a lot of pioneering work on computerised information retrieval from large text databases. Specifically, the abstracts and indexes of **Chemical Abstracts**, a publication which contains references to all published chemical research. As you can imagine, this was not a trivial problem to approach from scratch. Not least of the difficulties was the fact that the data collections exhibited little or no long range order, being essentially a conglomerate mass of text.

Well there are ways; and Tony found them and he and his team made quite a nice living providing the results of computerised searches of the databases to chemists around the world. Given that this was in the days of steam when dinosaurs roamed the earth and the mainframe computer we used had less processing power than the chip that currently drives my watch, this was most impressive. Those of you who surf the net, stopping off at places like Alta Vista and Yahoo are reaping the fruits of this research. The databases of links that they maintain are essentially large free-text databases. You search them using techniques that Tony (and similar people) pioneered in the late 1960s...

I have never heard of N. Lee Wood, but the novel **Faraday's Orphans** had an intriguing blurb so I bought it. There has been a gigantic eco-catastrophe. The geomagnetic reversal of the poles has changed the face of the planet and mankind is almost extinct. Only in a few high-tech domed cities does civilisation survive. Now that the planet is settling down after the catastrophe,

the cities are starting to expand into the wilderness. Berk Nielson is a helicopter pilot from Pittsburgh. He monitors and scouts the wild areas, trading with the scattered settlements, avoiding the feral natives in the wilderness and the ruined cities. His helicopter is destroyed through a chapter of accidents and together with a companion who rescues him from the crash he attempts to make his way back home.

Sounds awful, but it held me engrossed for hours. The story is as old as SF; the theme is hackneyed. Surely nobody in this day and age could find anything new to say about this situation? Well N. Lee Wood can. The SF trappings are there simply as a framework that allows the writer to explore the dynamics of relationships under enormous stress. And what she exposes are weaknesses rather than strengths. In other novels of this type the hero wins through against appalling odds and lives happily ever after. Not so here. Neilsen is exposed as a morally weak man and his survival (for he does survive, but you already guessed that) destroys rather than saves him.

And on top of that, the story is so gripping you won't want to put it down.

On the strength of this magnificent novel I raced straight out to the shops and hunted down Wood's first novel **Looking for the Mahdi**. Kay Munadi (a reporter) and John Halton (a fabricant -- a sort of android) are sent into a middle-eastern country which is becoming a world problem because of its belligerent attitudes. Superficially Halton is a gift for the ruler, but the plot thickens quickly as mysterious assassinations, stolen computer chips and palace politics are stirred into the mix. I began to lose track of who was double crossing who, and I never did figure out why.

This one really is hackneyed. I gave up half way through, snowed under by the weight of the clichés. Maybe it improves towards the end but I will never know.

Tony taught me to program. Every lunch time we would spend an hour or two together and he initiated me into the mysteries of printers and tapes and disks; sequential and indexed files; punched cards and how to spell "Identification Division". In later years this got me into trouble since one day I inadvertently mis-spelled it "Indentification Division" and the compiler went into a loop and used three boxes of lineflow paper printing out the same error message over and over and over again before the operator finally got bored and killed it.

My research project at the time was the investigation of a rather odd idea of Tony's that perhaps the computer could formulate the database questions as well as generate the answers. This isn't as mad as it sounds -- when you sit at the search prompt of a web search engine, just what should you type in? It's very hard to decide. So why not let the computer generate the search terms from a frequency analysis of the words in known relevant documents? That was the basis of it, and if you care about the results, go and search through the dusty back issues of the Journal of the American Society of Information Science (JASIS) for the paper that I published.

Programming proved to be fascinating. The more I learned from Tony, the more neat tricks I could apply in my own research -- this was much more fun than relevance judgements and frequency analyses. Programming took up more and more of my time and information science research less and less...

Larry McMurtry is probably this century's best interpreter of what for want of a better phrase I must call the wild west. I first came across his work with the absolutely unputdownable (and Pulitzer Prize winning) **Lonesome Dove** and over the years I have collected all his other western novels.

One of the things that gives them their strength is the appearance in them of historical figures -- characters who are real people lend an air of truth to a book. He does it again with **Zeke and Ned.** The Ned of the title is Ned Christie, a senator in the Cherokee tribal legislature who later

became an outlaw. He was eventually run to earth in 1892 and was killed after a twenty hour siege. These are historical facts, but McMurtry and his writing partner Diana Ossana flesh them out with detail, providing a motive for why Christie went bad and filling in the fine detail of their picture of the times with plot and sub-plot, character and incident. There is so much verisimilitude that you can smell the sweat and the dust and the blood.

The times were violent and McMurtry has never drawn a veil over violence and its effects. Other writers often romanticise the era, but McMurtry pulls no punches. Grim times and grim people, but they are fallible and human, eccentric and often funny, and the ever-present violence is only just beneath the surface, ready to burst through at the least provocation. I am no great fan of McMurtry's contemporary novels, but I yield to nobody in my admiration for his westerns. **Zeke and Ned** is another winner, a classic of its kind.

Octavia Butler writes far too little -- in an age where sometimes it seems that everybody is pumping out a thousand page novel every week, she remains austere, not at all prolific and her books (when they appear) are invariably head and shoulders above those of her more fecund contemporaries.

Bloodchild is a collection of her short stories and it is a slim volume (only 144 pages). She has written very few short stories. Her major works have all been novels. In a preface she claims to hate writing short stories -- they are too difficult. Her works always want to grow up into novels. Well perhaps so, but when she puts her mind to it she can compete with the best. Every one of these stories is a gem. They range in mood from the grim to the (relatively) light hearted and not a word is wasted.

One of the things that Tony was particularly good at was standing in front of a room full of people and talking to them. No matter what the subject he spoke authoritatively, persuasively and amusingly. He always spoke off the cuff, there were never any notes or pre-prepared bits. Tony always maintained that if he prepared beforehand, giving the talk would be boring since he would be going over the ideas for a second time. And if he was bored, the audience would be bored, and that would never do.

One of his more persuasive talking sessions convinced the United Nations that environmentally harmful chemicals were a pressing problem (and likely to become more so) and that one of the ways the UN could help would be to maintain a database of such chemicals, noting their effects and any alleviating treatment that might be applied. This database would be contributed to by all member states and would be available to all member states in the event of an emergency. (The idea later proved its worth when a big dioxin leak from a factory in Italy caused major environmental damage and much suffering. Information from the database was used in the clean up campaign).

And so in the mid 1970s I found myself in Geneva working on the design and implementation of this database. Those lunch time programming sessions were being put to very good use...

Stephen Bury is better known as Neal Stephenson, but whichever incarnation you find him in you are guaranteed an enjoyable time. **The Cobweb** is set during the events leading up to the Gulf War of 1991. Clyde Banks is a deputy sheriff investigating a murder in a small Iowa town near a university. The murdered man is an Arab who was working at the university. It seems that rather a lot of Arabs work at the university. And in the surrounding towns. And they are not always friendly towards each other.

Meanwhile in Washington politics and expediency threaten to undermine world peace as well as destroy careers at both the top and the bottom of the tree. Only Hennessy who once worked for the CIA but now works for the FBI and is therefore cordially hated by both seems to know what is going on, but he is constrained by political machinations and when the crisis comes he must depend on Clyde Banks. Could Saddam Hussein really have a biological weapons factory in an

American university?

The book succeeds on every level. It is a thriller, a comedy, a serious examination of political motivations and a thoroughly entertaining read.

And so is **Lunatics**, Bradley Denton's mad new novel. Jack is in love with Lily, a goddess from the moon. She insists that he meet her naked by moonlight and when Jack is arrested for indecent exposure his friends all gather round to help. And so does Lily

This is a delightful novel about love and the things that make a relationship work. It is much lighter than Denton's earlier books and is much more approachable as a result.

I have lived in New Zealand for nearly seventeen years. For much of that time I worked as a programmer. For the last few years I have been teaching my skills to other people. I have had to be a good programmer and I have had to be a good and persuasive and entertaining speaker. All of these things I learned from Tony, both directly from the horse's mouth and indirectly by watching and mimicking what I saw. A day seldom passes without something that Tony taught me proving useful.

Tony Kent died on October 11th 1997. He was my friend and I miss him.

Postscript.

Following Tony Kent's death in October 1977, a group of his friends contributed to an annual award to be called The Tony Kent Strix Award, to be presented each year by the Institute of Information Scientists in recognition of outstanding practical innovation or achievement in the field of information retrieval. The first award (in 1998) was to Professor Stephen Robertson of the Department of Information Science of City University.

The Strix (commonly known as the Tawny Owl) is found throughout Britain, nesting in barns from which it seldom emerges before dusk to forage for food. The choice of the Strix as the emblem for the award commemorates not only Tony's love of birds, but also the highly successful information retrieval program of that name which he developed. The award itself takes the form of a very dramatic bronze statuette of the bird which was created by Jon Bickley of Old Buckenham, Norfolk.

A memorial booklet celebrating the life and achievements of Tony Kent was produced by the Institute in September 1998. The obituary to Tony in the above article (sans book reviews, of course) was printed as Chapter three of that memorial booklet.

Rick Cook	**The Wiz Biz**
	The Wizardry Cursed
	The Wizardry Consulted
	The Wizardry Quested
N. Lee Wood	**Faraday's Orphans**
	Looking for the Mahdi
Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana	**Zeke and Ned**

Octavia Butler **Bloodchild**

Stephen Bury **The Cobweb**

Bradley Denton **Lunatics**

Bouncy

***Phoenixine One-Hundred and One**, January 1998*

Another trip to Wellington. We filed slowly on to the aeroplane. Ahead of me a sports team who appeared to posses only one brain cell which they passed around amongst themselves all tried to get on board simultaneously and blocked the door. "Awwww, mate," exclaimed the current possessor of the brain cell. Eventually the blockage sorted itself out and we seated ourselves. The sports team were all at the back. "Awwww, mate!"

With **The Brentford Chainstore Massacre** Robert Rankin returns to his old stamping grounds and his old heroes. Pooley and Omally learn that because of a special papal dispensation, the calendar in Brentford differs from that in the rest of the world. It would seem that Brentford can celebrate the millennium two years early (and avoid the rush). All that Pooley and Omally must do is find the papal document which has unaccountably disappeared. They enlist the aid of Professor Slocombe. Meanwhile Dr Stephen Malone, using DNA extracted from bloodstains on the Turin Shroud and from fragments of the true cross has cloned several Jesus Christs (one for every religion). Are these plot threads connected? Yes and no.

Unusually for Rankin, the book contains no Brussels sprouts and no Morris Minors. On the other hand, it has no chainstores and no massacres either which probably makes up for it.

In contrast, Larry McMurtry's new novel **Commanche Moon** has lots of commanches, most of them trying to kill Augustus McCrae and Woodrow Call. This novel is the last of the **Lonesome Dove** sequence and covers McCrae and Call's years as Texas rangers. They are bold and bloody years, hard years, hilarious years, tragic years. This is an emotional roller coaster of a book, screamingly funny and gruesomely sad.

We didn't take off until nearly 5:15pm; such an enormous delay that it was obvious there were serious problems somewhere down the line. Consequently it came as no surprise when, about half way to Wellington, the captain came on the loudspeaker.

"Conditions in Wellington are marginal," he said. "The wind speed is very high and gusting and we may not be able to land. If necessary, we will divert to Christchurch."

We dropped lower and lower through impenetrable cloud and the plane rocked in the gusts of wind like a fairground ride gone haywire. Eventually after an interminable time the cloud broke up into wisps and then vanished and below us a hungry sea boiled. "Come here," the waves called. "We want you now!"

There was a whine and a thump as the landing gear deployed. Immediately we took on all the aerodynamic characteristics of a brick and the turbulence doubled and redoubled in spades. The plane rocked and rolled and dropped hundreds of feet in an instant. "Awwww, mate!!" came an agonised groan from the back as the current possessor of the brain cell left his tummy on the ceiling.

The Sparrow is Mary Doria Russell's first novel and I am awe-struck by its sheer magnificence. The plot ingredients are common coin -- a radio signal has been detected from Alpha Centauri

and a spaceship is despatched to investigate them. Even the sub-text is not original -- the spaceship is funded and crewed by the Jesuits and much of the novel is concerned with the crisis of faith that the discovery of alien life implies (I was reminded irresistibly of James Blish's **A Case of Conscience**). But none of that matters, because Mary Doria Russell has written a superb and thought-provoking novel around these stock cupboard ingredients.

The human characters are engaging and interesting -- it is impossible not to feel sympathy for them, especially as all but one of them will die before the book ends. (No spoilers here -- this point is clear from the start since much of the story is told in flashback). The religious issues and religious people are honestly and fairly presented, with no hint of caricature or over-simplification. Even the alien societies and characters ring true (Russell is an anthropologist and is therefore on firm ground). This book deserves to win every award going.

By contrast, Stephen King's **Wizard and Glass** (the fourth volume in the Dark Tower sequence) is dull and boring. I simply could not get interested. The enormous middle section is an episode from early in the life of Roland the gunslinger and it concerns his first great love affair. I think it is meant to be romantic, but I found it tedious. I might have enjoyed it more had it been half the length.

However, King's one time collaborator Peter Straub has just published **The Hellfire Club** and this was so engrossing that I stayed up until 3:30am to finish it. The publishing company Chancel House has built its reputation on one cult novel **Night Journey**. Davey Chancel (grandson of the founder of the publishing house) is obsessed with the book. Nora, his wife, is not. Enter Dick Dart, cunning, depraved, a vicious killer. He kidnaps Nora and takes her on a terrifying trip that seems motivated by the events of **Night Journey** and the mysterious circumstances surrounding the writing of it. Nora soon realises that her only chance of escaping the living nightmare of Dick Dart is to unravel these mysteries. The book has everything; grue and gore, humour, mystery and nerve wracking tension. I could feel it manipulating me and I didn't care.

The sea seemed to stretch into infinity. Was there no end to this grim, grey surf? Then suddenly the runway appeared, racing past like a greyhound. This was going to be a powered landing -- very high powered, and that meant a speed which caused me to worry that we might run out of runway before we ran out of momentum. We banged down, and the engines screamed in an agony of reverse thrust and slowly (ever so slowly) our frightening speed bled away and we dropped to a seeming crawl. The sports team all applauded. Physical co-ordination like that was meat and drink to them. Who needs a brain cell? "Awwww, mate. What a landing, eh mate?"

Nobody knows more about the art and craft of writing than Damon Knight. His book **Creating Short Fiction** is distilled from decades of writing criticisms, editing anthologies and teaching in the Clarion and Milford workshops. The witty advice in this book cannot be bettered. I have never been certain as to whether or not it is possible to teach someone how to write, but if it is possible, this book will do it.

In **Mall Purchase Night** Rick Cook tells us about the events that take place in a glossy new shopping mall that happens to have been built over an entrance to fairyland. All that stands between the forces of Faery and thousands of innocent shoppers is one bemused security guard. As always it is Cook's lightness of touch with his absurd plot that keeps the book flowing. In the hands of a less competent writer this would quickly have degenerated into weak jokes, puns and/or thud and blunder. But Cook keeps it warm and witty. The jokes are good ones and the characters are well drawn.

Similarly, **Tex and Molly in the Afterlife** works only because Richard Grant never once loses control. Tex and Molly are two ageing hippies whose sudden deaths free them to observe (and partly control) the events surrounding an environmental protest. With the help (and hindrance) of forgotten deities and some down and out woodland spirits (I particularly liked Beale, a cynical

dryad) they bring together witches, wolves, hackers, survivalists and marketroids into a dance of life and death.

The whole farrago of nonsense hangs together simply because of the enormous wit and cleverness with which Grant plays with his ideas and characters. It would have been so easy to lose this one, but he never does. Instead he dances lightly and wickedly and it held me enthralled and enchanted.

We were so far off our scheduled time now that there were no free gates and so we crawled slowly over to the international terminal. "Please remain seated with your seat belt fastened until the plane has come to a complete halt outside international gate 20." You could hear the note of surprise in the cabin crews' voices.

The plane stopped and the engines were switched off. Now that we were no longer under our own power the full force of the wind could be felt and the plane shuddered and rocked as the wind howled around it. Through the window I could see the airbridge inching towards us. It too shook alarmingly in the wind. Eventually it seemed to mate with the plane and the crew opened the door. A huge gust immediately howled through the rubber seal and bounced off every seat. Several open locker doors slammed shut as the wind screamed past. "We're sorry about that," said a cabin attendant over the intercom, but it will be much less turbulent once you are through the airbridge."

"Awwww, mate," came from the back of the plane. "I trapped my fingers, mate."

Terry Pratchett's last novel (**Hogfather**) was mostly plotless and pointless, merely an excuse for stringing together a few rather poor jokes. **Jingo**, on the other hand is mostly plot, and is so pointy that at times it threatens to impale you to the floor as it shouts in your face. And nothing wrong with that I say. Pterry has always been at his best when his books are about something, rather than when he is just noodling around. This one is about war and politics, and that is one of the great themes, one he has worried about at length before (in **Johnny and the Dead**).

The sunken island of Leshp has arisen from the sea midway between Ankh-Morepork and Klatch and both are claiming the territory. Klatch is a desert kingdom (a good excuse for jokes about Saddam Hussein and Arabs in general) and Ankh-Morepork is not (so we get jokes about politics instead). As always with the best Pratchett, the game of "spot the reference" is enormous fun. For example there is a whole sub-plot all about the Kennedy assassination in general and conspiracy theories in particular. Mind you it is possible to take this too far. One of the Ankh-Moreporkian sea captains is called Jenkins, and this being a time of threatening war I kept looking for jokes about ears, and I didn't see any. Which means either I blinked and missed them, or Pterry decided it was all too obvious and didn't bother in the end. Perhaps the absence of the joke was the joke? Mind you, once you get into recursive meta-humour like this anything goes!

The Byzantine convolutions of the plot are sometimes rather hard to follow (don't blink, you'll miss the clues) but it's worth making the effort. The ending is rather a let down; but then it was building up to that all the way through -- once we learn about Leonard of Quirm's clandestine visits to Leshp the climax becomes relatively obvious, rather like an aunty I suppose (I did that, not Pterry).

But in summary, Jingo has lots of jokes, lots of subtle references, and a theme that is strong enough to support the surface layer. **Hogfather** represented the low point of the Discworld books; **Jingo** is one of the highest.

We filed off the plane into a completely deserted international terminal (there being no international flights scheduled). Toilet doors beckoned seductively and many passengers availed themselves of the facility. The rest of us crawled like sheep, following the stewardess

who beckoned us onwards.

Suddenly we stopped and milled around in confusion. The exit doors were all locked and bolted. What now? "I'll be back in a moment," shrilled the stewardess encouragingly and raced off in the opposite direction. Obviously she immediately fell into a black hole and spent the rest of eternity in the eighth dimension for we never saw her again...

More toilet doors beckoned (Wellington International Terminal has an inordinate number of toilets and was obviously designed by an incontinent architect). But the safety proved illusory for these too were locked.

At one end of the corridor was an illuminated sign that said "Baggage Claim" with an arrow pointing purposefully at a (locked) door. It seemed an obvious place to gather and so we did.

"Awwww, it's locked, mate. It won't open mate. Awww, mate!"

The delightfully titled **Moab is my Washpot** is Stephen Fry's autobiography -- or rather it is the story of his first twenty years. Doubtless there will be another volume in due course detailing the next twenty years. Sent to boarding school at the age of seven, he faces beatings, misery, love, carnal violation, expulsion, criminal conviction, probation and university. I laughed out loud at this book -- I even laughed at the tragedies (and much of it is tragic); though I think I was meant to laugh rather than cry. As soon as I finished it, I went and re-read **The Liar** (his brilliant first novel) and I was amazed at how skilfully he wove his autobiography into that book.

Fry loves language and he manipulates it well. The delicious, sometimes Wildean wit with which he weaves his story is enchanting. I suspect I would strongly dislike Fry if I ever met him; his attitudes annoy me. But his life story is vastly enjoyable and insightful.

Bill Bryson goes for **A Walk in the Woods** in his latest book. He walks (some of) the Appalachian Trail which runs for more than 2000 miles from Georgia to Maine. It is a spectacular wilderness filled with bears, moose, snakes, poisonous plants, ticks and far too many people who want to talk to Bryson about his terrible choice of camping gear. There is no doubt that Bryson is one of the funniest travel writers of our time and this book is one of his best. But he also has a serious purpose -- one of his reasons for wanting to walk the trail is that it may not be long before much of it disappears (or at least undergoes vast change). The rate of change is accelerating. Trees and animals that were commonplace less than a generation ago no longer exists. Diseases have been introduced, logging has devastated vast acreages. There is a sombre sub-text beneath the humour and that gives the book rather more bite than some of his others have had.

The corridor was lined with windows and through them we could see people coming and going. They ignored us. I began to think that maybe we would be trapped here for days, if not weeks. Perhaps we would have to demolish the chairs and build a fire and roast some of the more succulent-looking passengers on a spit. Doubtless after pounding up and down a playing field the sports team would be particularly nice and tender.

"Awww, mate. It won't open mate! Mate!"

Nobody would ever miss them.

The Siege of Eternity is the sequel to **The Other End of Time** and if you haven't read that one, don't read this one because it won't mean a thing to you. Several clones of the original crew have returned from the space station along with two Docs and a Dopey. The security forces are on alert, the aliens are less than co-operative and various complex machinations serve mainly to set the scene for the next book. Why is it that the middle novels of trilogies virtually never resolve anything?

Single author short story collections are few and far between these days and so I was pleased to find S. P. Somtow's new collection **The Pavilion of Frozen Women**. As might be expected, the stories are subtle though the surface trappings of grue and gore might make you think otherwise. They are also enormous fun -- Somtow takes a delight in juxtaposing odd ideas to see what comes out of the mix. Sometimes he returns to the theme again and again, exploring it from different angles. There are three stories in this collection about theology and zombies, for example.

Eventually a lady dressed in a vivid Day-Glo yellow slicker arrived outside the door. In one hand she clutched the walkie-talkie without which every airport employee appears half-naked (though I don't recall *ever* seeing anybody actually talk into one). In her other hand she had a bunch of keys, none of which seemed to fit the door, though they all caused it to rattle alarmingly. At last something appeared to match and the door opened. "This way, please."

We followed dutifully. Our way wound around and between eerily deserted immigration desks with rubber stamps lying casually where the last official dropped them after the last dramatic thump on a passport. More toilets (locked!) and a maze of little twisty passages, all alike. These lead to a twisty little maze of passages, closely followed by a maze of twisty little passages that turned into a little maze of twisty passages. The internal structure of Wellington International Airport has to be experienced to be believed.

Eventually we arrived at a door. It was locked.

Mulengro has been unavailable for many years. It is good to see it back in print again. It is a story about the Romany people, told (of course) by a *gaje* (a non-gypsy). As de Lint himself says in an afterword this may weaken the story for doubtless there are subtlties of the Romany way of life that have passed him by. But who among us would ever notice? This is story vein that is seldom mined -- the only other one I recall is Robert Silverberg's **Star of Gypsies**.

A series of bizarre murders is shaking the gypsy community and baffling the police. The gypsies give the murderer the name Mulengro and though the police are searching for a purely human killer, the gypsies know that he is a supernatural being; their wise women have *dukkerin*, (the sight).

The strength of the book lies in the contrast between the world views of the *gaje* and the gypsies and the interpretations they put on the events that they share.

Jack Faust is probably Michael Swanwick's weakest book. It is hard to call it a failure (it is beautifully written) but somehow it just doesn't work. It re-tells the standard Faust story. Faust uses his knowledge to institute a scientific revolution (to that extent you could regard the book as a parallel world story) and Swanwick uses the framework to tell (or re-tell) the history of Western scientific thought. Unfortunately that begins to turn the book into more of a lecture than a story and as a result the characters fail to come alive -- they are simply puppets dancing on the strings of the larger, more overt purpose that Swanwick has for the book. And therein lies the book's great weakness. It is, perhaps, too clever by half.

The lady with the keys and the walkie-talkie thumped the door hard. The walkie-talkie said "shhhhhh -- crrrrrr aaaaaaccccckkkkkkllllleeeee -- hhhiiiisssss", but she ignored it and thumped the door again. A surprised looking man opened it and they engaged in a serious discussion that involved much arm waving and staring at computer printouts. Eventually, with bad grace, he gave in and we strode through into the domestic terminal.

"Awwwwww, mate! Here it is mate!"

Kevin J. Anderson's anthology has one of the best thematic ideas I have ever seen. **War of the Worlds: Global Dispatches** presents the H. G. Well's Martian invasion of Earth as witnessed

by Mark Twain, Pablo Picasso, Jack London etc. (Obviously the invasion was world wide and Wells gave us only his view of it in England -- what happened in other countries?). The stories range from a straight forward ERB pastiche by George Alec Effinger to a hilarious scholarly paper by Connie Willis on the effects of the invasion on Emily Dickinson. The anthology has its strengths and weaknesses, but by and large it is an outstanding success.

The new Christopher Fowler novel **Disturbia** will teach you more about London than you ever wanted to know. Vincent Reynolds has fallen foul of the League of Prometheus, a secret society with a lot of power to manipulate the wheelers and dealers. The League sets him ten challenges, cryptic clues that can only be solved by those with an encyclopaedic knowledge of London. If he fails to solve the challenges he will be killed. At first it seems a game -- crossword puzzle clues to take him across the city. But the League has more at stake than simply tormenting Vincent. It gradually becomes clear that there many ulterior and sinister motives behind the game.

Disturbia is a paranoid's wet dream, but at the same time it is an elegiac paean of praise to London. That vision haunts the book and raises it from a simple chase story to something almost mystical in its outlook. It is a hauntingly beautiful story as a result.

I hastened to the baggage claim area. All the adverts for Ansett claim that the priority baggage arrives on the conveyor simultaneously with the passengers (if not before). After the huge delay in the toileted expanse of the International Terminal I expected to find the bags circulating forlornly, waiting for their owners. I was wrong.

Despite the sense of isolation, the passing of geological aeons and the strident cries of "Awww, mate", we had obviously been under close surveillance all the time.

As I arrived in the baggage claim area, the conveyor whirred into life and three seconds later my suitcase rolled into view. Adverts never lie.

Robert Rankin	**The Brentford Chainstore Massacre**
Larry McMurtry	**Commanche Moon**
Mary Doria Russell	**The Sparrow**
Stephen King	**Wizard and Glass**
Peter Straub	**The Hellfire Club**
Damon Knight	**Creating Short Fiction**
Rick Cook	**Mall Purchase Night**
Richard Grant	**Tex and Molly in the Afterlife**
Terry Pratchett	**Jingo**
Stephen Fry	**Moab is my Washpot**
Bill Bryson	**A Walk in the Woods**
Frederik Pohl	**The Siege of Eternity**

S. P. Somtow	**The Pavilion of Frozen Women**
Charles de Lint	**Mulengro**
Michael Swanwick	**Jack Faust**
Kevin J. Anderson (Editor)	**War of the Worlds: Global Dispatches**
Christopher Fowler	**Disturbia**

The Universe Hates Me

***Phoenixine One-Hundred and Two**, Feburary 1998*

When I cook, I have a strange relationship with the laws of physics. Effectively they cease to work (which is an enormously science-fictional situation, if you think about it). Time after time I read a recipe that says "fry the onions for 5 minutes until golden brown". Without a word of exaggeration, I swear that I can fry onions over an enormously high heat for half an hour or more and they show no indication whatsoever of going brown.

Then there are the recipes where one is supposed to "boil vigorously for a few minutes to reduce the sauce". I can boil sauces for (literally) hours at a time and they never, ever reduce. If anything they become more voluminous, if one can use such a word about a sauce. Evaporation? Never heard of the concept -- it is merely a figment of the imagination. Sometimes I think I live in a different world from the writers of the recipe books and the television chefs.

Maybe that's why I'm so fond of tales of alternate worlds. If such and such an historical event had happened differently, what would the world look like now? **Back in the USSA** is a collaborative fix-up novel by Eugene Byrne and Kim Newman. The stories that make up the book were originally published in the British SF magazine **Interzone.** Their pseudo-historical assumption is that there was a communist revolution in America in 1917. This is the tale of the United Socialist States of America (the USSA of the title).

Part of the fun of books of this kind is to place recognisable people from our own world into odd positions in the parallel world of the story. Byrne and Newman have a wonderful time with this -- Al Capone becomes president (he is the Stalin equivalent). In the 1950s, Buddy Holly, Howard Hughes and Jack Kerouac are rebels against the communist state. But because both Byrne and Newman are British, the vast majority of their references are to British personalities which makes you wonder why the book has been published in America, with no sign yet of a British edition. What on earth will the Americans think of the political assassin William Brown? Or Nigel Molesworth, the army officer sent into Vietnam (along with Jennings and Darbishire) to arrest his old school pal Fotherington-Thomas ("Hello clouds, hello sky, hello pile of severed human heads"). All of this is observed (and told) by Bob and Terry, known as "The Likely Lads".

If you enjoy the game of "spot the reference" you will love this book. If you enjoy amusing and exciting stories you will love this book. If you enjoy good writing you will love this book. If you...oh to hell with it. You will love this book.

The latest Connie Willis novel returns to the same time and place and cast of characters as her award winning novel **Doomsday Book.** The time travel unit at Oxford University is in a bit of a pickle. A rich dowager called Lady Schrapnell has invaded the unit and practically taken it over

in her attempt to rebuild Coventry Cathedral, destroyed in an air raid a hundred years before. Using the resources of the time travel unit she is determined to investigate the events surrounding the air raid, to document the artefacts that were destroyed (and those that survived) so the rebuilt cathedral will be as true to the original as possible.

To this end, Ned Henry finds himself in the nineteenth century investigating the bishop's bird stump (don't ask) and entangling himself with dogs, cats, romance and the peculiarities of time paradoxes.

Unlike the previous novel, **To Say Nothing of the Dog** is played strictly for laughs. It is a light hearted romp as only Connie Willis can do it and the jokes come thick and fast and funny. I read it in a sitting and chuckled all the way.

The new Douglas Adams novel is by Terry Jones. As Adams explains in the introduction, he doesn't have time to write a novel because he is too busy working on the computer game on which the book is based. So Terry Jones (who plays the parrot in the computer game) agreed to write the book -- but only if he could write it in the nude. Adams quickly said yes to this and **Starship Titanic** is the result.

At the galactic centre a vast civilisation is preparing to launch the greatest, most technologically advanced starship ever built. The night before the launch, its creator Leovinus wanders around the ship for a last little look. With mounting alarm, he discovers that things are not as they should be. Sloppy workmanship, improperly programmed cybersystems, robots that collide with doors.

As the launch proceeds all initially seems well, but then the ship veers out of control and seems about to crash when suddenly it undergoes an SMEF (a spontaneous massive existence failure). Whoops.

Meanwhile on Earth...

Jones writes pretty good pseudo-Adams, but really the book is plodding and predictable. Perhaps it is merely an advert for the game. The British edition of this book was cancelled at the last minute because the game is not yet ready and the publisher wanted to bring them out simultaneously. I had the book on order from England, but when the British edition was postponed indefinitely, in a fit of pique I went to **www.amazon.com** and bought an expensive American hardback. Then I discovered that some of the postponed British copies seem to have sneaked through the net and have appeared on the shelves here in New Zealand. Bummer.

The British copies have two enormous advantages over the American hardback that I ended up with. Firstly the British edition is cheaper, and secondly it has a photograph of the naked Terry Jones in the throes of composition.

Inanimate objects hate me. Well they hate everybody, but me more than most. Have you ever watched adverts for cleaning liquids? The people on the TV gaily squirt and rub and away comes all the grease. We all know that isn't true (grease and stains *cannot* be removed from any surface, everyone knows that), but that's not what gets to me. What gets to me is the way the cloths and sponges that they use all behave themselves perfectly. When *I* clean things, I rub the cloth over a surface and the cloth immediately rolls itself up into a perfect cylinder and then crunches down into a tiny ball. Within seconds, it becomes unusable; indeed it rolls itself up so tightly that often it threatens to vanish completely. How such an enormous volume packs down into such a tiny space I have no idea, but I'm sure it violates several conservation laws.

Furthermore, no matter what surface I clean, no matter where in the house it may be, the moment a cloth touches it, it sprouts hair. Without a word of a lie, when I unravel the tiny ball of my cloth and spread it out to try again, it has invariably picked up a fistful of hair (it is always

black and curly) and this hair immediately sticks like superglue to the surface about to be cleaned and no power on earth will remove it again; certainly not the cloth which exhibits a degree of loathing that has to be seen to be believed. It won't pick the hair up again, it just wants to put more hair down there (though it will condescend to spread it around a bit).

There is one book that should be required reading for every person who deals with figures -- Darrell Huff's classic work **How to Lie with Statistics**. John Allen Paulos' book **Innumeracy** bids fair to approach the same standard. The book examines the consequences of mathematical illiteracy through an engaging sequence of anecdotes and observations. Applying simple, straightforward arithmetical thinking to a host of everyday situations gives enormous insight into the way the world works. It can strip the veil of hypocrisy from biased news stories, allow a reasoned judgement about winning lotto, let you resist the false claims of advertisers. It raises your consciousness -- turn on, tune in, drop out with probability statistics.

James P. Blaylock writes odd books and **All the Bells on Earth** is a doozy. Walt Stebbins comes into possession of a glass jar containing the badly preserved body of a bluebird. The jar leaks and smells strongly of gin. Stebbins knows that the bird was destined for one of his business enemies in the town and initially he hangs on to it as a small revenge. But then he makes a wish...

Add to this mix a lunatic priest, a man with a compulsive urge to silence the bells of St. Anthony's church and several immolated corpses and you have a potent mix indeed. Somehow Blaylock juggles all the balls of his absurd plot without dropping one and the intricate twists and turns of the plot (and the high good humour with which this farrago of nonsense is narrated) are eminently satisfying.

For many years I avoided novels by Nancy Kress for the silliest of reasons. The first work of hers that I was aware of was called **Beggars in Spain** and the juxtaposition of the words in the title with the name of the author set up odd resonances in my mind.

You see when I was a child in England, a radio journalist called Nancy Spain was a popular and influential figure. She died under tragic circumstances in a plane crash and I still remember the almost palpable sense of shock that swept the country. Seeing the word **Spain** followed immediately by **Nancy** just made me feel sad and a little eerie. So I avoided the book and the writer.

But the work received so many awards and had such popular acclaim that it obviously wasn't going to go away so I gritted my spiritual teeth and ignored my fey feelings and read it. And guess what? It was just as good as everyone said it was.

The novel was quickly followed by a sequel (**Beggars and Choosers**) and now by a third volume which is called **Beggars Ride** on the front cover and **Beggers Ride** on the spine and that mis-spelling is unfortunately the only interesting thing about the book. I suspect the series has simply gone on too long and now the plot and the politics of her "sleepless" society have become so complicated and recomplicated that I simply can't follow it any more. The book bogs down in detail.

Nancy Kress alienated me again with the title of **Oaths and Miracles**. This time the euphony was too close to **Hons and Rebels**; the snobbish semi-autobiographical ravings of one of the Mitford sisters (I can't be bothered to go and look up which particular one it was). It is a book which I loathe and detest with a deep primeval hatred.

But once again I was being foolish. When I read it, **Oaths and Miracles** proved be a taut and exciting thriller; one of the best I've read in ages. Robert Cavanaugh is an FBI agent with a quirky sense of humour and a penchant for drawing slightly sick cartoons. Ben Kosinksi is a prominent biochemist who is murdered shortly after a job interview with a biotech company in

New Jersey. Other deaths and a vague hint of mafia involvement lead Cavanaugh to a paramilitary splinter group, a religious commune and the deadly secret that ties these disparate threads together. This secret, in retrospect, turns the book into science fiction for it is a pure speculative Mcguffin. But don't let that worry you; go along for the ride. The tension will have you on the edge of your seat, and the dénouement (when it comes) will take your breath away.

The problem of cleaning people is almost as intractable as the problem of cleaning things. We shower in the morning in order to stop our smelly bits giving offence (and also to wake ourselves up). One of the smelliest of the human smelly bits is the feet; and yet I have never found any satisfactory way of washing my feet when I take a shower. In the type of shower that pours into a bath, one can always sit down. However this is cold and hard on the bottom and the extra distance that the water falls on to the recumbent carcass in the bath imparts a peculiar body-penetrating force to it which makes the whole operation decidedly unpleasant.

In the type of shower which is little more than a tiny cabinet, it is possible to wash one foot by dint of some undignified balancing and hopping on the other foot. However the washed foot then becomes soapy and very slippery and attempting to balance on it in order to wash the first becomes fraught with bone-fracturing peril.

Perhaps you are only supposed to wash one foot a day? However this too is difficult. I don't know about you, but I can't remember *anything* in the morning, let alone which foot I washed yesterday. Suppose I get it wrong and wash the same foot twice in succession? It doesn't bear thinking about. Imagine, one foot might go unwashed for a whole year! Thank goodness for tightly laced shoes to keep the smell in.

I remember reading William Gibson's **Neuromancer** when it first came out and I was completely blown away by it. I re-read it years later, when the hype had died down, and found it to be appallingly bad (Raymond Chandler with computers) and appallingly ignorant (you could engrave all of Gibson's knowledge about computers onto the head of a pin and still leave room for a portrait of Isaac Asimov). I've cordially disliked his books ever since. His latest novel is **Idoru** and it shows no improvement. It is all surface and no substance; it dissolves in the mouth like fairground candyfloss. Who cares that a pop star wants to marry a virtual reality singer (the **Idoru** of the title)? I don't.

Garry Kilworth is one of those irritatingly inconsistent writers. When he is good he is very very good. But when he is bad...well, you know how it goes.

In **A Midsummer's Nightmare** he is very very good indeed. Sherwood forest is shrinking as urban sprawl consumes it and Oberon, King of the fairies, decides that it is time to leave. Sid, a young mechanic the fairies have charmed, suggests that they migrate to the New Forest. Oberon and Titania agree (reluctantly) though some of the other fairies stage a bit of a rebellion which Oberon quickly puts down (though it will have consequences later). Sid teaches Titania to drive, and on Midsummer's day they set off in an old, smelly bus.

Their journey away from their usual haunts sends magical signals on the ley lines of the world and many slumbering magical creatures reawaken as the fairies pass. The news bulletins are full of videos of giants and dragons. But one of the awakened spirits is the fairy of the morning, Morgan Le Fay.

Meanwhile the fairies journey onwards, taking rest breaks as required. They enter a Morris dancing contest and win (naturally). Titania takes a human child and leaves a changeling in return. Unfortunately she was in a bit of a rush and the changeling she leaves is a goldfish. The bargain is not appreciated and tales of a kidnapped child begin to replace videos of giants on the news broadcasts.

The New Forest offers sanctuary, but before they can enter it, Titania and the morning fairy will

have to settle their age old quarrel. The battle is an epic one.

The borders of the fields we know are often fruitful story sources. Far more so than the wilder stretches of untamed country beyond those fields. This delightful tale from the borderlands is one of Kilworth's very best novels.

I was at university with a man named Geoff. During the course of one whole year, Geoff proved that as long as you slurp every single drop of liquid from your mug, you do not have to wash it before imbibing something else. Coffee, tea, horlicks, orange juice, ribena, milk and the occasional beer were consumed in sequence, month after month after month. By the end of the year the interior of the mug was ... interesting. I think Geoff's relationship with biochemistry was rather like mine with physics.

Eugene Byrne and Kim Newman	**Back in the USSA**
Connie Willis	**To Say Nothing of the Dog**
Terry Jones (Douglas Adams)	**Starship Titanic**
John Allen Paulos	**Innumeracy**
James P. Blaylock	**All the Bells on Earth**
Nancy Kress	**Beggars Ride**
	Oaths and Miracles
William Gibson	**Idoru**
Garry Kilworth	**A Midsummer's Nightmare**

Diatribe on Language

***Phoenixine One-Hundred and Three**, March 1998*

This column began life as a record of my reading and if you jump to the end of it you will indeed find this month's book discussion. But before we get there we have a light-heartedly phrased but quite serious discussion of something completely different (so to speak) which simply won't work properly in my more usual mingled (some might say mangled) format. Sorry.

Words are the tools we use to communicate ideas. Without words it is not possible to live outside your skull and interact with the other (hopefully word-using) people around you. Anybody who has visited a country whose language they do not speak is well aware of the feelings of isolation and frustration that are caused by an inability to speak (and an inability to read if the written form is markedly different from your own).

However even when people are supposedly speaking the same language we still often find that the words that are used can convey meanings that are quite different from those intended. George Bernard Shaw once remarked that the Americans and the English were two nations separated by a common language.

Sometimes it is a matter of accent (or, less commonly, dialect). The average New Zealander's

utter inability to pronounce any vowels on the left of the sound spectrum often makes them incomprehensible to other English speakers. "What have pigs got to do with hanging out the washing?" my mother once asked me in bewilderment after having been involved in a charming (but from her point of view increasingly surrealistic) discussion about the merits of various different kinds of clothes pegs.

The effect seems to get worse the further south you travel -- I know somebody from Invercargill who (on a good day) can say "o" and "u". On a bad day only "u" can be articulated. Perhaps if I ever visit the Chatham Islands I will find that they gave up vowels years ago and now communicate only with consonants.

More seriously, the communication gap can also be widened when perfectly familiar words are used in ways that fail to match their meaning. I came across just such a phenomenon recently when I sat through a Microsoft training course. The training material kept using the word "enumerate" in a context that I found very puzzling. The word means "to count" (though more subtle actions may also be implied). However the course used it in a sense that seemed to suggest the action of looking in turn at a collection of things and doing something unrelated to counting on the basis of what you found. In other words to "iterate" through the collection. Once I figured this out, I simply assumed that in American English "enumerate" had a different meaning than it had in English English and thought no more about it.

Later, after the course, I looked the word up in both an American and an English dictionary -- the definition was the same in both! Enumerate simply does not mean what the Microsoft training material claims that it does. By bending the meaning for their own purpose until it broke, they not only failed to communicate with me, they completely mislead me, which is worse. Only Humpty Dumpty can get away with forcing a word to mean what he wants it to mean. Microsoft are nowhere near that powerful (yet). All they succeed in doing is muddying the waters.

The written word is a communication tool that that tends to require an even greater precision than the spoken word. When we speak we can often get away with solecisms that would be unacceptable if written down. For example, many people *say* **asterix** when they would (of necessity) *write* **asterisk** (I attribute this laziness of speech to the enormous popularity of the eponymous comic book character).

A more recent phenomenon is the elision of contractions such as "should've" into the phrase "should of". In terms of pronunciation it is not hard to determine why this has happened (try saying the two phrases out loud). However a far more worrying trend is that the latter phrase is now starting to appear quite regularly in printed material (I have seen it in several novels recently). This is simply not acceptable. If you wish to avoid contractions (as many people do) then spell the words out in full ("should have"); don't try and mangle it into something that it isn't.

The increasing popularity of word processing software and spell checking programs means that few people these days make spelling mistakes (unless they abuse the program, or are too lazy to invoke it in the first place or they fall into the homonym trap -- see later). However there exist, as yet, no grammar checkers worthy of the name. The only ones I've come across seem to do little except make delphic pronouncements concerning the passive voice; something that I find less than helpful.

As a consequence of this, many modern written communications tend to come littered with errors of the "should've / should of" variety and again, meaning and precision are sacrificed at the altar of utility.

Four techniques form the basis of our written language, and if any of these techniques are misused we progressively lose clarity of expression, and meaning vanishes before our very eyes. The techniques are spelling, punctuation, grammar and rhetoric -- and I'm going to talk about all four of them and try to demonstrate exactly what I mean.

Straight out of the box, a spell checker will tell you about the words you have misspelled, and you can instruct it to fix them with a fair degree of confidence. However after a few months of carelessly hitting the "Add" button and putting the misspelled words into your custom dictionary you start to let the misspellings trickle through. Some of these mistakes are caused by accident and some by the honestly held but mistaken belief that the computer is wrong and you are right. I am appalled, for example, at the number of people who seem to think "alot" is the correct way to spell "a lot" and who have therefore added it to their dictionary. However no spell checker will warn you about words that are spelled differently but sound the same. Homonyms are not synonyms and English has rather too many for comfort. Consider the following paragraph:

Their is only one way to discuss weather the whether is fine. Your on you're own if you think they're are others. If you think their might be rain you should ask someone if you could borrow there umbrella, or perhaps where an overcoat. If someone asks wear you got it, be discrete. If you are scene at the seen of an umbrella burglary, refuse to talk on principal. Carrying a discreet number of umbrellas is not a crime unless your school principle says so.

It passes my spell checker with nary a murmur, but every single use of

there / their / they're,
your / you're
weather / whether
discrete / discreet
principle / principal
seen / scene
where / wear

is completely wrong. I really don't know how many homonyms English has; I think it might be an open ended list.

Punctuation symbols are used to divide sets of words into meaningful blocks. They indicate breathing pauses and the word stress; the end of one idea and the start of another. Read your words out loud -- you'll soon see where the punctuation has to go as you breathe.

Most punctuation is actually pretty robust and can be mis-used without detracting too much from the sense. Misplaced or omitted commas just add awkwardness and a vague sense of disquiet. The use of the semi-colon is becoming a dying art. However the full stop is not so forgiving. Omitting it (or putting it in the wrong place) can completely destroy the sense. Let's try the above paragraph again:

Their is only one way to discuss weather the whether is fine your on you're own if you think they're are others if you think their might be rain you should ask someone if you could borrow there umbrella or perhaps where an overcoat if someone asks wear you got it be discrete if you are scene at the seen of an umbrella burglary refuse to talk on principal carrying a discreet number of umbrellas is not a crime unless your school principle says so

Without full stops, that already difficult paragraph degenerates into virtual incomprehensibility. Even worse. Are the full. Stops that are placed. At the end of things that. Are not sentences. The jerky effect that causes is most disconcerting and again meaning tends to vanish.

Perhaps the most abused punctuation symbol is the apostrophe. There are those who claim it is an archaic irrelevance and they would like to get rid of it completely. However removing the apostrophe from our written language would greatly increase our homonym list -- how would you distinguish, for example, between "were" and "we're" without it?

The apostrophe indicates missing letters in contractions ("should've") or the possessive ("Alan's book"). A case can be made that even when used as a possessive it **really** indicates missing

letters. An older form of the language would have written "Alan his book". Confusion arises when the word is *already* a possessive (as in "its book" which does not require an apostrophe) or a homonym with missing letters as in "it's a book" (i.e. "it **is** a book").

Putting a full stop at the end of a sentence presupposes that you know what a sentence is. The structure of a language (its grammar) defines this sort of thing and in English it can be a slippery beast indeed. Unlike many languages, English is almost completely uninflected. Where other languages change the ending of a word to indicate its function in a sentence, English depends on the position of the word to define its function.

There are remnants of an older, inflected language in modern English. Consider the sentence "He saw him". You can't turn it round -- "Him saw he" is nonsense; "him" is not allowed in the position reserved for the subject of the sentence and "he" is not allowed in the position reserved for the object. The feminine form is even more startling -- "She saw her" and "Her saw she". Mostly it doesn't matter though. "The sheep saw the sheep" can swap around quite happily.

In the first two examples the words are inflected in the sense that the spelling of the word defines what job it does (subject or object). However nobody would ever inflect a sheep and staring at the spelling of the word in isolation tells us nothing at all about its function in the sentence. The old joke that capitalism is the exploitation of man by man and communism is the reverse doesn't work in an inflected language, but English has no problems with it.

The structure of an English sentence is superficially much simpler than the structure of (say) a German or Russian sentence since we don't have to bother with word endings. However this seeming simplicity conceals a great subtlety and constructing a valid English sentence is not always easy without some pre-knowledge of the rules since the words themselves give no hints.

Even assuming that all of this works properly, we are still left with the style of the writing, the rhetorical tricks that dress up the prose in an attempt to get the message across. The way you say something can profoundly affect the way the message is received. If I said "Hey! Titface! Pass the sodding salt!" You would be less inclined to oblige than if I'd said "Could you pass the salt, please?". Such stylistic tricks are called rhetoric and Aristotle wrote a whole book about it (called, not unnaturally, **Rhetoric**).

The tricks are common coin and most of us use them without thinking, and without knowing their names. A metaphor allows us to draw a relationship between two things that are similar to a common (unstated) third. To say that a robin is the herald of spring means that a robin is to spring as a herald is to the message he brings his prince. No literal relationship is intended. A simile, on the other hand, would imply a literal relationship and we could then say that a robin is like a herald of spring (which is nonsense, since there is no such thing as a *real* herald of spring, but never mind). Almost invariably a simile reveals itself by involving words such as "like" or "as if". Usually a metaphor is abstract and a simile is concrete (which explains why the abstract simile I used above doesn't work properly). Aristotle remarked rather drily that a simile is a metaphor with an explanation.

A synecdoche (lovely word -- I have no idea at all how to pronounce it) is a usage whereby a part stands in for the whole. For example using the word sail to mean a ship or describing a computer system as a box.

Metonymy uses a name associated with an object instead of the object itself. Thus we might say "New Zealand has decided to send troops to Iraq" when we really mean that the *government* of New Zealand made that decision. Metonymy should not be confused with antonomasia where the surname of a person is used as a generic term -- quisling or macadam or hoover or boycott, although the latter is rather odd, being a verb as opposed to the more usual noun.

With hyperbole we have an exaggeration for effect ("If I've told you once I've told you a million times..."). Litotes gives the same effect by use of the negative and often comes across as a dry or amusing understatement ("I am not unused to saying this...").

The list of rhetorical devices that we employ for effect is again probably endless and highly elaborate classifications of them have been the delight of rhetoricians and grammarians over the centuries. An enormous list of hair-splitting definitions was published by Quintilian in a book called **Institutio Oratorio** in the first century AD and the list was rendered into English equivalents by one George Puttenham in the 16th century. I bet most authors would be overjoyed to have their books remembered and used for as long as Quintilian's was!

Spelling, punctuation, grammar and rhetoric are legitimate subjects of study and generations of British schoolchildren have learned to hate them. I studied them quite intensively for five years under the bucket category of **English Language**. The lessons learned so painfully are probably the most useful I have ever acquired and scarcely a day goes by that I don't use them.

We are talking about communication and clarity of expression. It is simply not possible to communicate effectively if the communication channel is corrupt. The language is flexible and will take a lot of abuse before it finally gives up -- but the greater the degree of corruption, the more the rules are mistreated, the harder it becomes to extract any meaning from the text. Just consider how much meaning was destroyed in my umbrella paragraph by only two simple abuses of the system.

Rules are made to be broken and language is an ever-evolving thing (God forbid that it should ever stagnate). But you simply cannot break the rules meaningfully if you don't know what the rules are in the first place; that's a given. Many people today do not know what the rules are because nobody has ever thought to tell them. The study of spelling, punctuation, grammar and rhetoric has largely vanished from our educational system. People who produce illiterate prose (and therefore fail to communicate) are generally not stupid, they are merely ignorant. And ignorance is correctable.

I have broken many of the rules of English in the writing of this article. Perhaps you would like to play a game and see how many violations you can find. I did it deliberately to enhance the effect I was trying to achieve and in every single case I knew what rule I was breaking and why I was breaking it. Today that is an increasingly uncommon skill.

We have to learn the rules of all our daily activities. We can't drive a car until we know the rules of driving, we can't use a computer system until we know the rules of clicking a mouse, we can't buy a round in the pub until we know the rules of money. Nobody demands or expects perfect knowledge of these things; just enough to get by. Is it too much to expect a similar working knowledge of your own language? I don't think so.

Now let's see if I can do it. Thsi (sic) is wot i red on my hols.

Carl Hiaasen bids fair to become my favourite thriller writer. In **Lucky You** two people (one nice, one nasty) win the Florida State Lottery. The nasty one does not wish to share the prize and kidnap, murder and mayhem result; much to the annoyance of a large crab and a waitress with a pair of orange panties. The novel is brutal and funny and sometimes you don't know whether to laugh or throw up. Hiaasen reminds me very much of Joseph Wambaugh and by a strange coincidence I came across Wambaugh's **The Golden Orange** this month. It is quite an old novel, but it has always escaped me in the past. It deals with the cynical manipulations of the super-rich. The heroine appears not to have inherited daddy's fortune. There may not even be a fortune or maybe she has been kept from it. Enter an alcoholic ex-cop with large gaps in his memory and a penchant for driving boats he doesn't own. The wit and subtlety makes this his best novel since **The Choirboys**.

Nancy Kress has carved out a niche for herself as a biological speculator. In **Maximum Light** we find a world where the world-wide fertility rate has declined enormously. Children are rare and treasured (though some of the children find all the attention suffocating). We are shown the society through the eyes of both young and old, and the morality of the young and the old is contrasted, particularly in regard to the rather sick way criminals are taking advantage of the downturn in fertility.

Spider Robinson's new collection **User Friendly** is probably his weakest yet. There are too many stories about SF (as opposed to being science fiction stories -- not at all the same thing), and some have seen the light of day in other collections. The essays are weak and the "ras" (his word) are incomprehensible.

From the titles of the three Janet Evanovich novels, it is easy to deduce that there will soon be a fourth. I, for one, can't wait. Stephanie Plum has lost her job as a seller of lingerie and, in desperate need of money, visits her cousin Vinnie (a well known pervert) and blackmails her way into a job with his bail bond company by threatening to tell Vinnie's wife exactly what he did with the duck. So now Stephanie is a bounty hunter -- when one of Vinnie's clients skips bail, Stephanie has to bring him in.

The three novels are virtually plotless (Stephanie chases a bad guy and gets threatened). What makes them so delightful are the brilliant characterisations, particularly Stephanie's horrible grandmother whose hobby is going to viewings at funeral parlours and who shoots the bum off a chicken with Stephanie's gun (which is probably more than Stephanie can do). Stephanie has a pet hamster called Rex and in the last book her hair turns orange. I hope the fourth book appears soon -- I need to know whether or not her hair will ever return to its normal colour.

Caesar's Bicycle is the third in John Barnes' timeline wars series. If you have read the other two you will love it. If you haven't read them you won't have a clue what's going on, but you might enjoy the vision of Roman legions conquering the world on bicycles rather than horses!

Showstopper is a book for computer nerds. It details the design and development of Windows NT from the inside and clearly demonstrates how much it derives from the poisonous personality of Dave Cutler, its chief designer, whose hobby appears to be arguing with and insulting everybody in sight.

The history is absolutely fascinating, and the book is much on a par with Tracy Kidder's **Soul of a New Machine** which did the same sort of expose of an old Data General system. **Showstopper** reveals that many of NT's weak points (some of which have been the subject of much controversy) were almost afterthoughts, shoved in at the last minute to placate political factions within Microsoft. Sometimes the joins show, which might explain why every new release has been so radically different from what went before.

Walter Jon Williams' **City on Fire** is a most unusual thing, a sequel that is more rivetting than its predecessor. It takes up where **Metropolitan** left off. Aiah, who had supplied Constantine with sufficient plasm to lead a revolution to overthrow the corrupt dynasty of the Kerematths, now has a position of high authority in Constantine's new government. The novel is about the loss of innocence that even a hardened rebel can suffer when exposed to the machinations of government and the corrupting influences of power. This one deserves to win every prize going.

Sooner or later every fantasy/horror writer turns out an Arthurian tale. **The Chalice** is Phil Rickman's. It concerns, of course, the holy grail; but from a uniquely Rickmannian point of view. It is probably one of his weaker novels in terms of plot, but it is rich in character, full of new age eccentrics and aging hippies. It is a huge, fat book but I read it in a sitting.

Carl Hiaasen **Lucky You**

Joseph Wambaugh	**The Golden Orange**
Nancy Kress	**Maximum Light**
Spider Robinson	**User Friendly**
Janet Evanovich	**One For the Money**
	Two For the Dough
	Three to Get Deadly
John Barnes	**Caesar's Bicycle**
G. Pascal Zachery	**Showstopper**
Walter Jon Williams	**City on Fire**
Phil Rickman	**The Chalice**

Toilets

***Phoenixine One-Hundred and Four**, April 1998*

There are no good times to lose the ability to flush your toilet. However late on a Saturday night after drinking several cans of beer is possibly the worst time of all.

Of course, it was all Sally's fault. I was merely the unwilling victim of her world record attempt at a superflush. In tones reminiscent of Jack Swigert reporting back to Mission Control from the shattered hulk of Apollo 13 she said, "I think we have a slight problem here..."

The little handle swung forlornly. I spun it round and round but there was no reassuring swishing noise. Silence was the stern reply. I took the top off the cistern and looked inside. Several random bits of plastic and metal stared back at me from the sludge at the bottom. At one time (given the hooks and holes that they exhibited) it would appear that they had been connected together. But now they were refusing to have anything to do with each other. No problem, I thought. It's just a jigsaw puzzle. I'll have this fixed in a jiffy. I groped around in the murky depths and tried re-connecting slot (a) to sprocket flange (b) in various random combinations. Eventually I had what looked like a sensible set of connections; all except for one important looking sticky-out bit. I fumbled around a little more and made an alarming discovery. Poking out of the base of the cistern was a solid plastic lump with a small hole in it. The sticky-out bit was obviously designed to go into this small hole, and doubtless it had to connect to something important inside. Unfortunately there was no way at all of getting at the something important inside for it was a completely sealed unit.

My legs began to cross themselves in involuntary panic. This was turning into a crisis. There is no agony to compare with the agony of not having a toilet. Valves were opening throughout my body and strange gurglings made themselves apparent as vast Amazonian torrents flowed inexorably towards the sea...

I had another can of beer. Maybe the alcohol would act like an anaesthetic.

Robert Silverberg's new novel proves yet again that there is no plot so old and clichéd that it can't be resurrected with a new treatment. One day the aliens invade the Earth -- big aliens, some with purple spots. They don't communicate their desires; indeed they don't appear to have any that we would understand. People are enslaved and made to work on mysterious construction projects. A resistance movement forms, but each small triumph is ruthlessly punished by the aliens. An alien is killed and half the population of the Earth is wiped out in retaliation. It's hard to fight against that sort of thing.

In the hands of a beginner this would be stupyfyingly banal. We've all read similar things before. However Silverberg is anything but a beginner. The story of the aliens is cunningly interwoven with the story of the Carmichaels, a military family around whom the resistance coagulates. They provide the leaders, the planners and the conscience that recognises the fact of failure. Retaliation that wipes out half the population is too high a price to pay.

Really it is a novel about morality, about drawing lines and living with the results of your actions. It is a novel about reaching maturity and understanding just what that means. And the depth that this adds to the superficiality of the story is what raises it above the banal. It also helps that the Carmichaels and their friends are interesting people in their own right, not merely figureheads acting out the authorial stage play.

The ending is somewhat of a *deus ex machina*, but it is not completely unheralded and so I suppose we can accept it. Silverberg also plays games. The novel has lots of science fictional references for those with ears to hear. In every generation of the Carmichael family the "senior male" is called Anson. And one of them marries Leslyn.

These days Tom Holt has made a name for himself as a writer of light, comic fantasy. However if you look closely, in the front of all his comic novels is a list of his other works. Two early novels are usually mentioned in this list; **Goatsong**, and **The Walled Orchard.** They seem to have been out of print forever, but they have recently been republished in an omnibus edition. It is called **The Walled Orchard**, but it does in fact contain both books bound back to back and this is just as well for they tell one continuous tale.

They are historical novels set in Periclean Athens. The story is told in the first person by Eupolis, a comic playwright. It is the tale of his growing up through some of Athens' more troubled times, beginning with the plague that wiped out much of the city in his youth and ending with a war that almost completely eradicated the Athenian Army in his middle years. Eupolis was one of the few survivors of that debacle.

The erudition this novel demonstrates is nothing short of astonishing. All the intimate details of Athenian life are exhibited. But this is no dull historical text. Holt brings the whole thing alive through the dry, cynical wit of Eupolis, his narrator. This novel shows Holt to be capable of so much more than his light comic novels would have you believe. The book is a stunning performance and demonstrates a breath-taking narrative skill. I can only assume that on its original publication it simply didn't sell, thus requiring Tom Holt to change his style and his material to something more lucrative. Let us hope that the second time around (now that he is more well known) it will sell enough copies to encourage him to try this sort of thing again, for there is no doubt that this area is where his real talents reside.

The next day being Sunday and therefore expensive, the plumber came to call.

"Tricky one this," he said pursing his lips as he glared at the cistern. It wasn't intimidated and it glared right back.

"I wonder how they got it in?" the plumber mused as he took the top off the cistern. The wall is made of wooden planks, tastefully varnished, and the cistern is recessed into the wall. The plumber scratched his head. "I reckon they put the toilet in and then built the walls around it," he

said. "Might have to rip all them planks off again to get it out." The thought appeared to give him a certain gloomy pleasure.

He poked around inside the cistern and delivered a professional verdict. "It's buggered," he said. "You need a new cistern."

It took a few phone calls, but a cistern was eventually obtained. A problem immediately presented itself. The old cistern had a handle sticking out of the front. The new one had two buttons on the top.

"That's not going to fit," said the plumber in tones of deepest satisfaction. "If we put it in the hole in the wall where the old one is there won't be enough room to get the top on. And you won't be able to reach the buttons either."

The rather unfortunately titled **Chicks in Chainmail** is an anthology of short stories designed to celebrate heroines cast in the mould of Xena the Warrior Princess with humour and style. Unfortunately both humour and style are lacking in most of the stories. There are far too many references to breasts, far too much authorial preening and nowhere near enough cleverness to justify the book. Most of the writers are women, and you would have thought that they would have been able to write about their own sex without sounding like sniggering, adolescent boys. However it would seem that they can't. The only stories which exhibit any real maturity or originality are both by males. Roger Zelazny tells a mildly amusing shaggy dog story and George Alec Effinger relates another tale in the saga of the sword-swinging Maureen Birnbaum.

With **The Course of Honour**, Lindsey Davis returns to her old stamping-ground of Vespasian's Rome and tells the story of the love between the slave girl Caenis and Vespasian himself. Much of the background, the geography and the politics of the era will already be familiar to readers of Davis' stories of Falco, the Roman detective. But Falco has no part to play here. This is a pure historical novel, not a genre tale wrapped in historical trappings.

She has not lost her touch. The broad sweep of politics and the personal stresses of a close relationship make this an enthralling read.

After some discussion the plumber and I agreed that the new cistern would have to be mounted on the wall rather than recessed into it. Of course, before we could do that, the old one had to be removed. "Can you turn the water off?" asked the plumber.

Oh dear.

My house is on the corner of the street. The valve for turning the water off is round the corner, outside the house at the back, which is number 188. The people in number 188 turn their water off with the valve outside number 186. The people in number 186 turn their water off with the valve outside number 184. The people in number 184...but you get the picture. I have no idea what happens at the bottom of the street. Perhaps everybody in Auckland has their water meter outside their next door neighbour's house. Probably it's all my fault.

I walked up my street, round the corner, down the next street and turned the water off. Then I walked up the street, round the corner, down my street and back into my house. "Water's off."

The plumber grunted, obviously wondering what took me so long. He began to dismantle the cistern. He unfastened the downpipe from the back of the toilet. "The pipe goes behind this plank up to the cistern," he said. "It will have to come off."

He levered the plank off with a chisel. Reluctantly and with a hideous squeak of rusty nails parting from wood, it came away. "Good heavens," said the plumber, astonished. "Will you look at that!"

What a pleasure it is to welcome Richard Matheson's novel **I am Legend** back into print. This is the novel on which Charlton Heston's famous film **The Omega Man** was based, but as is so often the case, the book is considerably richer than the film. A bacterium that induces vampirism is loose in the world. Most people are now vampires and exhibit the usual vampiric traits. But Robert Neville is immune to the disease. By day the world is his to do with as he pleases, but at night the vampires emerge from their sleep and they want to hunt Neville down and kill him.

This is one of the seminal works. Both Stephen King and Dean Koontz, two of the biggest writers in contemporary horror fiction, have recognised the debt that they owe this novel. It defined a generation, and it marked the beginning of the maturity of the horror genre, its emergence from the pulp ghetto.

The novel is very short by today's overblown standards -- only 170 pages, barely enough to qualify as a novella in modern publishing terms. Perhaps for this reason, the new edition also includes a selection of Richard Matheson's previously uncollected short stories. They are a patchy bunch. Most are quite slight and there are perhaps good reasons why they have remained uncollected until now. But don't let this put you off. Every serious library should have a copy of **I am Legend.**

In the 1960s Robert Sheckley wrote a series of quirky novels and short stories whose fame endures to this day. One of them, **The Game of X** was a very weird detective novel that became a minor cult classic. It is long out of print, and copies command high prices on the rare occasions that they surface.

His new novel, **The Alternative Detective** is the first of a series and is billed by the blurb as a return to those heady days. Direct comparisons are made with the earlier novel and I expected to read something comparably odd. Instead I got a perfectly acceptable, but very ordinary detective novel with none of the quirkiness or stylistic mannerisms that would once have marked a Robert Sheckley book.

This is not to say that the book is bad -- anything but. As a straightforward genre detective novel it is probably head and shoulders above most of the competition. But don't let the blurb mislead you.

I looked into the hole in the wall. There was the down pipe from the cistern to the toilet bowl. It had a zig, closely followed by a zag. The cistern was not immediately above the toilet; it was slightly off centre, and the pipe had been bent in order to join the two together. Judging by the bubbles on the surface, someone had taken a blow torch to it in order to soften the plastic. "No wonder they hid it behind the wall," said the plumber. I couldn't help but agree with him.

Unfortunately we would have to retain this misalignment between cistern and bowl because the new cistern had to cover the hole in the wall left by the old one. Therefore the new pipe would also have to be distorted to fit. And since the new cistern was going on to the wall instead of being inset into it, the new pipe would have to be on the outside. This kinky pipe would not be hidden from the gaze of the world. Though given that I am a gentleman, and therefore lift the seat, (which is, of course, the definition of a gentleman) it would occasionally be camouflaged.

The plumber heated the pipe over an element of the stove, constantly turning it and gently pulling and twisting to put the proper zigs and zags into it. It distorted very smoothly and took on its new shape without any of the bubbling exhibited by the old one. I suspect that whoever fitted the original toilet only discovered that the cistern and the toilet bowl did not line up after they had been fixed in place, and the pipe had to be distorted *in situ*, hence the blow torch and the bubbly surface. What a bodgy job.

Sap Rising by A. A. Gill is a very dirty book; one of the most obscenely funny it has ever been my pleasure to read. The word "filth" is nowhere near filthy enough to do it justice, the word

"rude" is not rude enough and the word "obscene" is woefully inadequate. This is one mother of a dirty book. And it is belly-laugh-out-loud hilarious as well. For once the blurb sums it up perfectly:

> ...just a farcical love story set in a garden, about nothing of any consequence, performed by comic grotesques with a lot of swearing and unnatural sex.

The faint of virtue will probably want to ban it and the weak-stomached will have a permanently risen gorge. Those who have read it will never again look at a packet of seeds with an innocent eye and they will give a wide berth to german shepherd dogs and jars of brylcreem.

The remaining steps to get the toilet working seemed fairly straightforward. Off with the old, on with the new (though the old cistern required attacking with a saw before it surrendered); attach the wibbly wobbly pipe, tighten the various knobs. "Can you turn the water on now, please?"

Hell:

Up the street, round the corner, down the road, twist the valve, up the street, round the corner, down the street, back into the house.

"It leaks," said the plumber. "Can you turn it off again?"

Up the street, round the corner, down the road, twist the valve, up the street, round the corner, down the street, back into the house.

Twist, turn, seal the joints. "Can you turn the water on again?"

Goto **Hell**.

Somehow the infinite loop I entered in the last paragraph eventually terminated (I may have discovered a new Cantorian transfinite number somewhat in excess of Aleph-Null in the process). "I hate water," said the plumber with feeling.

And now, there it is in all its glory; my toilet with the S-shaped pipe and two cute little buttons on the top of the cistern, one for a half-flush, one for a full; a choice I've never had to make before. The complexity of it all threatens to overwhelm me at times, but so far I've managed. I'm relieved.

I'm also relieved that it's over. It's OK for my cats to scratch a hole beneath a tree and squat, but I'm not sure that I could manage it with dignity (though for a time I thought that I might have to). Let's hear it for Thomas Crapper.

Robert Silverberg	**The Alien Years**
Tom Holt	**The Walled Orchard**
Esther Friesner (ed)	**Chicks in Chainmail**
Lindsey Davis	**The Course of Honour**
Richard Matheson	**I am Legend**
Robert Sheckley	**The Alternative Detective**

How do I Find the Time?

***Phoenixine One-Hundred and Five**, May 1998*

Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare is an enormous book -- partly because Shakespeare was quite prolific and partly because Asimov finds an awful lot to write about every individual play and a couple of poems. I was also quite surprised to find him discussing several plays which simply did not appear in the **Complete Shakespeare** that I inherited from my Grandmother and which is now starting to look slightly less than complete to my eyes. Admittedly these extras are sometimes of dubious authorship and there are a couple of acknowledged collaborations where Shakespeare's own input appears to have been minimal. But all is grist to Asimov's mill and he examines each and every item in the canon.

The book does not pretend to be a literary analysis -- rather it attempts (very successfully) to place the plays in a contemporary and historical context. **Macbeth**, for example, was written partly as a gift for King James I of England (the VI of Scotland) on the occasion of his accession to the English throne. A deal of political sensibility was required as James had strong opinions and, being a new King and perhaps uncertain in his powers, needed a degree of buttering up. The play is also based around historical fact, though Shakespeare played a little fast and loose with the time scale and twisted the truth a bit for political ends in order to humour his new monarch. Asimov analyses both these threads with masterful skill, placing each very carefully in context.

I won't claim to have read the whole book. I have read the discussions of the plays with which I am familiar and I skimmed many of the others. I found all the essays interesting and erudite and utterly fascinating. What a polymath Asimov was. This book demonstrates as few others do the enormous breadth and depth of his range of interest and knowledge. It is an absolute gem.

The new Jack Vance novel is obviously the first of an open ended series, given that it doesn't come to a satisfactory end. It simply stops when the page count is long enough. God grant that he lives long enough to finish the series for it is wonderful and witty and quintessentially Vance.

As a boy, Myron Tany dreamed of space exploration, of leading expeditions among the myriad planets of the Gaen Reach. But his family insisted that he set himself a course of sober study, the better to prepare himself for gainful employment and so he studied economics. Then his Great Aunt Hester, a woman of flamboyant manner and great wealth comes into possession of a space yacht and Myron starts to hope his dreams may come true. Aunt Hester is frightened of growing old and departs in her yacht to search for a fabled rejuvenation clinic. To begin with all is sweetness and light. But soon Hester is bored by the sameness of every day of her journey and she and her paramour deviate from the course to explore some of the planets along the way. Soon there is a quarrel and Myron is marooned on one of these planets and left alone to make his way as best he might across the vast expanses of the Gaen Reach. He signs on with a cargo ship that meanders from planet to planet. Several are visited and then the book stops.

There are no plot resolutions. We never learn how Aunt Hester fares and Myron's journey is scarcely yet begun. There is obviously so much more to come and I for one anticipate the remaining books with great eagerness. This wandering odyssey of a plot is the perfect vehicle for Vance to indulge in that which he does best -- the creation of quirky, bizarre and sometimes downright twisted societies, the description of exotic (and sometimes revolting) foods, the long, languorous conversations, all profoundly polite and circumlocutory but nevertheless managing to convey all manner of insult and innuendo. Who cares what plot vehicle Vance hitches his prose to? The prose itself is so lush and grandiloquent that you can simply wrap yourself up in it and luxuriate in the fecundity of his imagination and the richness of his tone.

My only complaint is that the book has no footnotes! What use is a Jack Vance novel without footnotes, I ask you?

Harry Harrison too has begun a new series. **Stars and Stripes Forever** is the first book of yet another trilogy. It is a novel of alternate history. Britain is dragged into the American Civil war and (in almost a reprise of the war of 1812) invades from Canada. America finds itself fighting a war on two fronts. This is unsustainable and the warring states patch up their differences and unite against the common enemy. History takes a dramatically different turn from that which we lived through!

This first book, while full of dramatic events and much thud and blunder, is really only a scene setter. The meat of the story is still to come as this vastly new historical reality is explored. I suspect it will be hard to judge the worth of the project until the project is complete. But in the interim, let it be said that I enjoyed the book and will most certainly continue to follow the series as it progresses.

Perhaps it is the season for alternate history books. Jake Page's **Apacheria** has the Apaches fighting the United States government to a truce and negotiating a new homeland for themselves. Apacheria (the territories of New Mexico and Arizona) becomes a completely separate country within the American continent and the bulk of the book explores the sometimes uneasy relationship between this country and its larger neighbours.

The plot is only superficially convincing. Everything falls into places for the Apaches a little too easily and too much is left unexplained. The long arm of coincidence is invoked a little too frequently. It is a mildly entertaining book, but ultimately an unconvincing one. I simply couldn't get lost in the story.

Helm, the new Stephen Gould novel, is a huge disappointment. I loved his previous novels so much that I fell on this with glad cries of glee, but it turned out to be a routine and rather dull skiffy book with far too many detailed and long drawn out descriptions of Aikido contests.

Faced with global devastation, Earth sends colonies out to the stars in an attempt to perpetuate the race. The colonists are supplied with imprinting devices -- glass-like helmets that contain all of Earth's scientific knowledge. The colonists barely survive their landing on the new world. Much of the Earth technology is lost, destroyed in the crash. But one imprinting device remains. Once a generation, the heir undergoes rigorous training to prepare himself to absorb knowledge from the Helm and use it to successfully continue to lead the colony. As the book opens, the younger son of the current leader has, against all instructions, donned the helm -- the shock to his brain is almost overwhelming. He barely survives and it becomes imperative to fast track him through the training procedures. During his training, he falls in love with the daughter of his father's political rival.

You can probably write the rest of it yourself.

Mike Resnick's stories of Kirinyaga have been published piecemeal for almost ten years. Each separate story won many of science fiction's most prestigious awards. Now they have been put together into a fix-up novel and seeing them all together in one place, reading them as a coherent whole, makes me realise just what a wonderful *tour-de-force* of writing they are. Each story is like a facet of a diamond, sharp and polished and shiny, a lovely thing in its own right. But put all the facets together, create the diamond out of its constituent parts (as it were) and the jewel becomes infinitely richer for it. The sum of all the Kirinyaga stories is like that -- a jewel of incomparable beauty.

By the 22nd century the African nation of Kenya is a polluted sprawl of cities. The great animal herds of history are extinct, European crops grow on the savannahs, the nation is losing its identity. Koriba is a distinguished and educated man, a Kikuyu by birth, fiercely proud of his

heritage and disturbed to see it dying. He wants to preserve the old ways and the true culture of his people, the thing that makes them Kikuyu, that separates them from the other people of the Earth.

So he founds a colony on a terraformed planetoid which he names Kirinyaga (after the Kikuyu holy mountain). Here there is only the traditional Kikuyu lifestyle and modern influences are not allowed to intrude. The colony is run strictly according to historical and cultural practices; no exceptions are allowed. It is paradise, it is utopia.

But it isn't of course. And the examination of why it isn't and the ways in which the noble experiment fails are the reasons why this book is such a seminal work. It demonstrates the ephemeral nature of too rigorous an interpretation of cultural history. Rules that allow no exceptions (because our ancestors didn't do it that way) are far too rigid. This inflexibility becomes the colonists worst enemy, for their society (like all societies) attempts to evolve and change to meet the challenges of life. But change is not permitted and the conflict between the two requirements ends up destroying the very thing that the rigidity of the rules was designed to protect.

There are universal messages here for all cultural conservatives -- the comatose intellectual savants from the *academie francaise*, or religious fundamentalists of any persuasion at all, or Irish nationalists still seeking revenge for the ancient excesses of Oliver Cromwell, or Maori traditionalists trapped in a time warp a hundred and fifty or more years old. This book isn't really about the Kikuyu at all. It talks in universal symbols and that is the reason for its greatness.

Resnick has no answer for this paradox, of course for there is no answer; it is the way of the world. Instead he asks questions and gives warnings, as every great artist should. And along the way he tells a story that will wrench your heart strings.

Michael Flynn first came to my attention with a superb novel called **Firestar** which I discussed in an earlier article. Now a sequel to that novel has appeared. It is called **Rogue Star** and it is as wonderful as its predecessor. The last book ended with an expedition being sent to investigate an asteroid. The new book opens in the ship, the crew well on their way. However the bulk of the book takes place on Earth as Mariesa Van Huyten continues the political manipulations that add up to project Prometheus -- her master plan to protect the Earth from a collision with a rogue asteroid, and almost as a side effect to aid greatly with the social and scientific progress of the world as a whole. Few know her secret agenda -- but she has made a lot of friends and not a few enemies.

Interspersed between the dramatic events on Earth are vignettes that take place aboard the space ship as the crew approach the asteroid, land on it, explore it (and make some startling discoveries) and return to Earth. The book ends as it began -- with the spaceship, though this time at the end of its journey rather than the beginning.

The microcosm of the exploration of the asteroid is skilfully echoed in the macrocosm of Mariesa van Huyten's manoeuvrings. The parallels are quite overt. One of the spaceship crew remarks at the end of the book that "We aren't the same men that left [the Earth]". Similarly, Mariesa at the end is not the Mariesa of the beginning. There have been huge upheavals in her life, her career and the direction of project Prometheus...

Like far too many second books in a series, this one is partly a scene setter for the prefigured denouement that will be the third book. Certainly it does not stand alone. If you haven't read **Firestar** it probably won't mean much to you. But if you have read the earlier novel, this one will hold you enthralled.

On the strength of Flynn's two novels, I also indulged in a collection of his short stories. Like so many of these things they proved to be a mixed bunch. The title story (and by far the longest in

the book) was a brilliant tale that gripped my imagination. It is set in an alternate world in which America is a balkanised continent -- a land mass of small warring countries. Pennsylvania remains German speaking and largely isolated from its neighbours, though bitterly at war with them. A Pennsylvanian scout, returning from an expedition comes across a stranger in the forest; a man carrying much odd looking scientific equipment. The man is a time traveller from a future (and very different) America. But not only has he travelled through time, he has also travelled across the stream of history to (it transpires) several parallel worlds, this one being only the latest of many. He is hopelessly lost. All he wants is to return home, but he will never be able to do so.

The story is a poignant one. The misery of the lost traveller on the one hand and the realisation of what might have been on the other. Both the traveller and the Pennsylvanians have room for regret over lost opportunities, some large and some small. It is a brilliant and most moving tale.

The remaining stories in the book are all quite competent but they never really caught fire for me.

For my sins, I work with computers and for much of my career I have been a programmer. Steve McConnell's book **Code Complete** proclaims itself to be "...a practical handbook of software construction". It proved to be an immensely readable compendium of wisdom about the art of programming (for it *is* an art, not a science). Every serious programmer should read this one. It concentrates on the procedural languages and the procedural approach to program design and construction, but even you object oriented people will benefit from reading it (your classes all have procedural interiors and their instantiations are controlled externally from within procedural structures. Yes they are -- don't argue!).

Over the years, through very many very painful lessons learned as my programs crumbled around me and exhibited some unsuspected flaw, I have started to grope my way towards my own philosophy of program design. I have approaches and techniques that I use because (pragmatically) I have found that they work. I was pleased to find that many of these painfully acquired ideas corresponded very closely with the ideas developed in this book (everyone likes to have their prejudices confirmed, don't they?). However I had never really formulated my half-thought-out ideas with the clarity that Steve McConnell has demonstrated in his book, and neither had I realised the implications of what I was doing. I read this book in a state of acute intellectual excitement. I learned something new, useful and wholly wonderful in virtually every chapter. The book has *classic* written all over it. I was a good programmer before I read it; I am a better one now.

Edward Yourdon's **Death March** is a discussion of the type of computer project with which many of us are all too familiar. The under-funded, under-staffed project with such ridiculous specifications and lunatic deadlines that it is doomed to fail before it even starts. Everyone is expected to work (it sometimes seems) twenty four hours a day, seven days a week and still there is no chance of bringing this behemoth in on time and/or on budget. And association with the failure will look bad on your CV.

Yourdon discusses just why these projects exist at all, why they are so common (they are almost the norm in the industry), how to avoid working on them and what to do if you ever find yourself on one.

He talks about politics and about money, about personalities and about business realities. There are many amusing anecdotes about real death march projects that Yourdon and his friends have worked on.

And most unusually for an Edward Yourdon book, it doesn't turn half way through into a diatribe about how wonderful CASE tools are (I sometimes get the impression that Yourdon thinks that CASE is the cure for world hunger, poverty, AIDS, athletes foot and halitosis as well as helping

a little with mundane things like designing computer systems). Consequently the book remains consistently enjoyable, amusing and informative right to the very end. If you ever have been, are currently or are about to be involved in a death march project, this is the book for you.

I have never made any secret of my love for the novels of Sir Henry Rider Haggard and over the years I have managed to amass a fair few of them. Some, however have managed to elude me. Recently a friend filled one of the gaps on my bookshelf by finding me a copy of **Cleopatra;** a novel I last read at about age fourteen and which I haven't seen anywhere since. I devoured it luxuriously. Oh the high flown, heavily archaic language, the dire warnings, the dooms foretold and dooms withheld, the machinations of the gods and the love and the passion that seeks to defy death itself. All of this woven around the historically accurate (and very familiar) story of Cleopatra herself. Nobody could do this like Haggard; and his magic spell is as potent now as ever it was. I love it.

The late John Brunner had no illusions about his own writing. He knew what was good and what was merely make-work and he was never afraid to blow his own trumpet, usually (it must be admitted) with very good reason for many of his books were undeniably brilliant. Over a period of several years, at many British SF conventions I heard him talk about a massive work in progress of which he was inordinately proud. It was called (he told us) **The Great Steamboat Race** and it was a historical novel set in nineteenth century New Orleans. It was about the sprawling, brawling city itself, the times, the politics, the business, the haunting Mississippi river, the boats that sailed upon it and the people who crewed them. It was a huge novel, a definitive novel, his masterwork.

Well it finally appeared. Ballantine published it in 1983. It made no splash and it sank without trace. Few people ever knew it had been published and even fewer read it. It was (and it remains) Brunner's great, lost work.

It broke him. He had really loved that book, fought for that book, believed passionately in that book. The publishing failure left him a bitter and an angry man and he wrote nothing of significance for the rest of his life. Oh there were other novels, but they were light and frothy things written with half of his attention; just tossed of casually. They were never less than competent for Brunner was the consummate professional, but his heart wasn't in it any more. The great days were over and so were the great books.

I knew the book existed, but like most people I had never seen it (it went in and out of print frighteningly fast and there was no second edition as far as I know). And then, a couple of months ago I went to Sydney. We have recently moved to new offices in Sydney and I was looking forward to seeing them. I was quite impressed to discover that the offices were just across the road from a second hand book shop. And I was even more impressed to see, in pride of place, right in the centre of the window display, **The Great Steamboat Race**, by John Brunner.

Well it turned out to be a curate's egg. It is a vast novel with a huge cast of characters and a complex and convoluted story line. There are excellent vignettes within it, moments where the novel springs into vigorous life. But then it collapses again and the brief spark dies. I think Brunner was a victim of his own enthusiasm. He researched the novel in enormous depth (there is a long list of primary sources at the back of the book) and perhaps he researched it too much and became lost in the minutiae. The weight of its own significance and of its own huge detail overwhelms the book. Brunner let it run away with him. I think perhaps he was too close to it for too long. It was not the book that he thought it was. And that too is very sad. I so wanted this to be a great book, for the sake of a wonderful man who believed in it so passionately.

But it wasn't.

Isaac Asimov **Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare**

Jack Vance	**Ports of Call**
Harry Harrison	**Stars and Stripes Forever**
Jake Page	**Apacheria**
Stephen Gould	**Helm**
Mike Resnick	**Kirinyaga**
Michael Flynn	**Rogue Star**
Michael Flynn	**The Forest of Time and Other Stories**
Steve McConnell	**Code Complete**
Edward Yourdon	**Death March**
Sir Henry Rider Haggard	**Cleopatra**
John Brunner	**The Great Steamboat Race**

Fiji

***Phoenixine One-Hundred and Six**, June 1998*

A perk of my job is the necessity to travel to far away places with strange sounding names. There is something undeniably attractive about staying in expensive hotels and eating at gourmet restaurants every night secure in the knowledge that work will pick up the tab. So I was quite looking forward to going to Fiji.

Unfortunately there was a mosquito in the ointment. Fiji is currently suffering from a dengue fever outbreak -- mosquito repellent was obviously called for.

A friend in Holland and a quick search of the web convinced me that the only repellents worth a damn were those based on diethyltoluamide. My friend in Holland added that it also dried out the skin something rotten and recommended a powerful moisturiser as well. I hunted around the shelves of the pharmacy and chose an appropriate diethyltoluamide repellent in an attractive package. I queried the pharmacist about the skin drying effects, but she seemed to be so overcome by meeting someone who could say diethyltoluamide without stumbling over the syllables that she had to go and lie down to recover from the shock. I purchased a moisturiser cream anyway.

The trip to Fiji was undertaken in a state of sybaritic luxury since I spent some airpoints on an upgrade to business class. I drank champagne and played with the popup television in the armrest. What a shame there was nothing worth watching on it. Free gifts abounded -- a pair of socks to ease the feet, a mask to block out distracting light as one took a slight snooze, a zip up case full of aromatherapy gels and a toothbrush. Such decadence. All too soon we landed at Nadi airport.

About five seconds after disembarking from the aeroplane, before I'd even passed through the immigration check, I got bitten by a mosquito. Gloomily I waited for dengue fever to develop, but it must have been one of the rare fever-free mosquitoes, for nothing happened.

James Hawes writes intellectual, literary books. You can tell that because the dialogue is indicated by a leading hyphen instead of being inside quotation marks. Therefore, because the style is pretentious, all the literary and intellectual critics are allowed to read the books. As a consequence of this, the book covers positively drip with laudatory remarks about the humour, excitement, innovative style and subject matter of the novels. Perhaps these critics should go slumming more often; then they would realise that James Hawes really writes quite ordinary (though very entertaining and amusing) thrillers, just like a thousand others.

A White Merc With Fins is the story of an ageing layabout who plans to rob a bank in order to be able to live a comfortable retirement. **Rancid Aluminium** is a secret service story straight out of the **Boy's Own Paper** with cynicism by Len Deighton and John Le Carré.

Both are actually remarkably entertaining, despite their pretensions to literary grandeur. The plots creak with cliché but the treatment saves them. Hawes has dragged up a convincing cast of eccentric characters and scattered the obligatory gratuitous sex scenes liberally throughout both books. Though they are formulaic, the books are never dull. But they are nowhere near as rib-tickingly funny or as significant as the cover blurbs would imply.

I was staying in a hotel called Raffles, just across the road from Nadi airport. Despite its name, it was slightly less than luxurious. The wastepaper basket in my room was a cardboard box lined with newspaper. Written in black magic marker on the side was the name of the hotel (presumably to discourage me from stealing the box). The tiles in the shower were so grubby that the soles of my feet were dirtier when I left the shower than they had been when I entered it, though this was hard to prove conclusively for the bulb in the bathroom light blew up on my first day and never got replaced.

The hotel's policy on servicing the bathroom was mildly eccentric. When I arrived I had a full complement of two bath towels, two facecloths a bathmat and a hand towel. Two days later my bath mat disappeared, never to return, and I was down to one bath towel and one facecloth, presumably because there was only one of me. My hand towel had vanished, but it reappeared twenty four hours later and I deduced that hand towels were allowed only on alternate days.

On Thursday evening I arrived back at the hotel to find that my room had been serviced with unusual determination and viciousness -- not a scrap of bathroom equipment was to be seen. No towels, no facecloths, no bathmat (of course) and no soap. The bathroom looked strangely naked. I phoned reception and about half an hour later two bath towels and a hand towel arrived and I finally got to take my evening shower. There being no soap, I washed from head to foot in shampoo. An hour later my soap ration was delivered. Ah well.

John Dunning has hit upon a formula so obvious and yet so clever that a myriad of writers must now be kicking themselves for not having thought of it first. It really is one of those obvious in retrospect things.

The hero of the novels is Cliff Janeway, a tough, book-loving homicide detective. In the first story, **Booked to Die**, he is pursuing a psychopath called Jackie Newton who he is convinced has committed several murders but who has always managed to evade conviction. Events reach such a crisis after the murder of a vagrant and the brutal beating of Newton's girl friend that Janeway loses control and hands out some summary justice of his own to Jackie Newton. While very satisfying in the short term, it is the kiss of death for Janeway's job and he has to resign from the police force. However one advantage of this mid-life change of career is that Janeway now has time to indulge in his great love and passion -- the buying and selling and collecting of books. He opens a bookstore and soon the bookscouts are bringing him books to

sell. But they have information to sell as well -- the vagrant who died was a bookscout; he made a precarious living searching for first editions in charity shops and market stalls. Janeway is still a detective inside and he follows the trails that are opened up for him. The game is still afoot.

Dunning tells a traditional hard-boiled tale but throughout it he scatters fascinating snippets of book-lovers lore. Anybody with the least feeling for the beauty and attraction of books will love this story. For a rabid bibliophile such as me it proved quite unputdownable.

The second novel, **The Bookman's Wake** continues the formula as before. Janeway is lured into acting briefly as a bounty hunter. He travels to Seattle to bring back a fugitive wanted for assault, burglary and the possible theft of a rare edition of Edgar Allan Poe's **The Raven.** The book is a first edition published by a small press that is now defunct. The publishing house went out of business when its owner and his brother died in a mysterious fire many years before. Books from this publisher are rare and much sought after.

The fugitive turns out to be a young woman called Eleanor Rigby who is an enormously talented bookscout. Janeway finds her intriguing, the more so when he learns of her family's connection with the small press publisher of **The Raven**. There is more going on here than meets the eye. There are publishing secrets so valuable that they are worth killing for.

Again the arcana of book collecting suffuse and illuminate the whole novel. We are also introduced to the actual mechanics of book production, all the way from font design to the choice of paper, boards and glue. God is in the details and the details are utterly enthralling. But Dunning does not lose touch with the story he is telling and the mysteries and thrills lead inexorably to a most unexpected climax and resolution.

Never before has a love of books been put to such good use.

My Fijian breakfast was outside in the Palm Court dining area close to the pool. A selection of fresh fruit looked somewhat sad. The pineapple was obviously tinned and I didn't care much for the ants scurrying around the display case. A ramrod straight and very dignified waiter enquired "Some toast for you my friend?" He had a smiley face tattooed on his left arm. I had corn flakes, but they were stale.

The hotel restaurant provided dinner in the evening. The menu was limited but surprisingly well prepared and presented. The ubiquitous kokoda was as good as any I have tasted and the vegetable samosas were delicious (though the pickled green chillies provided as a condiment were skull shattering).

Every night the resident trio of musicians went around each table in turn and sang a personal song to the diners. The principal guitarist had trade union stickers all over his guitar. I couldn't help thinking of the trio as Fijian Mariachis, and the surrealism of that idea made me want to laugh -- but they wouldn't have understood my mirth, and might have felt insulted and so I controlled myself. They were very talented musicians and singers and I looked forward keenly to my nightly serenade.

The hotel bar was in the open air and thus my evenings were spent well anointed with repellent as I sipped my Fiji Bitter and the mosquitoes gorged on more attractive flesh. However there are places on the body that one tends not to anoint and I was appalled on one visit to the toilet to find a bold mosquito zeroing in on just such a place. Fortunately a skilful combination of manual and penile dexterity allowed me to drown it in mid air. I remain inordinately proud of this feat.

Frederik Pohl has taken a rest from the trilogy he is currently working on and has published a stand alone novel called **O Pioneer!** The hero, the unfortunately named Evesham Giyt, is a computer hacker making a nice living for himself milking money from corporate networks and dreaming of long gone frontiers and hardy pioneers of the past. Then he falls in love with and

marries an ex-prostitute called Rina. A drastic lifestyle change is called for and the couple migrate to the colony world of Tupelo. Rather to their surprise (the advertising material on Earth had given no hint) he and Rina find that five other alien races are also involved in colonising Tupelo. Human beings are only the latest arrivals.

Giyt is elected Mayor of the human colony and thus has much contact with the alien races, particularly in the regular council meetings but also in his social life as well. It starts to become obvious that there are deep political waters here and that humanity may have its own agenda for the planet and the alien races and Giyt himself appears to be merely an unwilling pawn in these machinations.

This is a most impressive and enjoyable novel -- one of the best that Pohl has produced for many a year. He has done his research very well indeed and his picture of Giyt as a hacker can be read by a modern day computer professional (me) with nothing but nods of agreement. Pohl uses technical terms in exactly the right contexts and his extrapolations of contemporary computer trends are fascinating and insightful. I wish I could say the same of some other SF writers, many of whom treat the vocabulary of computers with contempt and the machines themselves as magic marvels capable of any feat at the click of a mouse. Pohl makes neither of these elementary errors and his book is the richer for it.

The aliens are also most inventive. It says much for Pohl's skill that he can imagine five utterly distinct races, each with their own motivations and sociological imperatives (six if you count the humans) and make them at one and the same time understandable in human terms and yet completely alien and outside of our experience. The alien-human-alien interactions provide the mechanisms that propel the plot -- but they are so much more than merely plot devices, as they must be if the book is to be anything but formulaic. The old grand master is at the height of his powers here. Age has not diminished him at all.

Fiji contains more than its fair share of revolting wild life. One evening I returned to my room to find something huge and black with enormous wings and far too many legs breast stroking backwards and forwards with evident enjoyment across my toilet bowl.

There was no way I was going to bare my bum to that! It had to go. I flushed mightily, but it did no good. This Olympic class insect appeared to revel in the unexpected water sports and employed a particularly inventive backstroke as it breasted the waves with ease. More elaborate weapons were obviously required.

I draped toilet paper across the bowl and its unwelcome occupant. Several layers of paper criss-crossed the water. The paper heaved as the trapped insect pushed upwards, struggling to escape. I flushed again and water rushed into the bowl pushing the edges of the paper down and under the surface, wrapping the insect securely. The bug parcel then slithered down the pipe taking its occupant with it. A faint scream echoed in my ears, but it might have been me making it.

Philip José Farmer has been silent for a long time (perhaps the fact that he is 80 years old has something to do with it) but the wait has been worth while. **Nothing Burns in Hell** is not a science fiction novel, it is a private eye detective novel, but it still has the distinctive Farmer touch.

The novel is set in Peoria, where Farmer himself lives. Corbie is a private eye married to a wiccan called Glinna who will only sleep with him when the stars are propitious. There are crystal balls and pyramids arranged in hexagrams under the bed in order to focus the most intense sexual energy. Corbie claims to be so conditioned that he can't drive past a crystal shop without getting a hard on.

Corbie is hired to witness an illegal transfer of money in a cemetery. The transaction goes

bloodily wrong. One of the villains has cancerous growths sprouting like tendrils from his around his mouth. In a fight with the woman who hired Corbie, one of the tendrils is bitten off (to the accompaniment of great cries of pain and much blood). Later Corbie finds the tumour lying like a worm near the gravestone where the fight took place. He chases the villains and ends up a prisoner of the tendrilled man, his brother and the enormously fat wife they share; truly a gruesome hillbilly threesome. Tortures and humiliations (lovingly described) are heaped upon him and murder is about to be done. But Corbie escapes, wounding the villain most cruelly with a snapping turtle.

It is unclear just what is going on (and why) but Corbie now has a motive to get to the bottom of this business. Greed, venality, hatred and noisy neighbours are Corbie's constant companions. The body count (and the mutilations) mount steadily. This is pure pulp fiction, no punches pulled and no holds barred. Gruesome and funny by turns, and definitely not for the weak of stomach, it is a very powerful and very odd book.

It is by Philip José Farmer, after all.

Work finished on Friday and I wasn't due to fly home until Sunday. I had a whole day free to do the tourist thing. I booked a cruise to Malamala, an uninhabited island, total surface area about six acres. You can walk around the entire island in about ten minutes (I timed myself).

On arrival the boat crew gave us a traditional Fijian welcome and served yaqona (kava). It looks and tastes rather like dirty dishwater and contains a narcotic that numbs the mouth. If you drink enough, the numbness spreads across the face and over the body. It is traditionally drunk sitting down since the numbness prevents you from standing up. It is an extract from the root of a local variety of pepper plant and the very best kava is prepared in the traditional way by toothless old women who chew the root and spit into a communal bowl. This extract is then diluted with water and drunk with great ceremony. In deference to the sensibilities of their guests, our crew prepared the drink from dried kava root -- not a spitting old lady to be seen. I felt vaguely disappointed.

The slang name for kava is "grog". In Nadi I saw a kava bar -- it was called "The Olde Grogge Shoppe".

I left the other cruise people to their own devices and went over to the opposite side of the island to be alone. I sat beneath a palm tree and sipped a cold beer. The only sound was the gentle lapping of the waves on the beach. I watched the fierce sunlight dance across the waves. On the horizon more islands beckoned mysteriously. The sense of utter solitude and complete isolation and tranquillity was restful and relaxing. It seemed the world had gone away. I emptied my mind and let the tensions drain.

I rejoined the rest of the group and we went out on a glass bottomed boat to view the coral. An enormous brain coral sprawled and vivid blue fish swam hither and yon. A baby shark swam innocently by and I saw a furiously bustling jellyfish with a purple centre.

The boat moved further out to the edge of the reef and some of the group went snorkelling. One of the boat crew threw bread into the water and the sea boiled as hundreds of zebra striped fish appeared seemingly from nowhere to gorge upon the bread. A young snorkeller found herself in the middle of the shoal and she giggled uncontrollably as they tickled her in their feeding frenzy.

When the snorkellers returned to the boat they were all scratching furiously. The water was aswarm with sea lice and as we headed back to shore the people began to develop red lumps.

The next day I flew home and the violently abrupt contrast between the world I returned to and the world I left was shocking. Much of Sunday was spent in the office and it was hard to believe that only the day before I had done a most romantic thing. I had walked alone around an

uninhabited Pacific island. It satisfied a lifetime ambition; R. M. Ballantyne eat your heart out!

James Hawes	**A White Merc With Fins**
	Rancid Aluminium
John Dunning	**Booked to Die**
	The Bookman's Wake
Frederik Pohl	**O Pioneer!**
Philip José Farmer	**Nothing Burns in Hell**