
Scratch Pad 18

Based on the non-Mailing Comments section of *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life*, No. 18, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the July 1996 mailing of *Acnestis*.

Guest spot:

Taiga! Taiga!

by Elaine Cochrane

(Elaine wrote the following for *Weeders Digest*, her contribution to *The Secret Garden*, the gardening apa. Here's all the latest news from 59 Keele Street.)

Recently it has been made compulsory in Victoria to register pet cats. (It's been compulsory for dogs for years.) This is intended to aid local authorities in controlling stray and feral cats and irresponsible owners, and I have no quarrel with that.

One part of the legislation allows cat owners to be fined if their cats are on other people's premises without permission. I wasn't expecting any problems there — the offended person has to go through a complaints procedure first, and Robert, whose back fence abuts our side fence, said long ago 'I like your ginger cat. I used to have a mouse before he started coming around' — but it did get me thinking about how I could restrict the moggies to the back and side yards if I had to.

In mid-April, Theodore, the ginger cat who really does think he's Ghod's Ghift, went and got himself locked into a factory some five minutes' walk away. On a Friday, so he had to wait there until dawn on the Monday before I could ask for him back. The extraction of said mog, which was not successful until the Tuesday evening, involved great courtesy on behalf of the factory management and workers and the use of Bruce's very long arm to reach behind a stack of pallets to grab him by the scruff of the neck. So I started thinking seriously about how to fence the yard, and rang a fencing contractor to come do a measure and quote.

Then, a week later, Oscar, who is large and fluffy and twelve years old but who still thinks of himself as the starved six-week-old kitten that John Bangsund and Sally Yeoland found under their house, disappeared between a Saturday afternoon and 3 a.m. the following Monday. Still don't know where he was, but he was very very pleased to be home again — not least because from the flood in the litter tray he obviously had not had a pee the whole time he was locked in wherever.

(These events had precedents. Julius vanished without trace. Sophie once disappeared for eight days; we have Sophie because TC spent five days locked in the office building next door and he was replaced before we

found out where he was; we lost count of the number of times Lulu was locked into the factory across the road. (They have a mouse problem.) To say nothing of fight injuries (apart from the usual abscesses, Theodore once got a claw in the eye and Muffin died from FAIDS), and the danger in crossing roads (Lulu's fate.)

By the time the fencer turned up I'd managed to work out something feasible and affordable. I blocked off all the spaces under and through the fences, and wired heavy stiff clear plastic to the six-foot wire mesh fences and gates where the roses haven't climbed yet (the same sort of plastic can be nailed around tree trunks to protect the trees from possums — the common brush-tail is cat-sized and roughly squirrel-like, and can be destructive). I tied shade cloth above the part of the back fence between our toilet and our office neighbour that was within cat jumping distance, and chicken wire blocking access to the toilet roof, and had the fencer put up swimming pool safety fence (closely spaced vertical bars with no horizontals apart from the top and bottom struts) on the tops of the brick fences that were within jumping distance. (One of these fences is between our yard and Robert's, so I had to ask permission. His only concern was that the mice would come back.) I also had to cut down my crepe myrtle, which Polly used to climb to jump over the back fence when she was too lazy to go through the cat hole cut into the fence, and the trunk of the long-dead peach tree that they all (except TC, who's too arthriticky) used to get onto the toilet and laundry roof.

Theodore got out the first night, but I found the spot and blocked it. He got out again a week later, but I found and blocked that spot too. Since then it has worked, for all except Polly. Unlike the rest of the household, Polly is slim-line, and she just jumps to the top of the low (five-and-a-bit foot) brick wall between our yard and Robert's, and dissolves her bones and pours herself through. When I told Robert he wanted to know if she'd eat mice like Theodore did. (She does, but she's not a great mouser because she's blind and deaf on one side.)

Theodore was pacing the yard like a caged tiger at first, but except at dusk, when the mousing switch comes on automatically, he now seems reconciled to the loss of his huge territory. The others aren't too worried.

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GENERICALLY YOURS: An attempted reply to Kev McVeigh, Steve Jeffery, Paul Kincaid, Tony Cullen and Ian Sales

Thanks, Kev, Steve, Paul, Tony and Ian, for long and thoughtful responses in Mailing 41 to what I said in Mailing 40.

In reply, I'm trying to work out the essence of what I was trying to say a few mailings ago. This will probably lead to a fit of the generalisations. Apologies in advance:

- I've said several times in recent mailings, 'Aesthetics above all.' Which writers write best? Few science fiction or fantasy writers are good at fine writing. If you want fine writing, you read little SF or fantasy.
- Yet most of us read a lot of SF and/or fantasy. Why? What are we looking for? It must have something to do with the *content* of what we are reading rather than the quality of the writing. The distinguishing content of an SF book or story is the writer's attempt to tackle a new idea, or put an unexpected spin on an old idea. For this reason I'm not much interested in high fantasy, which specialises in very old ideas.
- As Kev, Tony and Ian say, Big Ideas don't have much literary value in themselves. The ideas that stay in the mind are those that are also metaphors for personal and collective experience.
- But a metaphor cannot come alive without the full power of language behind it. And metaphors/ideas don't come to life unless they are experienced by an interesting 'character'.

Therefore it seems to me that SF has rarely produced anything that could be called 'great fiction'. The clichés of the genre are substituted for real achievements. These clichés were invented a long time ago. There was a time in the 1940s and early 1950s when many of them were not worn out, but were fresh and new. The attempt to give them new life through 'literary writing', particularly since the 1960s, has not often been successful. Most of the writers who've gained reputations for literary writing have relied on bombastic shouting or flashy tricks. Not many SF or fantasy writers realise that good fiction consists in 'less is more', or 'clarity, clarity and more clarity' or 'cutting out everything but the essentials, then cutting most of the essentials', or whatever neat generalisation you want.

To Kev:

I started reading science fiction in late 1959 or 1960, although I had read children's 'space stories' long before then. Most of my early reading was from the magazines of the time. They contained some very good stories, including some that are still favourites. The same magazines contained book review sections. The reviewers tended to agree

that SF was at a low ebb at that time. They mentioned the Great Authors from the Golden Age. I spent most of the 1960s imbibing a nostalgia for a period I could not have remembered. It took quite a while to read some of these Golden Age stories (and it tended to be individual stories that were mentioned). Some were very good. I recall the pleasure of reading Simak's 'The Big Front Yard' for the first time, and many of the best stories from the early days of *Galaxy* and *F&SF*. Try as I might, I found it hard to recapture the reviewers' nostalgia for stories from *Astounding* (which had just changed into *Analog*). I didn't like most of the Heinlein stories I read; I didn't like any Van Vogt. Asimov I always liked: the Enid Blyton of SF. I had read nearly all his memorable stories by 1964, and have hardly touched them since.

When I started reading my bible — *Australian Science Fiction Review* — in 1966, I discovered critics of quite a different stripe. This was not nostalgia; this was holy writ. John Foyster delivered the sermon: John W. Campbell had been the best editor of SF, and Sam Merwin the second-best editor, and everything since was a fall from greatness. Moreover, no SF was as good as real literature; the *ASFR* reviewers professed to judge SF by 'literary standards'. I was doing my Arts degree at the time, so I pitched my critical tent under the banner of Lofty Literary Standards.

The most lethal shot across the bow came from George Turner in his first review for *ASFR*, in the First Anniversary edition in 1967. George opined, then demonstrated in great detail, that Alfred Bester's reputation was based on nothing but mud; that both *The Stars My Destination* (*Tiger! Tiger!*) and *The Demolished Man*, especially the latter, were failures. According to George's article, to defend such works was to defend the 'double standard', i.e. using one (high) standard when reading literature, and another (lower) standard when reading SF.

By the beginning of the 1970s, when I began my own magazine, I had mixed attitudes to science fiction: of course none of it was as good as Real Literature, but I had to 'keep up with the field'. I read every available piece of short fiction in the field. The New Wave, *New Worlds*-style, was a wonder and a joy. Perhaps science fiction could become great literature after all.

This didn't happen. Lots of science fiction writers put on the trappings of literature, but they recirculated the old ideas. Perhaps I'm wrong and there are geniuses out there somewhere. It's impossible to tell because the field has expanded so rapidly since the mid-1970s that nobody can keep up with anything but a tiny percentage of what's

published. Worse, the critical fanzines have all but disappeared (except for the ones I can't put my hands on, such as *Vector* and *Critical Wave*). *Locus* reviewers praise every book that appears, so it's impossible to tell from it what's worth reading. There are a vast number of awards and infinite gusts of self-congratulation, but when I peek into these Great Books of SF I find the same rotten old clichés that I found thirty years ago.

There seems to me an infinite gap between Wells's Time Machine and Sheffield's Space Elevator. The difference is the quality of metaphor, for reasons that Jilly might express much better than I can. With the time machine, one can explore the destiny of humanity, and end up on a beach at the end of time: surely the most effective piece of writing in all science fiction. Perhaps it's the most poignant scene in any novel in the last 100 years. (The Time Machine metaphor was used wonderfully again in Tucker's *The Year of the Quiet Sun*.) Is Sheffield capable of great metaphor? Only if he is capable of great writing; to me, he can hardly write a decent sentence.

But why pay any attention to the Gillespie Sermon? Do as I do, not what I say:

- Ignore me and read what you enjoy, Kev. Don't read anything because you 'ought to' read it, even if everybody in Acnestis recommends it.
- At least consider the possibility that SF is an organic entity, a genre, a web of connections between a vast range of people over the years, and that it can be interesting in itself to know a bit about the structure of that genre. Fortunately, the *SF Encyclopedia* and similar books can educate anybody without making it necessary to read the old stuff.

You're not kidding. Nostalgia is a pain in the arse, not to mention the fingers, arms and shoulders. I'll have to plead ignorance of some of your favourite writers, such as Moffett, Shiner or Kennedy. Some of these authors have to be ordered from overseas, so I need to know about them first. So far I've found it impossible to obtain any of Graham Joyce's work, for instance. Gray's *The History Maker* arrived yesterday. (I couldn't obtain the hardback, but had to buy the Penguin paperback.) I have bought most (or perhaps all) of Josephine Saxton's books, but am behind in reading them.

Thanks for the piece about Kim Stanley Robinson. I've read most of his short stories, but few of his novels. I must have a go at the Californian utopian books. They must be in the house somewhere.

To Steve:

I just don't believe the current writers are remarkably better than the best writers of the late forties and early fifties. They are certainly more verbose, which is why I can't be bothered with most of them. Look what's happened in the mystery field. For half a century few mysteries went over the 60,000–80,000-word limit. Suddenly you have P. D. James littering the book stalls with 150,000-word monsters, and everybody follows her lead. Very few of these blockbusters are as interesting as the lean little mysteries we used to read. Conciseness is all, especially in SF, which is why I like hundreds of SF short stories much better than all but a few novels.

I'd be the first to welcome some brilliant characterisation as well as Big Ideas. But is there better characterisation in current SF novels than there was during the Golden Age? I can't remember any distinctive characters in

any recent SF novels. Nobody goes quite as far as Greg Egan in deconstructing the *concept* of character (in *Quarantine*), but all the heroes of all current SF novels seem much alike to me. Greg Egan is more honest about it, that's all. In *Distress* he uses a character straight out of Benford or Bear and what seems like a typical American Big Idea, and turns the idea completely on its head.

Literary criticism of the SF field written during the late 1960s and the 1970s has certainly been important in shaping my thinking, but the five critics I've read most have been Brian Aldiss, Franz Rottensteiner, Stanislaw Lem, George Turner and John Foyster. Of these, Aldiss has the greatest understanding of SF, but perhaps likes it too much, Rottensteiner and Lem see mainly the flaws in the field, and Turner and Foyster like some SF but are implacably sceptical towards most of it. The latter attitude is closest to my own: SF and fantasy are all right in their place, but it's just a small province within the whole big wonderful continent of literature.

To Paul:

It seems to me that when you write an SF story you are trying to invent *something* of which the reader can say 'Wow! I never thought of that before'. But often those 'new' ideas are replies to somebody else's 'new' idea. That genre is a conversation is a notion that was reduced to its most simplistic (but perhaps most accurate) form in Sam Moskowitz's biographies of SF writers. In Sam's account, every SF idea is a ker-plunk in a never-ending tennis game in which SF writers try to keep ideas in the air, adding something new each time the idea pops up. If this is so (and Franz Rottensteiner, of all people, has written approvingly of Moskowitz's approach), a knowledge of the genre is essential for evaluating any particular story.

After all, what do most SF writers, especially American authors, read? Other people's SF stories.

To Ian:

I would just have to repeat what I've said. You believe SF is a great wave of quality, while I believe that since the mid-1970s it's been merely a great wave of quantity.

Wasp Factored

Thanks to **Kev McVeigh** for alerting me to Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory*. I bought the novel years ago because of **Dave Langford**'s recommendation, but as with about seven-eighths of our books, I hadn't read it yet. Now I have read it . . .

It's *different*, isn't it? Different from anything I might have expected from reading Banks's later work. And it keeps undercutting expectations from one chapter to another. I kept thinking I knew what Banks was on about, but I realise from reading your essay, Kev, that I hadn't twigged at all. It occurred to me while reading the book that Eric might not exist, but rejected this idea by the time I finished. It really depends on what Angus was doing during the last pages of the book. Who did set fire to the dogs and sheep? Was it the father or the 'son'? I was disappointed by the ending, but your reading is valid.

I suppose some British fanzine (one of the many that nobody sends me) has already reprinted your article, Kev, but I'd certainly like permission to reprint it for Australian readers.

BOOKS READ RECENTLY

These are books read since 1 March 1996. The ratings are:

** = Books highly recommended.

* = Books recommended

☹ = Books about which I have severe doubts.

** *Distress*

by Greg Egan (1995; Millennium; 343 pp.)

I realise that the Clarke Award judges must be sick of *Distress*. We've talked about it a fair bit in *Acnestis*, but I never give up discussing a book I like. I see *Distress* as a series of dramatic metaphors loosely connected by a plot. The first metaphor in the novel is that of the man who dies, is revived very briefly, and in that moment realises the full horror of his own mortality. The book's other vivid metaphor is that of the island that is made of living matter; the main character descends through the middle of the island, as it dissolves into its constituent living particles. The Theory of Everything, which seems to be the main point of the novel, is shown to be a McGuffin; the main character's experiences during his stay on the mid-Indian Ocean island give him a small key to understanding. A novel that carries echoes of Benford and Bear proves to be a refutation of everything they stand for.

** *Eccentrics*

by David Weeks and Jamie James (1995; Phoenix; 198 pp.)

Jamie James adds a journalist's touch to David Weeks's research into the nature of eccentrics. Weeks found, rather to his surprise, that he was the first person to investigate the subject. Giving a structure to his research proved difficult. Eccentrics do not end up in institutions, since they prove to live happy, enjoyable and long lives. The story of formulating research criteria is as interesting as Weeks's conclusions. James, I presume, provides the concise, chatty style and the examples for the historical chapters.

* *Permutation City*

by Greg Egan (1994; Millennium; 310 pp.)

As I've said elsewhere in the mailing, this is a hard slog, even for an Egan fan such as me. Egan's images for the main characters' ideal city seem to be unoriginal and hardly worth exploring, while the splintering of viewpoints destroys most of one's interest in following the story. For some other reader, the ideas and images might congeal into illuminating metaphors; for me, they just congeal.

** *The Blue Mountain in Mujani*

by Aini Vavere (1988/1990; Penguin; 173 pp.)

Published by Penguin Australia, this fine collection of short fiction about growing up Latvian/Australian was mainly ignored when it first appeared. A pity, since this has the humour and sharpness of observation and dialogue that are hard to find in most Australian general fiction. The main characters are not satisfied with the restrictions of the traditional life style; on the other end, they don't easily come to terms with things Australian. Vavere lets us experience that knife edge without making easy conclusions.

* *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton*

by Shari Benstock (1994; Penguin; 546 pp.)

This was supposed to be the authoritative biography of Edith Wharton, because Benstock was the first writer to have access to the letters from Wharton to her lover during the affair that biographers had not even known about until recently. *No Gifts from Chance* shows that great biography is not founded purely on exhaustive research. Benstock remains outside her subject; she hurries through many matters that should have been explored, and provides too much detail about Wharton's endless wanderings around Europe. Benstock's Wharton is an insider within a lost world of privilege; the author of *The Age of Innocence* was both fully inside and totally outside her own society. Benstock never gets to grips with that outsider quality in Wharton, for that would mean getting to grips with the fiction itself. Benstock is unwilling or unable to do this.

** *Faith Fox: A Nativity*

by Jane Gardam (1996; Sinclair-Stevenson; 312 pp.)

Even so perceptive a critic as Brenda Niall (in *The Age*) was inclined to belittle this book because it seemed to deal with minor, domestic matters. A baby is left alive after her mother dies; the characters are trying to work out what to do with the baby. This approach ignores the major, muscly nature of the prose itself; the best prose I've read this year. Gardam has an astonishing ability to create character through dialogue, then weld dialogue and description of landscapes into a metaphor for the world as it is today. Yet Gardam's writing is without pomposity; she does everything through skilful prose and brilliant story-telling.

** *The Memory Cathedral: A Secret History of Leonardo da Vinci*

by Jack Dann (1995; Bantam; 487 pp.)

In writing a novel that seems to account for Leonardo da Vinci's adventures during four years that are lost to historians, Jack Dann has avoided the temptation to write a Moorcock-style SF or fantasy novel. Instead he has attempted to recreate the contradictory chaos of Renaissance Italy, and later the sixteenth-century Ottoman and Arab world. We know that many of Leonardo's inventions might have been built if somebody had had the money and vision to do so. When Leonardo falls foul of nearly everybody in Italy (this process is the most interesting section of the novel) he finds himself whisked off to help found a new empire based on his inventions. Most other SF writers would have made this into a wish-dream narrative; instead Jack Dann constructs an interpersonal labyrinth of betrayal and counter-betrayal. Despite all the adventures and derring-do, *The Memory Cathedral* is about trying to remain humane within a dehumanised world. But it's a great yarn as well.

** *The Wasp Factory*

by Iain Banks (1984; Futura; 184 pp.)

(Already discussed, somewhere above.) The naïve-child style works particularly well here: the protestations of innocence (doesn't everybody kill a sibling or two when he feels like it?) combined with some wonderfully nasty images gives a sort of airiness to the

narrative that stops it from being oppressive horror. I never quite knew what was going on; all suggestions welcome.

** *Lilian's Story*

by **Kate Grenville (1986; Allen & Unwin; 211 pp.)**

Kate Grenville is the first credible successor to Patrick White in Australian fiction. Other would-be Patrick Whites have tried to remind his prolix ambiguous prose, therefore missing White's real concern, the innermost soul of the secret person. Grenville's *Lilian*, the secret person talks to us in this novel, is said to be based on Bee Miles, a famous Sydney eccentric of the post-war years. Grenville retains the superficial aspects of Miles's life: the background of privilege, the ferocious heterodox opinions, the vagrant's life on the streets, her monstrous weight. What she adds is a complex, finely written inner life, the tale of a soul trying to find some relationship with the world. Very funny, very poignant. A recent Australian film is based on this novel, which is unfilmable, so I've avoided the film.

** *The Moth*

by **James M. Cain (1949; Robert Hale; 356 pp.)**

I can't remember how I came upon this novel. It's an Australian printing of the first British edition; not rare, I suspect, but an interesting curiosity. British publishers with a guaranteed best-seller occasionally do separate printings from the British plates for the Australian market. This edition of *The Moth* suggests that James Cain was doing pretty well in Australia in 1949, although the novel itself is no longer reprinted. A great pity, since it is a major novel about surviving in America through the Depression. The 'moth' of the title is the story-teller, an ordinary chap who seems guaranteed a good living until the Depression hits him and his family. Investments made by his father become valueless. Keeping a good job depends on marrying the boss's daughter. The main character escapes the situation, endures all the vicissitudes of hobo life during the Depression, and fetches up in California, where he begins a new life. A very American tale, but made attractive by Cain's knowledge of the practicalities of staying alive and his brisk, self-mocking style. Cain's work always seems ripe for a major revival; I hope that when it comes, *The Moth* will be given back its rightful rank as a major American novel.

* *Temples of Delight*

by **Barbara Trapido (1990; Michael Joseph; 318 pp.)**

A novel I bought because I read its first paragraph in a book shop. '[Jem] had appeared, "like a dropped acorn", halfway through the term, halfway through the week, halfway through the Silent Reading Hour.' The relationship between star-struck Alice and Jem, the brilliant girl who gives not a fig for anyone, makes the first half of the novel a sparkling entertainment. With the disappearance of Jem from the school and seemingly from Alice's life, the book bogs down, and never recovers. Which wouldn't have been so bad if, beneath the brilliance of Trapido's bantering observation, she hadn't revealed a heart of pure Mills & Boon. If you like conventionally romantic novels, you'll probably like the second half.

** *I Served the King of England*

by **Bohumil Hrabal (1989; Chatto & Windus; 243 pp.)**

Nudging *Faith Fox* and *Lilian's Story* for best novel of 1995 is this bracing breeze of a novel by the major

Czech novelist of the generation that lived during World War II. Like many of the best novels I've read in recent years, this is told from the viewpoint of a *faux naïf*, a cherty little chap who aims to become a head waiter, then during the ups and downs of the Nazi Occupation becomes first the owner of a restaurant, then a prisoner in the world's most easy-going prisoner-of-war camp. All these high jinks have, no doubt, a vast layer of meaning for the book's Czech readership. For me, the author has a great ability to be inside the main character and outside him. Hrabal 'paints' the mind of the main character, blending it like an art object into his picture of the land itself as it survives that period between 1920s and the late 1940s. A book of many intoxicating pages.

☞ *Shroud for a Nightingale*

by **P. D. James (1971; Sphere; 323 pp.)**

From the sublime (Hrabal) to the mechanical (James). It's as if P. D. James bought a textbook on how to construct a mystery novel, then painfully built one. Creak, grind, creak. There's not much point solving the mystery if you don't give a stuff about any of the people who are threatened or who might have dunnit.

** *Court of Memory*

by **James McConkey (1983; Dutton; 338 pp.)**

An odd book. It's made up of personal essays written over more than 25 years. Some are brilliant; some are not. It depends on what you think of the literary persona of James McConkey, an American academic who seems determined to show himself as the best of all possible people — but humble, oh so humble: self-abnegation from a great height. Despite my feeling that I was being conned by a humourless Garrison Keillor, I was fascinated by some fine prose. McConkey's relationship with his father, and then with his own family, inform many of the book's best pages. He writes some very sane things and tells some vivid stories, but also lapses into unconvincing theories about memory.

☞ *Fantastic Alice*

edited by **Margaret Weis (1995; Ace; 291 pp.)**

It's a long while since I've read any of the vast number of original fiction SF anthologies that are stacked in boxes all over this room. I picked this one because it's a (relatively) recent review copy, and because the stories claim to pay tribute to my two favourite novels, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. I can't begin to guess what Margaret Weis told her authors when she commissioned these stories. Criminal misdirection, I would call it. Nearly all the authors plump for itty-bitty pieces based on some of the images from Carroll's books. A couple try to emulate his jokes. The horror! Only Peter Crowther uses Carroll as a valid take-off point, and even his story ('Conundrums to Guess') is just a story.

** *In the Presence of the Enemy*

by **Elizabeth George (1996; Bantam; 477 pp.)**

Like all mysteries these days, *In the Presence of the Enemy* is at least 200 pages too long. Given that annoyance, it's the best novel she's written since *For the Sake of Elena*. Better still, it's the novel she's been aiming for since *A Suitable Vengeance*, her extraordinary debut. Everything works here. The book is about its characters, not the mere solving of a mystery; but to solve the mystery one has to reinterpret the whole situation, not merely a bunch of facts. It sounds trite to say that every charac-

ter is closest to his or her 'enemy', to the person who can hurt most. George has a great ability to dramatise (sometimes hair-raisingly) the damage that parents and children and husbands and wives can inflict on each other; the laceration of interrelationship within interrelationship.

* *Love in Vein*
edited by Poppy Z. Brite (1995; HarperCollins Voyager; 433 pp.)

I might have liked this anthology a lot more if I hadn't read two Ellen Datlow anthologies on a similar theme (a special recommendation for *Blood Is Not Enough*). Datlow shows that an editor can produce a theme anthology while persuading her authors to leave out most of the clichés associated with the theme. Poppy Z. Brite does not have this ability. She seems to enjoy many of the clichés of vampirism/eroticism. Fortunately, a few of her writers have an original turn of mind. Jessica Amanda Salmonson ('The Final Fete of Abba Adi') also has wit and style. Where might the vampire legend have come from originally — perhaps a few millennia before Transylvania? Other four-star stories are 'Queen of the Night' (Gene Wolfe), 'In the Soul of a Woman' (Charles de Lint) and 'The Alchemy of the Throat' (Brian Hodge).

** *Dirty Laundry*
by Paul Thomas (1996; Mandarin Australia; 271 pp.)

One of the few enjoyable review copies I've received recently. This is a heady mixture of mystery, adventure and satire which works because it is never settles down into a category. A routine murder mystery becomes a free-for-all exposure of the peculiarities of the New Zealand's governing classes, which in turn becomes an exhilarating knockabout search-and-find caper.

** *Dark Places*
by Kate Grenville (1994; Macmillan; 375 pp.)

Lilian's Story (reviewed above) gave Lilian Singer's version of growing up under the influence of her father. *Dark Places* gives Albion Singer's version of the same events. What a technical masterpiece! Grenville not only brings to life a male character, but gives validity to an entirely unsympathetic character. Singer is the ultimate Victorian head of the household; as he says of himself, his aim in life is 'domination and reproduction'. Nobody within his orbit must be allowed independent action or thought. Grenville tells the story from Singer's viewpoint while remaining unsympathetic to everything he says. To do this, she shows how his civilisation makes him into the madman he becomes; yet somehow we can still see through his eyes. Yet another proof that Kate Grenville has made herself into Australia's leading prose writer.

— Last page written 30 June 1996