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# Scratch Pad 12

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Based on the non-Mailing Comments section of \*brg\* No. 14, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the August 1995 ANZAPA (Australian and New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association) mailing.

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1994

by Bruce Gillespie

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## BOOKS READ since the end of November 1994

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The ratings are:

\*\* = Books highly recommended.

\* = Books recommended

☞ = Books about which I have severe doubts.

\* *A House in the Country*

by José Donoso (1978; King Penguin; 352 pp.)

Ambitious, but self-congratulatory Latin American Gothic novel.

\*\* *Cross Kill*

by Garry Disher (1994; Allen & Unwin; 209 pp.)

As usual from Disher, a perfectly made crime thriller told from the criminal's viewpoint.

\*\* *Australia's First Fabians: Middle Class Radicals, Labour Activists and the Early Labour Movement*

by Race Mathews (1993; Cambridge University Press; 284 pp.)

More interesting, perhaps, for the personalities, rat-bag and idealist, than for the very muddled Australian politics of the late nineteenth century.

\* *Love Lies Bleeding: Crimes for a Summer Christmas No. 5*  
edited by Jennifer Rowe (1994; Allen & Unwin; 173 pp.)

A few promising stories and a lot of ordinary stories; all put in the shade by Garry Disher's 'Scrapings', a masterpiece of Gothic unease set in Venice.

\*\* *The Crocodile Bird*

by Ruth Rendell (1993; Arrow; 359 pp.)

A 'Ruth Rendell' novel that is as at least as accomplished and unease-provoking as any of the 'Barbara Vine' novels. Why does Mummy have a penchant for a murder? Ask Daughter; but remember that it's Daughter who's telling the story.

\*\* *Collected Poems 1942-1985*

by Judith Wright (1994; Angus & Robertson; 436 pp.)

Yes, Judith Wright is as great a poet as I had always been led to believe; but only some poems are very great, and

most of the truly memorable pieces were written before 1950.

\*\* *Einstein's Dreams*

by Alan Lightman (1993; Sceptre; 179 pp.)

More a fanciful essay than a story, *Einstein's Dreams* is both a blithe satire of the Swiss and a compendium of great unused science fiction ideas.

\*\* *A is for Alibi*

by Sue Grafton (1986; Pan; 253 pp.)

This, the first of Grafton's highly successful 'Alphabet' mysteries, is, as the author has admitted, an act of ersatz vengeance on one particularly unpleasant husband. Given that this makes the ending a bit predictable, the book stays in the mind as fusillade of wonderful Californian language. Who gives a stuff about the plot in an American hardboiled mystery story?

☞ *The Pure Land*

by D. M. Foster (1973; Macmillan; 235 pp.)

I've always wanted to read this book because it won (I think) *The Age* Book of the Year award against the competition of (I've always presumed) Gerald Murnane's *Tamarisk Row*. Either Murnane's publisher didn't enter it, or the ABY panel must have had an attack of blindness, because of *The Pure Land* is awful: that icky self-conscious bad-imitation-Joyce Cary style that seems to have largely disappeared from Australian writing. To think I had this in the house for 22 years before I could give myself the pleasure of getting rid of it!

\*\* *The Judgment of Eve*

by Edgar Pangborn (1966; Avon Equinox; 159 pp.)

A gorgeously vivid fable set in Pangborn's post-World War III New England in the days before things got going again. Further evidence that Pangborn is one of the most underrated sf writers.

👉 ***Cutting Green Hay: Friendships, Movements and Cultural Conflicts in Australia's Great Decades***

by Vincent Buckley (1983; Penguin; 315 pp.)

A very peculiar book. Buckley speaks about his own tiny patch of ground — Catholic intellectuals during the 1940s and 1950s — as if it occupied the whole Australian continent, which would have been all right if Buckley had been able to give any indication of why anybody outside that world should have been interested in it. Surely Buckley the poet was not entirely the funny old duffer that one meets in this book?

\*\* ***The Man Who Fell to Earth***

by Walter Tevis (1963; Avon; 189 pp.)

A complex, meditative book about a drunken alien. Bowie was perfect for the part in the film, but only a few scenes from Roeg's baroque film match the dry brilliance of this tale.

👉 ***Castle Keep***

by William Eastlake (1965; Michael Joseph; 355 pp.)

I bought this book thirty years ago because of my fond memories of Sidney Pollack's brilliant first film *Castle Keep*. I still hope to see the film again one day, but now I've ditched the book after reading 50 pages.

\*\* ***God Bless the Child***

by Robert B. Parker (1974; Penguin; 169 pp.)

This, the second of Parker's 'Spencer' mysteries, is a lot better than the first. Whiplash dialogue and remorseless commentary on Parker's financially over-endowed main characters give solidity to the narrative.

👉 ***Red Dwarf***

by Grant Naylor (1989; Penguin; 298 pp.)

I trust the tv series was better than *this*.

\*\* ***A Window in Mrs X's Place***

by Peter Cowan (1986; Penguin; 278 pp.)

Cowan has been writing short stories in Western Australia for more than forty years, and he's still pretty good, but some of his earliest stories (especially 'Living') have a compressed gritty desperation hardly matched by any other post-war fiction in English. This collection has stories from each period of Cowan's writing.

\* ***No Night Is Too Long***

by Barbara Vine (1994; Viking; 326 pp.)

A bit dull for a 'Barbara Vine' novel, although the major twist in the plot is genuinely surprising. Perhaps Rendell should give 'Barbara Vine' a rest for a year or two.

\*\* ***Somewhere East of Life: Another European Fantasia***

by Brian Aldiss (1994; Flamingo; 391 pp.)

Hugely enjoyable, although I'm not sure that Aldiss ever decided what kind of a novel it is. In the near future, a man has ten years of his memories stolen from him, and spends the rest of the novel tracking down the computer software to which they have been transcribed. Is this novel a monster political travelogue of the near future? (Much of its material is too close to comfort; the book's publication preceded the Chechnya war by only a month or so.) Is it a science fiction novel? Yes, but the sf element is never allowed sufficient play, which is a pity. Is it a love story? For me, the love story fails entirely.

\*\* ***Feels Like Going Home: Portraits in Blues and Rock 'n' Roll***  
by Peter Guralnick (1971/1978; Omnibus Press; 256 pp.)

So this is Whitey waxing on about the great black blues

players, but somehow the book works. Guralnick tells of his personal search for the stories of the great blues performers. The result is often moving, since most of these people have never been rewarded for their efforts, or they died young and remain only as legends in the memories of people who learned from them. Robert Johnson is mentioned a lot.

\* ***An Axe to Grind***

by Robert Wallace (1989; Angus & Robertson; 237 pp.)

This is the second in Wallace's series about Essington Holt, an amusing art forger and knobbler of criminals. It starts brilliantly, but almost disintegrates during its final pages. Some vivid Riviera scenery and action, but I can't remember what it was actually about.

\*\* ***The Tin Can Tree***

by Anne Tyler (1965; Hamlyn; 189 pp.)

Having kept up with Tyler's novels since the mid-1970s, I'm gradually catching up on her earlier works. It's a poor sort of book that doesn't include at least one funeral scene, but this begins with one. People stagger home from the funeral of the youngest member of the family. Gradually we find out about the people themselves, but only in brief reflections do we find out anything about the child who died or why her death leaves the family rudderless. Like all Tyler's work, this is funny as well as sad and powerful.

\* ***Collected Short Stories***

by Ruth Rendell (1987; Hutchinson; 546 pp.)

Rendell knows the mechanics of writing short stories, but her heart is not in the form, as this collection shows. Rather predictable sting-in-the-tail crime stories, plus some very pedestrian Inspector Wexford short pieces, illuminated only by the odd spectacular flash of pieces like 'The Orchard Walls' and 'The Vinegar Mother', which read like preliminary sketches for later novels. The best story is a fantasy, 'The Green Road to Quephanda'. I'd like to read the novel that's developed from this one.

\*\* ***Voices in the Night***

by Sean McMullen (1994; Aphelion; 306 pp.)

\*\* ***Mirror Sun Rising***

by Sean McMullen (1995; Aphelion; 332 pp.)

These two books add up to one novel. It's hardly perfect, but it's original and vivid, and the characters have a sit-up-and-take-notice-of-me quality which is unusual for this sort of narrative. In a far-future Australia, people have rebuilt a non-electronic civilisation, despite the difficulties of working with such technology and the fact that they are confined to the interior of the Australian continent. This is a story of a society in change, but I liked best the accounts of the society before it began to change.

👉 ***New Worlds 4***

by David Garnett (1994; Gollancz; 223 pp.)

Garnett does much beating of breast in introducing this, the last of the current series of *New Worlds*, complaining of the failure of the public to support noble enterprises that seek out great new writers. The trouble with this argument is that Garnett has a keen eye for the concrete-booted story: drop it into the swim and it sinks without trace. Only one story here, Lisa Tuttle's 'And the Poor Get Children', has much going for it, unless you count Elizabeth Sourbut's 'The Last Phallic Symbol', which must be a pseudonymous (John Brosnan or Leroy Kettle?) raspberry to what many men see as the feminist movement. Most of the other stories are

unreadable British attempts at cyberpunk.

- \* ***Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction***  
**by Damien Broderick (1995; Routledge; 197 pp.)**  
I whinged out this last time, so I won't again. If you can get past the postmodern argot that Broderick feels obliged to use, you will probably find some useful insights into science fiction. It's just that I don't wish on anybody the sheer labour of searching for them.

- \*\* ***Our Lady of Chernobyl***

**by Greg Egan (1995: MirrorDanse; 111 pp.)**

A well-produced chapbook of four Greg Egan stories for those of us who believe that *Axiomatic* should have been much heftier. 'Our Lady of Chernobyl' is the best of the four. Where, still, is 'The Extra', or 'Dust', which I'm told I should seek out?

— Bruce Gillespie, 3 August 1995