
Scratch Pad 19

Based on the non-Mailing Comments section of *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life*, No. 8, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the October 1996 mailing of Acnestis.

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SUFFICIENTLY DECADE

In January this year Jean Weber wrote to me offering me the honour of Fan Guest of Honour at the 1999 World Convention if Melbourne won the bid in September. As I wrote back to her, I thought I was beyond surprise in fandom. Why me? Why not or? Or even or? In several cases, I can guess why X or Y were crossed off the list: because they were unlikely to turn up at Aussiecon III. I benefited from faulty fan memories. True, like Katisha, I'm sufficiently decayed — by September 1999 I will have been in fandom for over 31 years — but I'm a fannish spring chicken compared with several other people, including at least two living Sydney fans who joined fandom before World War II.

I have three years to worry about my Guest of Honour Speech, so I won't squander one possible topic: Fannish Giants Who Should Be Guest of Honour Instead of Me. A pretty boring topic, but it should be good for an hour or so if I can't think of anything else. (Whether anybody turns up to the Fan GoH Speech or not, I must give it. All ideas welcome.)

The year that wasn't

That letter from the Aussiecon III Bidding Committee was a great start to the year, but greatness did not bless the rest of the year.

First, I paid a fortune (I keep saying 'a small fortune'; hah! it was a dinkum *fortune*) to publish two issues of *Metaphysical Review*.

The washing machine died. \$1000 to buy another one. (The old one was secondhand, and not repairable.)

The tax bill arrived, with only two months to pay it. That would have been okay, if I'd thought to save the likely amount.

The lights needed replacing.

My mother, in her late seventies, was feeling well until this year, but recently she's had a couple of falls. No bones broken, but even she is feeling mortal these days.

The CD player died, after 11 years of sterling service. Most CD players last only a few years. We thought ours was

immortal. It wasn't. We played a lot of LPs (remember vinyl?) while waiting to be able to afford a new player. The new player is superb, but I would have liked to have put up with the old one until I had paid all my debts from the beginning of the year.

And then . . . and then . . .

I write little about my paying work in fanzines because my paying work is as boring as the next fan's. Officially I'm a freelance book editor. In fact, since 1984 I've had an arrangement with the secondary education section of local Macmillan (offshoot of Basingstoke Macmillan, not Maxwell's Macmillan): they throw me a guaranteed amount of work every month and I put their work before anybody else's. I'm not a 'contractor' because neither of us has ever signed a contract, but the arrangement has worked nicely since then.

One big problem — the arrangement was always been between me and Brian McCurdy, head of secondary education. I've done freelance work for Macmillan since 1974, but until 1984 it was very irregular work. In July 1984 I was earning less than the minimum wage from freelancing when I rang Brian to see if anything had turned up. He was surprised to hear that I had had no freelance work for six weeks. 'We must do something about that,' he said. And he did. The beginning of the arrangement was a bit rocky, because at that stage I was feeling too ill to do all the work that was flung at me. Also, Brian asked me to work in at Macmillan's South Melbourne office for two years while I learned how to handle books the Macmillan way.

In 1986 the arrangement became far more comfortable when Macmillan lent me the money to buy my own computer (an AT: two 360K drives; 620K RAM), and improved further in 1992 when Elaine bought me the 386 and I began desktop-publishing using Ventura 3 and a Hewlett Packard 300-dpi laser printer.

The first sign of changes in the arrangement showed up about two years ago, when I had to buy a 600-dpi printer to continue producing camera-ready copy. During the last year or so rapid changes in the publishing industry have

A Letter from ANDREW WHITMORE

Dear Bruce

Here is the decoded note from *Red Shift*. You will be immediately aware, after having read it, that only a truly cretinous intelligence could consider it to be anything other than a note written about their final meeting (so it does belong at the end of the book and it is the last word on their relationship). . . .

I think you should read William Faulkner, because the similarities between Garner (or what I think Garner says) and Faulkner are quite remarkable. . . .

The note from *Red Shift* is:

'I love you. If you can read this you must care. Help me. I'm writing before we meet, because I know it'll be the last. I'll put the letter in your bag, so you'll find it on the train afterwards. I'm sorry. It's my fault. Everything's clear, but it's too late. I'll be at Crewe next time. If you don't come I'll go to Barthomley. I love you. The smell of your hair will be in my face.'

Very touching. I leave it to you to fathom the significance of it to the book.

If you see George Turner, tell him that 'Tom's a-cold' is a quote from Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Act III, Scene iv), where Edgar is running around disguised as a madman. All Tom's quotes on the last few pages of *Red Shift*

come from there. Or did you already know that? I can't remember who George said the quote came from. I thought he said Dickens, but I mightn't have been listening. There's no reference to 'Tom's a-cold' in Tom O'Bedlam's Song, though, so it would seem that it doesn't go further back than Shakespeare. I'm not sure what significance this has, but I thought that it might interest you.

To decode the note at the back of *Red Shift*, write 'Tomsacold' repeatedly under the message, so that for each letter of the note you have two referents (e.g., for the first word you would have PT, then XO, CM, OS, EA, etc.). Then you need a grid twenty-six by twenty-six:

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

A	abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyza
B	bcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyzab
C	cdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyzabc
D	defghijklmnopqrstuvwxyzabcd
E	efghijklmnopqrstuvwxyzabcde

and so on for the whole alphabet. Then all you do is use the two referents as co-ordinates on the grid. Thus, as an example, EA gives 'e' as the translated letter. This information will undoubtedly be of use if Alan Garner should ever decide to write a sequel to *Red Shift*.

(8 July 1977)

sidelined (or sideswiped) my little enterprise. Desktop publishers are now expected to provide jobs on computer files that can be converted directly into film. Without owning a Macintosh, which I can't afford, I can't do this to Macmillan's satisfaction, although at the beginning year I spent \$1700 on Quark XPress 3.31 for Windows.

The final blow (it seemed) came in early August this year, when Brian rang to say that he was taking early retirement at the end of that month. My nice little world seemed to have fallen in. It might still do so. Brian has retired, after (as I can see now) spending several years training three or four people to take his place. Few people are privileged to work for a really effective, pleasant boss who is brilliant at solving problems instead of causing them. Brian McCurdy leaves quite a gap, although at the moment there seems no reason why I can't work with his successor(s). The Arrangement, as I think of it, still exists, but work has become much more difficult. It is much harder to pile up hours from editing than it is from desktop publishing. Like most people in this country, suddenly I seem to be working harder than ever and earning less.

It's a familiar story. The only real surprise in it is the neatness of the arrangement that has existed during the last twelve years. I feel like I'm still standing on a precipice. Will I be pushed over the edge? Will I jump? Or will I continue ambling along the edge, as I've been doing since 1984?

What have I been doing recently apart from worrying about work (waking up at 5 a.m. suffering from Quark nightmares, fghodsake!) or hoping that Zagreb might win the bid for 1999? Not a lot, apart from reading and listening to music. I'll include my usual Recent Reading list somewhere in this issue. I should be publishing fanzines, but I

don't feel creative at the moment.

A few months ago I agreed to give one half of a Nova Mob talk on the novels of Iain Banks. (The Nova Mob, which meets on the first Wednesday of each month, is Melbourne's highly informal SF discussion group.) Race Mathews offered to talk about the SF novels of Iain M. Banks at the November meeting, so stupidly I volunteered to talk about Banks's non-SF novels. When I made the offer I had read one of them (*Complicity*). I'm beginning to catch up. Dirk Strasser had asked me to be a judge of one of the sections of the annual Aurealis Awards for Best Australian SF, but I wriggled out of that one because recently I've been reading only about four books a month. Banks seems to be producing novels at this rate.

Meanwhile, Elaine volunteered to give a talk on the works of R. A. Lafferty to the October meeting of the Nova Mob. Already she's read vast amounts of Lafferty, and I'm looking forward to her talk.

I still haven't written back to **Elizabeth and Paul Billinger** to thank them for (a) making me a member of the BSFA for the first time in at least ten years, (b) sending me *A Very British Genre* and the latest bundle of BSFA stuff, especially *Vector*, and (c) offering to arrange a method by which I can gain some recent back issues of *Vector*. (Any good interviews with Iain Banks, or even Iain M. Banks?) Please tell me which Australian SF books *are* reaching Britain before I begin filling the gaps.

The amazing thing about leafing through *Vector* is to find that most of the members of Acnestis write scads of reviews as well as contributing to this apa. Such energy. (I remember when I had energy.)

BOOKS READ RECENTLY

These are books read since the end of June 1996. The ratings are:

** Books highly recommended.

* Books recommended

☞ Books about which I have severe doubts.

** ***No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* by Anthony Cronin (Paladin 0-586-09011-8; 1990; 290 pp.)**

Australia's John Bangsund made Flann O'Brien (Brian O'Nolan) famous throughout fandom when he began to write new 'Keats and Chapman' stories in his fanzines. In mundane literary circles, O'Brien's reputation has been growing steadily during the last thirty years. Cronin's story is not just a biography, since it is partly Cronin's biography as well: writers drinking and knocking around Dublin, forever trying for the big success that never happened. O'Brien's story is that of a writer-against-himself, a dour and snappish alcoholic who wrote funny books, a man who wrote some classic Irish novels, then disowned them in favour of doomed attempts to write a big commercial success. It's Cronin's story too, and that of post-independence Ireland. O'Brien's friends try to help him, but they can't; Ireland tries to lift itself by its bootstraps, but keeps falling over (at least during the central period of O'Brien's life). Here is a book filled with flawed, funny, sad people, etched clearly by Cronin: both great biography and illuminating social history.

* ***A Summons to Memphis***

by Peter Taylor (Knopf 0-394-41062-9; 1986; 209 pp.)

I discovered Peter Taylor because of a *Time* review of a book of his short stories. Taylor's literary persona is that of the sane Southern gentleman, the last of a nearly extinct group within American society. His prose is calm and ironic: never hysterical, never ornate. Under this guise of sanity, he writes about slightly skewed people. He does here, too, but his narrative is so well crafted and smooth that somehow the point of the story escapes me. I know that something really remarkable is revealed here somewhere, but I've never quite found it. (Taylor's books of short stories are more satisfying than this novel.)

* ***Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow***

by Peter Høeg (Harvill/HarperCollins; 1992; 409 pp.)

I realise that this is everybody else's favourite novel, but, well . . . could somebody please tell me what actually happens at the end? And what actually happened to the boy on the roof? Miss Smilla tells us at the end of the novel that she has had a blinding flash of inspiration, *but doesn't tell us what it is*. This is my Irritating Novel of the Year. Yes, it has lots of vivid stuff about snow, and Greenland, and the Inuit, but it is also a laborious novel, and the plot makes no sense at all. (Why does Smilla remain alive throughout the novel, when she should have been bumped off by the baddies within the first 30 pages?)

* ***Dream Weavers***

edited by Paul Collins (Penguin 14-02-026208-3; 1996; 283 pp.)

This is Paul Collins's latest anthology for Australian Penguin: stories of heroic fantasy and magic. The cover is striking and the package looks good, but not many of the stories are interesting. Some, such as Tony Shillitoe's 'The Innkeeper', have effective ideas, but the stories themselves plod, plod, plod, letting their ideas trail in the dust. The only stories with much fire to them are Russell Blackford's 'The Sword of God' (a gritty combination of sword-fightin', blood-lettin' and powerful magic) and Ian Haywood Robinson's 'The Crypt of Fleeting Hope' (an effective variation on the locked-room, which-door-should-I-choose? puzzle story). I don't know whether Penguin is releasing any copies of this edition in Britain; if it hasn't appeared there, I can always get copies for anybody who's interested.

** ***Ladder of Years***

by Anne Tyler (Chatto & Windus 0-7011-6302-X; 1995; 326 pp.)

Tyler's 1972 novel *The Clock Winder* (see below) has basically the same story as her latest novel *Ladder of Years*. A person leaves home, usually because he or she is too eccentric or wayward to stay there, and wanders into a situation in which other people come to lean on him or her (usually her). Eventually the new situation has the same constrictions as the old, and the heroine (usually) must make an ambiguous choice between the old and the new. When I read each new Tyler novel, I rarely notice the similarities between the plots until towards the end; I'm much too interested in the particular characters who hold centre-stage in this particular story. In *Ladder of Years*, the leading character walks away from a beach on which her family are holidaying. She hitches rides as far as she can, then settles in a small town, and vanishes from the sight of her family. But she must earn a living; she needs to find a place in this new society; and then she finds people leaning on her. The humour and perceptiveness of Tyler's writing is as brilliant as ever. Great pleasures remain in life, and reading Tyler's fiction is one of them. I just hope that next time she finds a new plot.

☞ ***The Anvil Chorus***

by Shane Stevens (Andre Deutsch 0-233-97807-0; 1985; 343 pp.)

I bought this novel because of a favourable review in a reputable journal, but it's a stinker. For the first third of the book, it has some of the bite of a Simenon novel, but eventually it becomes a very average variation on the theme of Nazis in hiding killing people in an attempt to find the gold that (of course) was smuggled out of Germany at the end of World War II. If this book had had any elegance or real cleverness, it might have been fun.

** ***A Dream Journey***

by James Hanley (Horizon Press 0-8180-0623-4; 1976; 368 pp.)

A few years ago, certain that I had discovered The Great Undiscovered British Writer, I bought as many James Hanley novels as I could lay my hands on. *A Dream Journey* is not great, and in parts it is so irritating that I nearly gave up reading it. I was glad I finished it;

it has that kind of lurid vividness that stays in the mind long after exemplary novels have been forgotten. Hanley has a manic style that tries to get the exact flavour and pitch of every lived experience. The trouble is that his main character is an alcoholic artist who hasn't painted for years, his life held together only by the concern and hard work of his distraught wife. The middle section describes the events that pitched them into hell; in particular, one night during the London blitz. The tale of this one night is remarkable, as Hanley captures the mixture of terror and elation that gripped people while they sheltered in basements during long nights of bombing. He writes a wonderful scene in which people stagger out of the house in the morning, stare into the blue sky, their faces full of the joy of living, and say 'It's a wonderful day! Isn't it a wonderful day!', free for a few hours from the sound of falling bombs. As a novel, *A Dream Journey* is strange; as an experience, it's unique.

* ***Walking on Glass***

by Iain Banks (Futura 0-7088-2774-8; 1985; 239 pp.)

It was Dave Langford who put me onto Iain Banks. In reviews published first in Britain, then reprinted by me in *SF Commentary*, he mentioned the first three Banks books, saying (more or less) that they were SF books by an author who didn't know yet that he was an SF author. Banks discovered the real stuff soon enough, and decided to become The SF Author Named Iain M. Banks. I hope the early novels do not fall out of print. They are learner's novels; full of piss and vinegar, but ending with nothing more than 'It was all a dream, and then I woke up'. *Walking on Glass* tells three parallel stories that eventually are shown to be linked. One of those stories, seemingly science-fictional until near the end of the novel, proves to be another 'it was all a dream' yarn. This book has too many tricks, and not enough real feeling, to be satisfying, but it also shows plenty of Banks's humour and vigorous style.

** ***The Clock Winder***

by Anne Tyler (Arena 0-09-946960-X; 1972; 254 pp.)

As I've mentioned already, the plots of *The Clock Winder* and *Ladder of Years* are very similar, but Tyler's style was already so well formed in 1972 that one can easily go back to this early novel. An older woman is left a widow; she hires a young woman to look after her, but the young woman insists on being nothing more than the handyman. The older woman comes to depend on the younger, but also takes her for granted. The younger woman returns to her family; there she is again sucked into the all-enclosing family. Which 'family' should claim her? The novel works because all the characters

leap off the page; in fact, I cannot think of another novelist who can keep ten characters talking vividly at a dinner party without causing confusion or boredom to the reader. Highly skilled and satisfying.

** ***CivilWarLand in Bad Decline***

by George Saunders (Jonathan Cape 0-224-04247-5; 1996; 179 pp.)

George Turner sent me a copy of this book at about the time somebody mentioned it in *Acnestis*. Nice coincidence. Saunders writes bitter comedy that reminds me of Tom Lehrer mixed with Garrison Keillor, without providing the easy laughs of either. You find yourself wincing as much as laughing: this is the near future in America, and it won't be fun. 'Bounty', the novella that ends the book, tells of a pilgrimage through a near-future USA undergoing a chaotic civil war; in other stories, characters work in weird, broken-down theme parks that might all be called *CivilWarLand*. There are moments of human redemption, but not many. Saunders seems to be saying: this is the America you voted for, mugs, and this is what it will be like to live in.

** ***The Bridge***

by Iain Banks (Pan 0-330-29715-5; 1986; 286 pp.)

If only Banks had felt self-confident enough at this stage of his career to write *The Bridge* entirely as SF or fantasy! Instead, it proves to be another 'I recovered and it was all a dream' novel. I enjoyed the world the main character appears to be inhabiting: a long bridge-city, stretching vast distances in each direction, inhabited by wonderfully old-fashioned trains, towers, walkways — and even an ancient elevator. Weird things happen; the bridge-city is a sort of genteel *BraziHland*. The tale of the bridge falters just as the background story comes into focus; the conceit nearly works.

** ***The Crow Road***

by Iain Banks (Abacus 0-349-10323-2; 1992; 490 pp.)

This is the masterpiece Iain Banks was working towards, and the masterpiece he may spend his career retreating from. *The Crow Road* is so well-made, so complex and intricate and interesting and passionate and vivid, that he is unlikely ever to do better than it. Must be a bummer to have this happen so early in a career. Generations of families overlap each other; various Scottish landscapes and cityscapes enfold into each other; everything is delicious, especially the disasters. I want to write something at length about *The Crow Road*, so I won't waffle on here. This is the Iain Banks book to read.

— Bruce Gillespie, 30 September 1996