

---

# Scratch Pad 16

---

Based on *Great Cosmic Donut of Life*, No. 4, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the February 1996 mailing of Acnestis.

---

## Contents

---

1 RECENT BOOKS READ by Bruce Gillespie

4 FAVOURITE SHORT STORIES 1995 by Bruce Gillespie

---

### Yet more sackcloth and ashes

Another membership-saver; more feeble twittering to hide the fact that I'm not doing mailing comments because I haven't read the last few mailings yet. Bits of them, yes, but not complete mailings.

I have my excuses. Two really enormous excuses, which should have clunked through your mailbox a few weeks ago. *The Metaphysical Review* Nos. 22/23 and 24/25 took all my spare time over recent months. I'm sending them to you as a premailing/postmailing, so please send enormous letters of comments or articles, or enclose comments in Acnestis, or something.

As you will have noticed, Acnestis had much to do with the final shape of *TMR* 24/25. Jane Carnall listed her Top 100 Authors in the July mailing. Yvonne Rousseau offered her list in August. She sent her magazine to a few other people, including Peter Nicholls. As a result, he wrote 'The Books We Really Read', including his Favourite Two-Hundred-and-Something Authors. He gave this as a talk to the Nova Mob (Melbourne's sf discussion group). I asked for Australian rights to the article, which was sent originally to *The New York Review of SF*. (Did it appear there? I haven't seen a copy of *NYRSF* for well over a year, since it no longer has a distributor here.) I listed my Top 100, and Elaine did her best to add her list.

The Fanzine Snowball Effect. Just shows how the value of apatalk.

In the past, *TMR* readers have been staunch listomaniacs, but so far only one reader (Rob Gerrand) has sent in his own list. Race Mathews has promised one, but hasn't sent it yet. Come to the party, O Acnestans! Spend all Acnecon concocting lists of Top 100 Authors. It beats getting sozzled in the bar, doesn't it?

I hope everyone has a great time at Acnecon, and of course I wish I could be there. Apart from the fact that I hate travelling, I'm not there because in the last month or so I've had to spend \$1700 on software (Quark

Xpress) and \$4100 on printing and posting those two issues of *The Metaphysical Review*. And my CD bill is huge, too. At the moment I owe Elaine a small (large?) fortune, and won't be out of debt for months.

Apologies to the Acnestis newcomers. You won't have your copies of *TMR* yet, since I posted them to people who members in December.

I have no real excuse for failing to read the mailings, although work and *TMR* have certainly stopped me from writing apazines. (I'm also in danger of being thrown out of ANZAPA, my other apa.) I've been reading books instead of fanzines, and some of the books have been very good:

### THE PRESTIGE

by Christopher Priest

(1995; Touchstone 0-671-71924-6; 404 pp.)

*The Prestige* is Chris Priest's best book since *Inverted World*, because it's the first since then in which the 'top story' works as well as the 'bottom story'. By which I mean: you can always see the metaphors (the 'bottom story') working in Chris Priest's books, but they are often disconnected from the formal story (the 'top story', the story you read first, before winking out the metaphors). In many of the other books, the events don't make sense, although the total patterns do. In many Priest books since *Inverted World*, I've been left hungry for the novel-that-might-have-been. And here it is: *The Prestige*.

The trouble with *The Prestige* is that if you haven't read it, you shouldn't read the rest of this review. Many of its mysteries are hinted at, then unravelled, from Page 1 onwards.

Andrew Westley is invited to a country house to receive the manuscript written by his great-grandfather, who had been a famous magician at the beginning of the century. The person who hands him the manuscript is the great-granddaughter of Rupert Angier, a rival magician. We read two rival manuscripts, that of Alfred

Borden, Westley's great-grandfather, and that of Angier. We are invited to guess at the secrets of their magic. In learning these secrets, we are drawn into an ever-interlocking series of meditations on magic (that is, illusion), twindom, and (for want of a better word) identity. Borden asserts that he is a certain sort of person, and we discover that that is untrue. Angier, painted as a villain in the first part of the novel, proves to be a hero of persistence. And Westley proves to be not the person he thought he was.

All this is written with enormous energy, clarity and precision. The prose surface gives no hint of pomposity or calling attention to its own cleverness, yet it draws us into a world in which every true statement is up for questioning. And the ending works! It's a masterstroke, reminding me of the great scenes of some of the great gothic novels.

### **AN ANTHROPOLOGIST ON MARS: SEVEN PARADOXICAL TALES**

by Oliver Sacks

1995; Picador 0-330-33717-3; 319 pp.)

IRecently I've recovered a bit of that good old-fashioned Gosh! Wow! Sensawonder. First I read *The Prestige*, then *An Anthropologist on Mars*. Both Priest and Sacks sport satisfyingly understated styles; each relies on slow revelation and quiet disclosures to make the impact of their discoveries all the more astonishing. *The Prestige* I hadn't read until now because Justin Ackroyd hadn't been able to get a copy from the Australian distributor; Oliver Sacks I hadn't read until now because of my undisguised prejudice against best-sellers. Silly me.

The reviews of Sacks's books make it seem as if he merely trots out a series of oddities among human beings: a literary version of the carnival freak show — here's Ollie and the next gang of weirdos!

And then Dick Jenssen lent me *An Anthropologist on Mars*, and at last I've discovered Oliver Sacks. (Actually, he pressed it on me because it has two interesting footnotes about sf.) Forgive me, Mr Sacks. *We're* the weirdos, of course. We go about thinking we're 'normal', that the human brain works in such-and-such a way, but you've discovered that it doesn't.

In looking at each 'case history', Sacks attempts to see how the other person sees the world. But if it is possible for this or that person to see the world in this or that way, how do we account for the way *we* see things?

Take colour, for instance. Colour splashes into the eyes, down to the brain, and caramba! there's colour. Right? Not at all. Look at 'The Case of the Colour-blind Painter' and the whole matter of colour sight is thrown open to question. The painter in Sacks's story lost all colour perception late in life. After two years he could not remember what colour was like. But the way he saw things after the loss was rather different from the

way a 'colour-blind person' sees things. His paintings appear in the book.

How does an autistic person see the world or feel about it? How can we tell? Sacks talks about two different autistic people, one of whom is perhaps the world's most 'successful' (in conventional terms) autistic person. Yet, although Temple Grandin can think about her own condition, she still sees other humans as aliens; she sees herself as an 'anthropologist on Mars'. She can see that a sunset is pretty, but the concept of 'awesome' or 'magnificent' is unknown to her. She can plan systems in minute detail — this is what she does for a living — but if interrupted when planning a system, she must plan it all again from the beginning.

Does Temple Grandin have a different sort of brain; or are the elements of her brain merely arranged differently from ours? Do we all have some elements of autism, or Tourette's syndrome? (Sacks tells the astonishing story of a man who is a great surgeon although he has Tourette's syndrome.) Are all 'disabilities' disasters? What kind of a thing is a 'normal mind'?

Sacks throws all these questions up for grabs. Will sf writers grab at them?

### **SHADOW OF ASHLAND**

by Terence M. Green

(1996; Forge 0-312-85958-9; 221 pp.)

I'll admit from the start that I'm prejudiced towards this book. Terry Green, of Toronto, started writing to my magazines during the 1970s, after he had heard that I'm a fan of the work of Philip K. Dick. (Many of my most enduring pen friendships have been with other Phil Dick fans.) At that time he was only writing reviews. Later he began to publish stories, and he sent me copies of his first two novels and his first collection of short stories. The collection included 'Ashland, Kentucky', which seemed much better than anything he had written before.

A contemporary Canadian family begins to receive letters written by a long-lost son/uncle in the 1930s. The main character sets off for Ashland, Kentucky, the small town from which the most 'recent' letters had been received. His arrival in the town is more or less where the story ended.

When Terry told me that he was expanding the story into a novel, I hardly greeted the news with cries of joy. Most sf novelists have no idea how to expand short stories into novels, but they keep doing it.

But Terry Green has done the impossible: seen vastly more possibilities in his original idea than could be fitted into a short story, then made the resulting tale, *Shadow of Ashland*, into a convincing novel.

Given that the letters had dropped through time, what did the long-lost uncle think was happening to him when he sent them? What had really befallen him during the 1930s, or had he slipped through time into the 1980s? At first the storyteller meets Ashland people

who had known his uncle during the 1930s, then realises they are withholding part of the story. And then . . . Terry Green puts goose bumps on your goose bumps.

*Shadow of Ashland* invites comparisons with a number of other books, especially Jack Finney's *Time and Again*, but it stands on its own because it has a real hard edge of passion that excises that things-were-better-back-then softness that you find in Finney.

*Shadow of Ashland* is not officially released until February, and will only be available in import shops. Good stuff.

### **THE END OF THE PIER**

**by Martha Grimes**

**(1992; Alfred A. Knopf 0-679-41126-7; 230 pp.)**

I've been fascinated by the books of Martha Grimes for some years. Why does an American lady writer write British murder mysteries in a way that so slavishly follows the traditional formula that she comes close to sending it up? And does she have a real feeling for British place, or does she write these novels so that she can live in her private Dorothy Sayers Land?

Even if she succeeds at the British-murder- mystery novel (and I've collected nearly all her mystery books without yet getting past the third in the series), from whence does she draw the power to write *The End of the Pier*, an unwaffly mixture of small-town Southern Gothic novel and American serial-killer mystery fiction?

The connecting link between *The End of the Pier* and her other novels is her capacity to put characters on stage and let them live. Maud Chadwick is the town's 'daffy lady', an outsider who survives by working at the local café but has dreams of better things. Her son goofs off to college, but fails his courses. The local sheriff, Sam DeGheyn, tries to be her friend, despite her vagueness. And she sits at the end of the lake's pier during summer nights looking out over the water at the parties happening in the rich houses on the other side of the lake. It's all very atmospheric writing, buzzing about all over the place. It's as different as possible from the 'Martha Grimes British mysteries' as you could get, but it has a convincing murder plot and a rattling good finale.

### **THE SCOLD'S BRIDLE**

**by Minette Walters**

**(1994; Allen & Unwin 1-86373-718-9; 327 pp.)**

When I mentioned Minette Walters to Carey Handfield, his response hinted that I really should have known about her from book one (*The Ice House*, which I haven't read yet). (Carey reads everything. He would be a great asset to Acnestis if only you could get him to write about what he reads.)

Minette Walters is refreshing. I've become slightly jaded with all the mystery writers who not only want to astound you but also want to show you what great

artists they are. Some are, I admit, smart writers, but it's still refreshing to find someone who believes passionately in the mystery genre itself.

Minette Walters is robust. She doesn't mind a whacking solid cliché if that's the only way of getting your attention and describing what she's on about. She doesn't mind a bit of action, some jaw-dropping revelations, and the odd punch into the reader's solar plexus. She obviously has such fun constructing and writing unrepentant melodrama. *The Scold's Bridle* seems much better than most other mysteries I've read during the last year or so. (Is Ruth Rendell going off the boil? *Simisola*, in particular, seemed bloodless compared to gutsy Minette.)

Nothing much I can say about the story of *The Scold's Bridle* without revealing in it a silliness that you don't notice while you're reading it.

### **LITTLE DEATHS: 24 TALES OF HORROR AND SEX**

**edited by Ellen Datlow**

**(1994; Millennium 1- 85798- 014-X; 454 pp.)**

I've met Ellen Datlow. She doesn't seem to be a genius. Just your ordinary average American bright cookie who does deals and promotes fabulously successful anthologies.

But it takes some sort of genius to extract from authors the stories that Ellen Datlow receives for her anthologies. I can't even guess what kind of proposal she put to the people who appear in *Little Deaths*. Given the slightest chance, most sf authors will plump for the fattest, most obvious cliché and hit it until they've beaten the pulp out of it. Not so in *Little Deaths*. It's almost as if the only note that Datlow gave these people was 'Be original, you bastards, be original!'

The connection between the horror story and the erotic story is so obvious that there have been umpteen collections of sexy horror stories (or horrible sex stories). But in most of the other collections sex = violence = horror = death. Datlow has persuaded her authors to delete the violence. In most of the *Little Deaths* stories, the connections are tenuous and bent, and so are the stories.

In her Introduction, Datlow claims Stephen Dedman's 'The Lady of Situations', the first story in the book 'is erotic and deeply disturbing yet has no onstage violence'. But Dedman's story, which is memorable, is also the least accessible metaphor in the book. I still don't know what he's on about, except that this is a brilliant extrapolation of an old sf idea: what would it be like to have total eidetic memory? (Oliver Sacks speculates about problems like this, but he doesn't come up with Dedman's solution.)

Lucy Taylor's 'Hungry Skin' is a great story because its central metaphor (a frigid woman's fascination for a sexy statue) works in an intricate way, and because the main character can in no way be described as the innocent sufferer of unwarranted torture. (Which is,

after all, what most pot-boiler horror is about: torturing innocent people.) The main character welcomes her fate; we accede in this welcoming process, even while guessing her fate. Lucy Taylor is Someone To Watch.

Nicola Griffith's 'Yaguara' is a homo-erotic tale about two women trying to survive in the Central American jungle, but that doesn't make any the less jungly or erotic. On the other hand, M. John Harrison's hetero tale 'Isabel Avens Returns to Stepney in the Spring' is so twisted and offbeat that you wonder what it's doing here at all. Great story; but what *did* Ellen Datlow say to her authors to garner pieces as diverse as 'Yaguara' and 'Isabel Avens'?

Lucius Shepard's 'The Last Time' seems to include everything that's luscious about the best of the rest of the stories, yet has a mad magic of its own. There have been plenty of stories and novels about sexual obsession, but Shepard finds an image that distils the experience of *sexual* obsession. (Most Western fiction assumes that a person could not worked up about sex itself, and therefore sexual obsession must be about something else.)

Don't buy the American edition in preference to the UK edition. *Locus* reports that several of the best stories, including the Shepard, have been dropped, and only one (a new Simmons) added.

## LISTS 1995 (Part 1)

Given that you've just recovered from reading my lists for 1994, it's a bit much to lumber you with my 1995 lists. So I won't. I'll just include the lists I have time to annotate.

### FAVOURITE SHORT STORIES 1995

- 1 'The Gate of Ghosts'  
Karen Joy Fowler (*Artificial Things*)
- 2 'The Safe-Deposit Box'  
Greg Egan (*Axiomatic*)
- 3 'The Interior of Gaaldine'  
Gerald Murnane (*Emerald Blue*)
- 4 'Hungry Skin'  
Lucy Taylor (*Little Deaths*)
- 5 'Not With Love'  
Philippa C. Maddern (*She's Fantastical!*)
- 6 'Angel Thing'  
Petrina Smith (*She's Fantastical!*)
- 7 'Living'  
Peter Cowan (*A Window in Mrs X's Place*)
- 8 'Escape'  
Peter Cowan (*A Window in Mrs X's Place*)
- 9 'The Last Time'  
Lucius Shepard (*Little Deaths*)
- 10 'The Green Road to Quephanda'  
Ruth Rendell (*Collected Stories*)
- 11 'Back of Beyond'  
Cherry Wilder (*Strange Fruits*)

### 12 'Uh-Oh City'

Jonathan Carroll (*The Panic Hand*)

### 13 'The Beach'

Peter Cowan (*A Window in Mrs X's Place*)

### 14 'Possum Lover'

Yvonne Rousseau (*She's Fantastical!*)

### 15 'The War of the Roses'

Karen Joy Fowler (*Artificial Things*)

The trouble with staying in fandom for long enough is that even in Australia sooner or later you meet most of your favourite and not-so-favourite writers. The embarrassing thing about the Short Stories list is that I know quite well five of these writers (Egan, Murnane, Maddern, Smith and Rousseau) and have had conversations with another two (Fowler and Wilder). I ask myself: are these my favourite stories because I know the authors, or did I merely choose to read them in the first place because I know the authors? Or am I really as objective as I like to think I am, and the fact that I know the authors has nothing to do with my choices?

That last possibility can't be true. Most of my compulsory reading is compulsory merely because I know the authors. I can't escape them or their books! Imagine the consequences if I had *not* read *She's Fantastical!*, edited by two friends of mine, Lucy Sussex and Judy Buckrich, and containing the latest stories by quite a few of my other friends!

And of course I pounced on my copy of *Axiomatic* as soon as I received it. Greg sent it to me. A pity that I had read most of its best stories before they appeared in the collection. (My Best of the Year Lists are for works read/seen/heard *first* in the particular year.) But I had not already read 'The Safe-Deposit Box', with its two wonderful ideas: the man who spends each day in a different body, and who gets to glimpse the creature who is creating him anew each day.

Karen Joy Fowler? I probably wouldn't have read *Artificial Things* this particular year if I had not found myself, unexpectedly, sitting opposite her at a dinner held in Melbourne in the week after Thylacon (Australia's national convention, held in Hobart in June). We all knew Kim Stanley Robinson would be at Thylacon, but I didn't get to meet him during his one day in Melbourne. Karen Fowler turned up out of the blue, and was good company. Several people already admired her stories, so I thought I'd rip into *Artificial Things* and *Sarah Canary*. I gave up on the latter after half way, never having glimpsed what the author was on about, but several stories in the collection were brilliant.

'The Gate of Ghosts' is about a little girl who learns to disappear from home, to a space that's simply Elsewhere. At first she does it in such a way that she returns home on the instant, but later it becomes obvious that she is slipping from our world into the other. All this relates to her relationship to her parents, one of whom has Chinese ancestry, and their relationship to each

other. Jessica's mother wants to 'rescue' her, pull her back into 'normal' space.

I fell in love with this story because of two paragraphs on Page 146 of the Bantam Spectra edition. The mother is trying to entice Jessica into telling about her 'other place'.

'Jessica pushed the spoon off the table with her elbow. It bounced with a tinny sound on the floor. She slid lower and lower in her seat until her mother disappeared below the horizon of the tabletop. Jessica slipped off the chair entirely and sat by the spoon underneath the table . . . Her mother slid forward; her knees came closer to Jessica's face and then back again and her mother was sitting on the floor under the table beside her, cross-legged.'

This is my favourite kind of writing, where a metaphor for the whole story is expressed entirely in concrete terms, but still conveys the abstract motion of the story. Here I feel Jessica slipping out of one world into another; her mother then joins her, but she must change perspective entirely. Later in the story, of course, the mother is able to enter the child's 'other place'. Read it for yourself.

What about the authors I have not met? If, for instance, I had met Peter Cowan, might I have placed his stories higher on the list? Perhaps. I read them early in 1995, and they've faded a bit in the memory. Possibly I've done them a disservice, especially 'Living', which is a passionate prose poem. All I know about Cowan is that he is in his eighties, is a prominent academic in Western Australia, and published his first stories in the 1940s. His lean, hard-bitten style is much more visionary than the easy-going naturalism ('dun-coloured', as Patrick White called it) of most Australian prose of the 1940s and 1950s. His books are probably unavailable in Britain, but you might be lucky.

Gerald Murnane is a unique Australian writer whose prose puzzles most critics (and, recently, me). I met him well before he published his first book, and I still enjoy best his first few books, especially *Tamarisk Row* and *The Plains*. I do not know whether I would have read him if I had never met him. Surely I would have read *Tamarisk Row*, as some important critics praised it highly. I've never read *The Plains* at ordinary reading speed. I typed up the first manuscript for Gerald, and typeset it for Norstrilia Press. Taken at typing speed (mine is about 2000 words an hour), the prose of *The Plains* is as intoxicating as that of Borges or even Proust. I've been struggling to come to grips with his recent stuff, and would not even have read *Emerald Blue*, his latest collection, if I had not known the author. Four of the five stories did not over-excite me, but 'The Interior of Gaaldine' (which, I'm told, is a reference for the Brontë buffs) is a real return to form: an amazing mix of wild ideas served up in the most straitlaced of prose. You won't find this in British bookshops, but I can get you most of Murnane's books if ever you want to dip into them.

Now we get to the important part: *She's Fantastical!*, and the reasons why you should send money (A\$22.95 — approx. £10 — plus postage) to Slow Glass Books, GPO Box 2708X, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, for a copy. (Ask for the *Slow Glass Catalogue* as well.)

*She's Fantastical!* is fabulously fannish in lots of ways. Lucy Sussex and Judy Buckrich had been thinking about an anthology of science fiction and fantasy by Australian women writers. They mentioned the idea to a third person, who was connected to Sybylla, a Melbourne women's publishing co-operative, who made an offer to publish it. No doubt Lucy or Judy will tell eventually the story of the battle with Sybylla to produce this book. It's enough to say that Lucy and Judy have a joint will of iron that would topple streetscapes, but the Sybylla crowd also proved to be tough eggs. Somehow the book became better as the infighting got nastier. (I'm not saying that the Sybylla people are fannish, but the problems of publishing via co-operatives are familiar to anyone connected to semi-professional sf publishing.)

*She's Fantastical!* emerged as a paperback with end-flaps on the cover; with a striking cover illustration that is also its icon; blue ink throughout; and a combination of type faces that is blinding, but unforgettable. The stories are pretty good, too.

The real achievement of Lucy and Judy has been to drag stories out of three people who are well known here for the equal quality and scarcity of their writing.

Philippa C. Maddern (Pip Maddern) is now steaming up the academic ranks in the Department of Medieval History at the University of Western Australia. To me, she is the best Australian sf writer, but she never has time to write. Somehow Lucy and Judy applied the Spanish Inquisition, extracting the best story in the book, 'Not With Love'. It's an amazing piece, which reminds me most of the stories of Gene Wolfe; you know, there's the story, and it's all happening, but what *is* actually happening? On an artificial living environment a long way from Earth, rebellion is steaming. But how to get in touch with Earth? What kind of people are these inhabitants? What sex are they? (It's only when you finish the story that you realise that, although this is a story of aroused passions, you are not really sure who is male and who is female, or whether it matters.) This is not just clever writing; this is suspense fiction of a high order.

Another of my favourite writers, Petrina Smith, is as reluctant to produce fiction as Pip is. Only the indomitable Sussex/Buckrich team could get Petrina to finish a story. 'Angel Thing' is a great story, which recreates all the fear of the alien that you find in outback Australian small communities. Is the creature an angel or an alien? And who are the aliens, anyway? Another first-class suspense story, with that absolutely clear style that Petrina has developed during the last twenty years.

You all know Yvonne Rousseau already, so I won't describe her. A few years ago she stopped writing her

brilliant reviews and critical articles in order to 'write a novel'. No sign of the novel yet, but again I thought it a major Sussex/Buckrich coup to extract a story from her. 'The Possum Lover' is not perfect, but it certainly sticks in the memory. Yvonne has still not learned, as Pip and Petrina have, to leave out all but the essentials, then leave out most of the essentials. (If I knew how to do that, I'd probably also return to writing fiction.) But given that 'The Possum Lover' is at least twice as long as it need be, it's quite a bravura performance, with a delicious ending.

Still talking of books Australian: I'm a bit unfair to Paul Collins' *Strange Fruit* collection by picking only one story from it. Cherry Wilder is not and never was Australian (she's from New Zealand), but like innumerable NZ pop groups she spent enough time here during the 1960s and 1970s to be branded Australian forever. (She's been German for almost the last twenty years.) Still, Cherry did seem to soak up enormous amount of Australian lore while she was here, and 'Back of Beyond', a tale of supernatural detectives, is about as back-of-beyondy as you can get. Isolated, loony station owners; the detectives going loony; burnt-out landscapes; everything's here, including a nail-biting conclusion.

Both Ruth Rendell's *Collected Stories* and Jonathan Carroll's *The Panic Hand* were a bit disappointing as collections. There are a few other Carroll stories I could have included on, say, a Top 30 Short Stories, and two

or three other Rendell stories. But the only reason to keep the Rendell collection is for the 'The Green Road to Quephanda', her only fantasy story; and 'Uh-Oh City' is one of several stories that make *The Panic Hand* worth picking up. (Many of the best short stories have appeared already as sections of Carroll novels.)

### **This excitement has to end!**

I don't have time to write much more. This magazine really must be printed this weekend, and sent tomorrow.

I'll publish my Favourite Novels, Books, and Films next time, and perhaps work out my music charts for 1994 (I always stay a year behind on those).

I have started catching up on reading past mailings. Endless mailing comments next time. I promise. Watch my fingertips.

Cheer up, O Great Helmsperson! (That's Maureen, of course.) I don't know how you do it, either. I realise that right now I should be pounding out yet another boring textbook for Macmillan, so I presume the editing work is burying you as well. Have fun at Acnecon. Stand for GUFF so we can meet you! (That goes for everyone else, too: Acnestans for GUFF!)

— Bruce Gillespie, 28 January 1996