

## Archive I:

### Down by the Old Slipstream

Arthur D. Hlavaty, 206 Valentine Street,  
Yonkers, NY 10704-1814. 914-965-4861.

hlavaty@panix.com

<<http://www.livejournal.com/users/supergee/>>

<<http://www.maroney.org/hlavaty/>>

© 2018 by Arthur D. Hlavaty. Staff: Bernadette Bosky, Kevin J. Maroney, Shekinah Dax, and the Valentine's Castle Rat Pack. Permission to reprint in any nonprofit publication is hereby granted, on condition that I am credited and sent a copy.

**This is a new idea. If I do more of these, they will go to efanazines but may not be sent postally or as .txt files. If you want to stay on either mailing list for these, please reply. Nice Distinctions will continue as before.**

I've been doing this stuff for 40 years; many of my friends have never lived in a world without my zines in it. And so it seems time to dig up some of the old writings.

When I entered fandom, back in the '70s, I wanted to invent slipstream. I thought there should be a word for "the kind of nifty stuff Pynchon & Sladek do." Unfortunately I didn't think of a good one, so I had to wait for someone else to. Here's some of what I wrote about it.

### Barrington J. Bayley

Philip K. Dick is dead. ~~No, he's outside, looking in.~~ A friend called up the other night to announce that he'd heard that Dick had checked out of consensus reality with a stroke.

I mourn him as the inventor of what is now my favorite kind of sf—the philosophical kind. The emphasis on him as a drug writer has always been a misleading form of sensationalism. I suspect that none of the many people who describe *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (perhaps his masterpiece) as "the ultimate acid book" have ever tried acid. Dick's subjects are more like metaphysics and ontology. There is little agreement as to which of his books are the best--indeed, I do not always agree with myself on this matter--but *Time out of Joint*, *Ubik*, *Eye in the Sky*, and *A Maze of Death* remain in my mind.

Dick leaves a couple of heirs to his tradition. One is my old pal Rudy Rucker, whose *Software* I recommended last installment. The other is a man

who gets a whole lot less recognition than I for one think he deserves: Barrington J. Bayley.

Bayley is an unusual writer in a variety of ways. One can see him as a strange sort of amphibian, in that he has been most published by *New Worlds* and by DAW. He is not a writer one seeks out for literary merit, characterization, elegant prose, adventure, or sex. If anything, he can be compared with writers such as Clement, Niven, and Hogan,\* who seek to do only one thing in their sf. But while the others speculate scientifically, Bayley deals with philosophical and spiritual questions, matters of the essence of reality.

Bayley has been largely concerned with the nature of Time in his writings, and perhaps his two best books until now, *Collision Course* and *The Fall of Chronopolis*, presented new approaches to this problem. More recently, he has incorporated such occult studies as Gnosticism, alchemy, and the Tarot in his work. A recent collection, *The Knights of the Limits*, offered a variety of remarkable inventions.

His latest, *The Pillars of Eternity* (DAW pb), may be his best. He pulls together a number of themes from his past writing, adds some new and startling possibilities, and ties them all together into a satisfying resolution. If you like philosophical sf, don't miss this one. [1982]

\*In 1982 James Hogan was considered a hard-science writer, rather than a crank.

### Robert Coover

One thing I am now devoting my time to is a writing assignment that I eagerly sought: doing the Masterplots summary of *The Public Burning*, by Robert Coover. I am of course filled with ambivalence about the job. I am getting paid to write about one of the masterpieces of our time, a book that delighted me the first time, and now again in rereading, and my task is to protect the youth of America from having to read it themselves. I certainly will mention that this is a book where God, rather than the Devil, is in the details, and you want to read the whole thing because it's full of Good Parts. For those who don't know, it is centered on the Julius & Ethel Rosenberg case, imagining their execution turned into a public show in Times Square, that being what was really called for to match the hysteria and loathing the case aroused. Half of the story is Gringo Magic Realism, featuring an incarnated superhero Uncle Sam, battling a personification of World Com-

munism known as the Phantom; the other half is a pursuit of the elusive facts of the case, narrated by one of the lesser participants in the consensus-reality version, Richard Nixon. (Coover did a remarkable job of making Nixon human, which some would say is more than the Creator managed.) The atmosphere of fanatical punitive rage that the book presents does not seem at all unrealistic as I reread the book today. When suitable time has passed, a new artist with Coover's gift for imaginative exaggeration may present a mythic tale of 1998's madness, perhaps entitled *The Public Bobbitizing*. [1998]

---

I've done my essay on *The Public Burning*. Rereading it, I am reminded that, contrary to what many people believe, it is not a book that states or presupposes the innocence of the Rosenbergs. That is a good thing because if I had to put money on it, I'd say they were guilty. I am more convinced than not by Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton's *The Rosenberg File*, which made a good case for their guilt, and there is more evidence in that direction now.

What happened to the Rosenbergs, whether they actually took information or not, is that they got caught up in the kind of mythical struggle between gigantic forces that the book describes and (only somewhat) exaggerates. Americans believed that we alone had the Bomb, and then it turned up in the hands of the Russians, a nation we had been told had barely mastered fire. The official story was that the Secret was stolen, as one could steal a gun, and given to people who probably had to be instructed as to which end to point away from themselves. That of course is not how such things work. (John W. Campbell jr., who was briefly suspected of Stealing the Secret, or at least knowing too much, wrote extensively on this question, and Harry Harrison turned it into fiction in *The Daleth Effect*.) In the narratives most of us live in most of the time, the Rosenbergs probably would have been convicted and sent to jail. In the great melodrama they found themselves in (and in some ways enjoyed participating in), they had to die.

In any event, the book is even better the second time around. I'm still not terribly fond of the Uncle Sam stuff, which reminds me of all those tedious nineteenth-century "humorists" like Artemus Ward, but if you like that sort of thing, Coover does it well. The contemporary reactions, like Jack Benny and the Marx Brothers doing bits about the case, are

brilliantly imagined. And the Nixon chapters fascinate me even more the second time around. Coover's Nixon, like the real one, is in many ways a wretched person, consumed by a desire for power for its own sake, but he's a human one, and his endless efforts to figure out the mess he's in are enthralling. At one point he muses that he and Eisenhower had both longed to be railroad engineers when they were young, but he had the fantasy because he knew he was supposed to, while Eisenhower would actually have wasted his life in a job like that. One thing I hadn't noticed as much the first time is the dreamlike quality of Nixon's story, from the endless complications and occasional confusions of identity to his repeated inability to pull his pants up.

This is actually a book that I enjoyed even more after I'd read a critical theory about it. Before the book was written, Mikhail Bakhtin came up with the theory of the Dialogic Novel, in which the single omnipotent storyteller is replaced by a Babel of different voices, leaving the reader to decide what is true. That's a good way to read *The Public Burning*. Even within the confines of the book, we do not get to say with any certainty whether the Rosenbergs Did It. (Another book that can be read that way is John Brunner's masterpiece, *Stand on Zanzibar*.)

Oh, and I took a break from the assignment to read Martin Garbus's *Tough Talk*, a memoir of his work as a First Amendment attorney. It turns out that he was briefly the lawyer for Coover when the Rosenbergs' sons threatened to sue for libel. (They settled for a charity contribution from the publisher.) When I read his description of the book, I said, in some panic, "I don't remember *that*." ("*That*" being a scene where Nixon achieves his goal, or close to it, with Ethel Rosenberg.) Looking back, however, I am reassured that I don't remember it because it wasn't there. Other than that, though, the Garbus book is good. [1998]

### **James Drought**

James Drought set out to be a writer and was rebuffed by Creative Writing profs, publishers, et al., and so he went into some utterly nonliterary business where he made enough money to return to his first love. He set up his own publishing house, Skylight Press; published a half-dozen of his own books; and began selling them to college bookstores. Remarkably enough, it worked. His books gained an underground reputation, and

finally several were reprinted in mass-market paperback by Avon and Fawcett, and one, *The Gypsy Moths*, even became a movie.

The books, perhaps unsurprisingly, focused on the individual at war with the usual powerful forces. The quality varied. One, *The Secret*, struck me as a powerful statement of that final and sometimes oppressive truth that there are very many of Them and only one of Me. At the other end was *The Enemy*, which I considered megalomaniac rubbish: An apparently unwitting parody of Ayn Rand's architect hero whines about how he was the greatest architect ever, but the nasty old Establishment prevented people from seeing the beauty and utility of spherical houses.

The last I'd heard from Drought was in 1968. He'd written and published a book with the anagrammatic title of *Drugoth* (a good one, if memory serves). Then there was an ad from Skylight Press, saying that *Drugoth II* had been printed in an edition of one copy, which the author was keeping. That did not strike me as a positive indicator of Drought's mental condition, and when I did not hear from him again, I concluded that, to put the best face on it, the Oppressive Establishment had claimed another victim.

But Drought lives. The latest *Small Press Review* has arrived with a front-page review of a new Drought book, *So Long Chicago*, published in 1982 by good old Skylight Press. The adulatory review, by one Arthur Winfield Knight, says that Drought has been producing books all along, and tells us, but does not show us, that he has taken up writing humorously. My curiosity is aroused. I will now see if I can find any recent Drought, as he always was interesting and always promised to write something major. [1983]

[Never did find anything new by him. *Contemporary Authors* tells me he's dead.]

### **Umberto Eco**

It is known that every so often a book with genuine literary merit appears on the bestseller list. For things to be otherwise would imply a greater amount of discrimination than the reading public is capable of. This year's is *The Name of the Rose*, by semioticist Umberto Eco. The book is a major structure, like *Ulysses* or at least *Gravity's Rainbow*, dealing with philosophy, theology, semantics, politics, and history; offering allusions, puzzles, lists, and paradoxes. It is a mystery, centered around a series of murders in a monastery, and

there is a detective, a signifying monk named Brother William, who uses the logical methods of Aristotle and the empirical approach of Roger Bacon to find his way through the labyrinth of clues. Sometimes the allusions seem a bit heavy-handed (there is an old, blind monk named Jorge of Burgos), and sometimes the web seems a bit too tangled (as with the complexities of a variety of heretical doctrines being discussed), but this book opens a fascinating world. [1983]

### **Randall Garrett**

One of my favorite alternate realities is Randall Garrett's Angevin Empire. In this richly imagined world a detective named Lord Darcy—who lacks magical ability, but makes up for it with the sort of skillful reasoning Sherlock Holmes made famous—solves murder mysteries. Garrett almost always set these problems up with great ingenuity. He followed all the rules of classic mystery, as well as the main rule of fantasy/science fiction mysteries: The solution shall not depend on powers and technologies unknown in our world (or at least shall not bring in such devices at the last minute).

*Too Many Magicians* is set at a sorcerers' conference, and along with a nonmagically explained locked room puzzle and enjoyable characterization, there are in-jokes, puns, etc. (One character has an uncle from Man, and it gets worse.) There are resemblances to other characters from other works; Lord Darcy's best-known detecting rival, the Marquis of London, is a stout fat, sedentary orchid grower, who has his legwork done by Lord Bontrionphe (French for *good win*). Garrett produced three books set in the Angevin Empire.... Then, alas, he suffered a brain infection that ended his writing career.

The books went out of print, but some of us remembered them and were cheered to hear that Ace Books was planning to continue the series, with Michael Kurland doing the writing.

This year, shortly after the death of Garrett's body, Ace published the first of Kurland's Lord Darcy novels, *Ten Little Wizards*. Was it too much to expect that, with a new author, the books would still have some of the brilliance, imagination, wit, and charm of the originals?

Yes. [1988]

### **Arthur Hailey & Lawrence Sanders**

There's a new Lawrence Sanders book out: *The Loves of Harry Dancer* (Berkley pb). Sanders has been turning out books with complex plot, snappy dialogue, and interesting characters since *The Anderson Tapes*. Now he's done a spy book in the Le Carré mode, with schemes and betrayals; when everything seems clear, there's another turn of the screw, and the two sides are not the usual ones. I enjoyed it, though it's written in a kind of Bestseller Terse:

Present tense. Sentence fragments. Few modifiers. Finish the book. Put it away.

Take out *Strong Medicine*.

And he found himself in a changed environment. Not only had the narration moved into the more traditional past tense, but the sentences were getting fuller, not merely grammatically correct, but packed with lumps of exposition, as he began reading the new Dell paperback by Arthur Hailey, the best-selling Canadian novelist who had retired from writing after six blockbusters and then returned to tell a tale of the drug business (pharmaceutical, rather than recreational) filled with lovable characters who explain things at great length to each other with occasional interruptions for bits of mundane business that allegedly add verisimilitude. The stewardess asked for his order, and he selected Diet Sprite.

The book is moderately amusing, but worse written than the Sanders, even though it's closer to the rules of formal grammar. On the very first page, one allegedly literate character asks another not to make him nauseous. If anyone made him so, it's the author. [1985]

### **Michael Kandel**

Speaking of long-awaited and promise and stuff like that, Michael Kandel's first novel, *Strange Invasion*, comes to us burdened with a great potential. Kandel has been the English translator of many of Stanislaw Lem's novels, and, given the sort of wordplay that Lem engages in, translating requires skill and even a certain amount of creativity.

I found the book disappointing in a distinctively literary way. Kandel begins well, with a premise worthy of Philip K Dick: warnings of extraterrestrial invasion coming to a man who

suffers from hallucinations because he's used to dealing with that sort of thing. The first few invasions themselves, such as the Marxist bugs, are amusing. But before long, the damned thing turns whimsical. We have a series of more or less amusing incidents, but they are piled on top of one another, with no development or resolution. The book stops, or perhaps runs down, rather than ending. [1989]

### **C.M. Kornbluth**

For years I have been praising NESFA Press for its services to the science-fiction community, notably its collections of the work of important writers in danger of being forgotten. They've done it again with *His Share of Glory*, a massive hardcover compendium of the short fiction of C.M. Kornbluth, which I urge one and all to purchase.

Kornbluth was one of the archetypal 50s *Galaxy* writers, mixing sharp social satire with understanding and compassion for individuals. Like most of the sf writers of his time, he was best at the shorter lengths. His novels ramble; the best of them, *The Syndic*, probably has within it a classic novelette. He died far too young; like many people, he had a taste for those concentrated white powders that give pleasure at first but eventually destroy the body (in his case, salt and sugar). Having tried giving up his self-destructive vices, he decided that a short life with them was better than a longer life without them. (As a reader, I selfishly resent this decision, but not having been him, I am not competent to insist that he was wrong.) He still managed to leave an impressive body of work, and NESFA has shown its usual thoroughness in assembling this book.

Kornbluth has an image as a cold, nasty person, but this collection clearly shows the opposite, in stories like "With These Hands" and "The Altar at Midnight." He was a cantankerous man, and he appears to have had a mixture of guilt and furtive pride in his failings that magnified those in the eyes of observers, as it no doubt did in his own.

But of course much of Kornbluth's negative image comes from an infamous story called "The Marching Morons." To me, "Morons," like James Tiptree, jr.'s "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" is a cautionary tale about the horrors that will follow if this goes on, but one that is viewed by unsympathetic readers as, "Hoo, boy, let's kill 'em all!" (An example of the rage and bile the story can

inspire is D. West's diatribe in *Foundation* about 10 years ago.)

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if Kornbluth had never written "Morons" or had decided to preserve his reputation by not publishing it. Then we would still have its central idea, but presented only as a secondary motif in an even better story ("The Little Black Bag"), and we would have a kinder, gentler image of its author. I do think that anyone who reads "Morons" should be required to read "Gomez" (a delightful story anyway), if only to see that Kornbluth was the kind of elitist who knows that the dark-skinned dishwasher speaking broken English might be one of the elite. [1997]

### **Keith Laumer**

Keith Laumer can be described with moderate unfairness as the author of a large number of books in which the good guy punches the crap out of the bad guys until he gets what he wants. There is one group of them, e.g., *A Plague of Demons*, in which the hero awakens to discover that the aliens have taken over the Earth. So he punches the crap out of a bunch of people until he gets to a rocket ship back to the aliens' home planet, whereupon he punches the crap out of a whole bunch of them until they make him Ruler of the Universe. Another series is the Retief books. Retief is a lower assistant on a diplomatic mission under the direction of a stuffed-shirt striped-pants type who usually bears some sort of cleverly satirical name like Shitface. Shitface, ever gullible, is about to conclude some manner of treaty with the Space Gooks in which Earth is going to be ripped off. Retief walks into a bar and finds out what's really going on, whereupon he—aww, you're way ahead of me. Anyway, Earth is saved, and Shitface gets the credit. Sometimes, as in some of the Retief stories and a delightful romp called *The Monitors*, the process is leavened with genuine wit. Sometimes it is not.

Laumer has, however, written two books in which I feel that he transcends himself. *The Long Twilight* has some mythic resonances that kept it in my mind long after I had read it. But perhaps his most remarkable work is a novel called *Night of Delusions*, which can perhaps best be summarized as a Chandler or Hammett protagonist going through a fascinating series of alternate realities. I'm afraid I can't resist calling it hardboiled Dick. [1982]

### **James Arpad Michaels**

James Arpad Michaels was an uncle figure to many sf readers. He'd used that term himself in his Worldcon GoH speech, where he said that sf writers are among the uncles of the world; fathers rule and mothers nurture, but uncles amuse, enlighten, and instruct, not always responsibly. (He even told the story of the kindly uncle getting the obnoxious adolescent out of everyone's hair by teaching him how to masturbate.)

He was born in 1927. After a few attempts at a serious career (teaching, Mad Ave.), he began selling stories to the magazines in the 50s and was able to survive as a writer.

He published in a lot of places, but his combination of vision and smart-ass fit in perfectly at *Galaxy*. His first published collection, *Beatniks in Space*, is made up entirely of *Galaxy* stories (removing the Golden showers that had been meant to improve the flavor), most of which still hold up. It was a time when the sf market was beginning to accept stories with sex in them as long as the sex was essential to the plot, and Michaels, like many others, applied all of his science-fictional imagination to making it essential.

His first novels, *The Long Haul* and *Time in Thy Flight*, are fairly minor works, but he hit his stride with *Natives*, in which visiting aliens anthropologically condescend to a primitive planet where the aborigines haven't outgrown sexual exclusiveness and use the wrong intoxicants. It won a cult following that started in the 60s and continues today (with me, for instance). *Space Corps* won a Hugo, but hasn't aged well; there is something overwhelmingly 60s about it, from the universal dope smoking to the women who want to be strong and independent but also show lots of T & A. (In some ways, it resembled a popular TV show of the time, but it dared to boldly go somewhat further, with things like the aforementioned dope smoking and different-race and same-sex couples, and it got more metaphysical.)

When Essex House started, he was one of the first to sign up, writing *The Marvelous Device* and *Hoodoo Man*, which have recently returned to print without removal of their lurid specificities. His *Dangerous Visions* story postulated that racial, religious, and national bigotry had vanished to the point where the former ethnic slurs were job titles. The punch line is that people now discriminate by astrological sign. As he said in the original afterword, "They always told me that it's possible

to express any idea, no matter how shocking, in acceptable language. Here I've done the reverse: say something that everyone believes, or professes to believe, as offensively as possible." A few years later, he admitted that he wished he'd thought to include sexual stereotypes.

It's been said that his Seventies books were either too ambitious or not ambitious enough, though there's good stuff in all of them. I tend to agree. At this point, he wrote relatively little rockets-and-space fiction, turning to writing about internal worlds. He studied magick. (Aleister Crowley and L. Ron Hubbard—the latter always at least somewhat disguised—turn up as ambiguous figures who Know Stuff, but also Know Stuff that isn't so.)

There's the amusing *Playboy* story "The Sorrows of Priapus," about a Witch putting a spell on a fundamentalist minister, such that he becomes erect every time the subject of homosexuality is mentioned. I've always liked its opening line: "Reverend Elmer Hatfield had never known that he was hung like a horse." (For that matter, I like the conclusion. Rev. Hatfield finally agrees to exorcism from a Papist—a South American who believes in liberation theology. He then remains flaccid through a lengthy discussion on male-male practices, but when he hears, "They believe that the working class should own the means of production..."—you guessed it.) He also started including Tuckerizations and intertextualities; the Maguffin in one book is a Martian slime-tip.

He had one really good shot left. In some ways his best book was *P.C. Rider*, a near-future tale that satirized not only the lefty statists and religious rightists he and so many others had been zinging in book after book, but also the heroic entrepreneurs who had usually been protagonists. One inspiration for it was a vicious essay by British critic Winston Mathers that seemed to blame Michaels for everything evil in American sf: technophilia, power madness, moral simplicity, lack of affect, pleasing the readers, stories that end instead of running down, everything. He said things like, "The heroes in a Michaels story are adolescents; the villains are adults, described as fathers or mothers," "His characters are sensual, rather than sensuous; they fuck a lot, but they don't seem to enjoy the physical world in any other ways," and "He sees the world as a problem to be solved, with science or with weaponry." My reaction to the review was a few grudging "Score one"s, a few "Missed again"s, and

the odd "You say that as if there were something wrong with it." Apparently, Uncle Jim agreed.

There are three sorts of response to Mathers in *P.C. Rider*. Most obviously, there is the leftist villain, a woman named Winnie Mars who suffers an obvious case of juvenile-onset yentaism and wishes to make everyone Grow Up. There are the replies to Mathers's misprisions, like the book's Wise Old Man saying, "Weapons are the solution to an extremely limited set of problems and the cause of a lot more." Finally, there is Mathers's remark that Michaels villains are Fathers and Mothers. Michaels runs with that in the book's imagery, although typically for him he includes male Mothers and female Fathers.

After that he wrote a few minor works. The sharecropped Old Adversaries series has its moments, and *Valhalla* is an amusing treatment of the good old fictional-heroes-meet theme, set of course in Westchester. I was particularly amused by the chapter entitled "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie." [other timeline]

### **Robert Silverberg**

There have been various times in the last ten years when people have asked me questions—about best science fiction books or books I would want on a desert island—and I have been tempted to name a nonexistent book. But what is science fiction about, if not about nonexistent things beginning to exist? Indeed, that nonexistent book has come into existence. It is *Beyond the Safe Zone*, by Robert Silverberg, recently published in hardcover by Donald I. Fine.

It is my belief that in the late 1960s and early 1970s Robert Silverberg turned out a body of work unparalleled in the history of science fiction for its combination of quality and quantity. There were almost a dozen of the novels that should be included in any history of the genre. There was *To Live Again*, with its remarkable technological version of possession and reincarnation. There was *Downward to the Earth*, with its theme of rebirth and redemption. There was that remarkable allegory, *Son of Man*. There was *The Stochastic Man*, which in its own way prefigured Stephen King's *The Dead Zone*, while presenting as persuasive an image of precognition as I've ever read. There was *Dying Inside*, which took the standard Jewish Confessional novel of the sort Philip Roth and Saul Bellow do, and made it truly science-fictional. And many more, just as good.

At the same time, Silverberg was producing even more short stories and novelettes, other views of the same great themes as his novels. The nonexistent book that I wanted to take to a nonexistent desert island (if I had to go there) was a collection of the best of those stories, and that is what *Beyond the Safe Zone* is.

The stories deal with the themes that we know Silverberg for: longevity/immortality, telepathy, alternate worlds. They talk about sex in ways that were not permissible before then, but are rarely "Hoo boy, now I can say this; now I can describe that!"

The stories are often set on other planets or bizarre technofutures, but the main scene is always Inner Space, the main emphasis is always what it is like, from the inside, to be a human being living in these worlds. The imagery, the sights these characters see, is bright and clear. Some of the stories are told straightforwardly. Others are experimental, modular, stripped of transitions and connections, evidence for a literary version of the theory that the best abstract painters are those who first learned to draw a cow that looks like a cow. Specifically:

"Trips" is sort of a condensed novel, all the ideas of passing between parallel worlds stated or implied in a space of twenty-seven pages. "You're not home."

"Ishmael in Love" is a story that has the chutzpah to begin, "Call me Ishmael. All human beings who know me do," and is good enough to get away with it.

"The Science Fiction Hall of Fame" and "Schwartz between the Galaxies" are recursive fictions, the former portraying a contemporary sf reader and the mental and physical worlds he inhabits, while the latter gives us a not unsatisfactory future world, contrasted with dreams of greater ones.

"MS. Found in an Abandoned Time Machine" is, as some of Ballard's work has been accused of being, a nonstory construct. Like Ballard's best stories, but in its own way, it works.

"Getting Across" is a rather standard political/social sf tale, quite skillfully done.

"Push No More" is perhaps the ultimate poltergeist story, and "In the Group" is an absolutely brilliant tale of a new form of group sex. Both include examples of well-described sex that is essential to the story being told.

"The Feast of St. Dionysus" may be the closest there is to a Standard Silverberg Story, a tale of resurrection and rebirth.

"In Entropy's Jaws" would be my choice for the best sf story ever.

That's about one-third of the book, and the rest is comparable.

Actually, I must admit that this is not exactly the book I had in mind. It does not include "Passengers," "Ringing the Changes," or "Sundance." Nor would I have minded if he'd left out "This Is the Road." This is not quite it, but it's close.

It should be pointed out that while Silverberg stopped writing at the end of this remarkably productive period, he began again a few years later, and what he is producing now is by no means chopped liver; he just picked up a well-deserved Nebula for his novella, "Sailing to Byzantium." But even he has not yet returned to the heights he reached in those days. [1986]

### **S.P. Somtow**

While I join virtually every other f/sf critic in bemoaning the plague of sequels and trilogies (the latter redefined as a series with *at least* three books), occasionally a new book will present a reality that I would enjoy revisiting, and I am glad when the author gives me the opportunity to do so.

A few years ago, S.P. Somtow published *The Aquiliad*. From the opening sentence—"Once, when I was very young, Father took me in the motorcar to the Via Appia, to see a man being crucified"—it was obvious that we weren't in consensus reality. Somtow's lead characters, a dense Roman bureaucrat and a wily Native American chief, toured a stranger and stranger New World in which they encountered dinosaurs, a Jewish Bigfoot (the Sasquatches were the Ten Lost Tribes), and finally flying saucers. At the end, it was all more or less plausibly explained, and the book seemed to be a self-contained unit.

But no. Recently, that book was reprinted in a Del Rey paperback as *The Aquiliad, Volume 1. Aquila in the New World*. Now the promise, or perhaps threat, implicit in that title has been fulfilled, and we have *The Aquiliad, Volume II. Aquila and the Iron Horse*.

In this one, Aquila's son, Equus Insanus (in this world, of course, Native Americans have Latin names), returns to deal with the forces that created this parallel universe. This book, like its predecessor, is thoroughly enjoyable, though not

overly burdened with credibility. At least one more book in the series will follow. [1988]

### **Judith Tarr**

I don't like fantasy. But every so often, one tempts me. For instance, I have an inherited interest in the historical figure of Gerbert (Pope Sylvester II). My father, a mathematics teacher and recovering Catholic, particularly fascinated by the history of the papacy, told me about Gerbert, who was a religious figure and a mathematician, and who may have dabbled in Black Magick or may have been accused of that because people didn't understand the mathematics he was doing.

Judith Tarr's most recent novel, *Ars Magica*, deals with Gerbert and, as the author herself said, represents a breakthrough in the fantasy field: a story entirely told in one volume. So I gave it a try, and I'm glad I did. I'm not competent to say how well it matches the historical facts, but it presents a thoroughly likable Gerbert and a compelling tale of his life. [1989]

### **Kurt Vonnegut**

*Deadeye Dick*

Since at least *Breakfast of Champions* (though you can find hints of it going back as far as *Mother Night*), Vonnegut has been wrestling with himself over the question of whether being a novelist is an honorable living, or whether he should be a cook or otherwise make tangible things that are good for people. I think he stated the case for art quite convincingly in *Breakfast*, but then I may need less convincing. He didn't sell the idea to himself.

One form of disillusionment with the writer's art is Tolstoy's syndrome, in which the author decides that if he is in fact compelled to make a living by publishing untrue statements, the only way to do this with anything resembling a clear conscience is to make sure that one writes simple stories that can be understood by almost everyone, and that these should contain nothing deviously artistic, but should merely be homilies encouraging the reader to be a nicer person. You might say that the man who proclaimed that, "We are what we pretend to be," pretended to be a lovable simpleton.

In practice, this has caused Vonnegut to write in a sort of baby talk, in which sentence structure is simple, ideas are broken down to basic components, and taboo concepts (with Vonnegut,

typically death rather than sex or excretion) are expressed in emetically cute terms.

I'm style-deaf enough for it to take prose as bad as recent Vonnegut for me notice it, and I can forgive that if the book has redeeming merit, such as the clever ideas of *Jailbird* and Vonnegut's early works. This one, however, has little cleverness or anything else to recommend it. Its protagonist's most notable trait is asexuality; the nearest thing to an interesting action he has performed is accidentally shooting someone; he was once tempted to become a writer, but he got over it; he now seems tempted occasionally to say clever things like writers do, but he generally overcomes it and talks simply enough for Tolstoy to approve. SPOILER WARNING: The book tells us that Guns Are Bad Things That Hurt People; Cooking Good Meals For People Is A Good Thing; and It's Nice To Be Nice. [1982]

---

About a dozen years ago, Kurt Vonnegut told an interviewer, "I want to be with people who don't think at all, so I won't have to think, either. I'm very tired of thinking. It doesn't seem to help very much. The human brain is too high-powered to have many practical uses in this particular universe in my opinion. I'd like to live with alligators, think like an alligator." Vonnegut's latest novel, *Galápagos*, takes this approach as its ideal. It tells a tale of imminent collapse, as seen from a future a million years from now where humanity has devolved away from those big brains that its narrator keeps blaming for all human unhappiness, and for good measure, away from those manipulative fingers and opposable thumbs as well. Vonnegut's own big brain has given us an amusing tale--morally repugnant, but amusing. [1985]

---

**Spoilers:** I made up James Arpad Michaels. Less plausibly, 1998 was the year the U.S. government was brought to an ass-grinding halt over a terminological inexactitude about an act of oral copulation. The boldface in Hailey/Sanders is a Hint.

---

Excelsior,  
*Arthur*