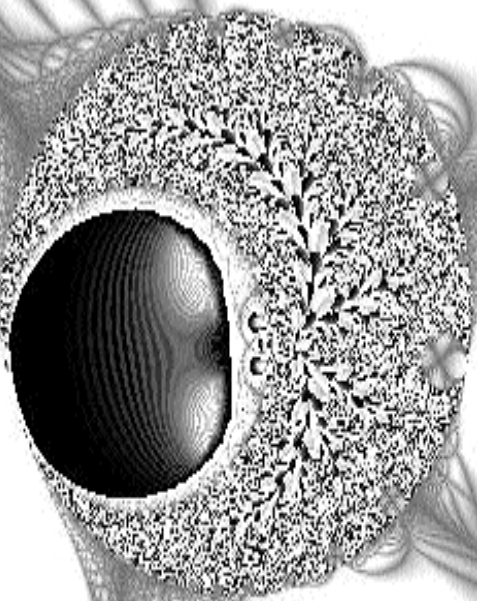


Scratch Pad

No. 24, August 1997

Burglings
George Turner
Book notes



Scratch Pad 24

Based on the non-Mailing Comments section of *brg* No. 19, 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 1997 ANZAPA (Australian and New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association) mailing. Cover: Ditmar, using DJFractals.

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AFTER THINGS FELL APART

At 10 p.m. on Sunday, 8 June 1997, we arrived home with Lucy Sussex and Julian Warner from visiting John Bangsund and Sally Yeoland at Geelong, to find that our house had been broken into for the first time in the eighteen and a half years we have lived here.

Terry and Hung will be familiar with the doomed sinking feeling that follows such a discovery, but it was new to us. Despite all the burglaries that keep happening around Melbourne, somewhere at the back of our mind we believed we were safe; it would never happen to us.

The burglars found it so easy to enter from the back of the house that it was only surprising that we had not been burgled years ago. Our locks were so feeble that there was no sign of forced entry on the back door or window. Because we had left home about midday, we had not left any lights on. Maybe some precaution as simple as that might have kept us safe.

When the burglars entered the place, they found that the door to my room was deadlocked. Using the pickaxe they found in the back shed, they smashed through the heavy door to my study, then prised the deadlock out of its socket. Wooden chips were all over the floor. The effort proved worthwhile: they took a bag containing Elaine's very expensive camera equipment, as well as my inexpensive beat box (CD player/radio/cassette player). A bracelet and a brooch, a legacy to Elaine from her grandmother, were carefully stolen so that it appeared no clothes had been disturbed. From the hall the burglars took the answerphone/fax machine, but luckily Elaine still had the old ordinary phone hidden away. We rang the police immediately.

A few minutes later, Judy Buckrich rang to tell us that George Turner had died. He had suffered a major stroke on Thursday night, but we had heard the news only 24 hours before. At least we were better prepared than most of George's friends, who had not heard about the stroke. Perhaps George died at the exact time when we were being

burgled.

The repercussions of that night will go on for the rest of our lives.

On the one hand, we don't feel safe anymore. We shouldn't have felt entirely safe before then, since Collingwood, an inner suburb, has been increasingly afflicted by drug-related crime during the last few years. Now we *really* don't feel safe. We've already had a security door put on the back door, and locks on all the windows. Since we've heard dozens of other people's burglary horror stories since 8 June, we've also installed a monitored alarm system. It's all insurance, not guaranteed safety; we will feel afflicted for some time to come. Since That Night I've suffered a few panic attacks, and have lost 6 kg.

Although we didn't, and still don't, feel like leaving the house at the same time, on Wednesday 11 June we left our house to attend George's funeral in St Kilda. It was a cold and overcast day. I'm not sure how many people attended the funeral. Someone mentioned a figure of 100. There were lots of people I thought would not be able to take time off. Many had not been prepared for the news.

I've never thought of George as a lighthearted person, but it's interesting how many amusing tales about him were told at the funeral.

John Bangsund spoke first. You can read most of what he said in the July *Ansible*. I also remember a heartstopping moment when Leigh Edmonds and I were introduced to Caesar the Great Dane. I get the impression that the nearest George's heart came to breaking was when he arrived home in 1970 after a year away to find that Caesar had been poisoned two weeks before. The novel *Transit of Cassidy* is George's tribute to Caesar.

I spoke next. I didn't speak very well, but then, I rarely do. I had found out the day before that I was supposed to say something. At 5 a.m. that morning I lay in bed trying to think of something pithy and pertinent. In the end, I wrote down nothing and took with me a few of George's docu-

ments to quote from. I remembered later all the things I wanted to say. This issue includes that later version.

Judy Buckrich is George Turner's biographer; her book should appear within the next year or so. She addressed her remarks as a letter to George, telling us his life's story. This was the real eulogy; the story of the man's achievement.

Andy Dunwoodie spoke last, introducing us to a much more mellow figure than the rest of us have ever met. Through Jim Dunwoodie, George's best friend of the last 25 years, George had become part of a large family living in Ballarat. When he moved to Ballarat after his first stroke, George became more than ever part of this other life. 'Uncle George' was how Andy described him; 'a plain man'. George was about as complicated a person as I've ever met, but it was moving to hear that he spent his last few years among people with whom he could be 'plain'.

After the funeral, Jim drew me aside. 'I think I should tell you that you're a beneficiary of George's will.' Me? Why?

Judy, John and Sally, Elaine and I went for lunch afterwards. On the way Elaine and I had bumped into Stephen Campbell, whom we had seen last about ten years ago. It was that sort of day.

We went to Scheherazade, the last of the great old St Kilda Jewish restaurants. I made the mistake of ordering chicken schnitzel, while the others were sensible enough to order nothing more filling than chicken soup.

Around the table we told lots more stories about George, and speculated about who would be George's literary executor. George had told John twenty years ago that *he* would be, but hadn't mentioned the matter again.

Next day, while we were still wading through insurance assessors, police and repairers and trying to do some of the piled-up freelance that pays the bills, Jim rang from Ballarat. George had made me his literary executor. How could this be? What does a literary executor *do*?

It's not even as if I ever felt particularly close to George. I had come to believe that there was a wall that George put between himself and everybody, and nobody crossed that wall. I didn't even try to cross it. George was one of the strongest father figures in my life, with all the disadvantages of that relationship as well as the advantages. I was also his publisher, first as publisher of a large percentage of his best reviews and critical articles, and then, with Carey and Rob in Norstrilia Press, as publisher of his only anthology of other people's writing, *The View from the Edge*, and the nearest he would permit himself to an autobiography, *In the Heart or in the Head: An Essay in Time Travel*. I was the only founder member of the Nova Mob who still attends today, and George once dedicated a book to the Nova Mob. And Elaine and I sent George the best of our LPs when we replaced them with CDs.

And although George knew my faults well enough, he knew that Elaine's strengths balanced my weaknesses.

But apart from that? I've looked for that computer file or scrap of paper that might explain George's reasoning in making me one of the only two beneficiaries of his will. (Jim, of course, is the other.) Nothing there. Even the Gillespie section in George's letter file is empty. Clever bastard, the old George; seems he's found a way of running the rest of

my life. Now I have to guess what he had in mind for its direction.

A week and a day after the funeral, Jim and Andy brought down George's remaining literary papers from Ballarat. There are few of them. The rest, the carbons of everything George wrote before he bought the computer, are still with Judy, who has been consulting them for the biography. I had hoped the manuscripts of the early novels would be with Judy, but they're not. George travelled lightly throughout his life.

I looked through George's computer files, and found that he had been using a long-disappeared program called Ezy, which is a cutdown version of WordStar. Since Elaine and I are the last people alive who use Windows 6.0 for DOS, I've had no trouble to retrieving George's unpublished manuscripts. No finished jewels, unfortunately, except the novel that's currently travelling America, but there's the first third of what would have been George's best novel since *The Sea and Summer (Drowning Towers)*. I've sent this material to George's American agent, Cherry Weiner.

Meanwhile, we've been working seven days a week, and waiting for cheques to appear, and wondering when the next burglary will take place (we know that a car was frightened away from the back lane that night; probably it was Them coming back for more). There's a knife street robber or robbers roaming Fitzroy.

Suddenly life seems dim.

It's not only that we've heard the news that Ian Gunn has cancer, which is much worse news than anything that's happened to us; or that the computer died yet again a week or so after the robbery (that's six hardware failures in eight months); or that we were hit by our first Word macro virus.

It's not just all these things. ('When will something *good* happen?' we keep saying to each other.) It's more the realisation that we've been too complacent, too lucky for too long; that the whole world has gone dingy while we've not been looking. Everybody, we find, has a worse burglary story than ours; when we walk up the street, we now see that most people look as if they're about to drop into the gutter. Who shafted Australia? Who allowed drugs to flood the street? Who unemployed Australia? We know the answer: the same people who shafted Britons and Americans and everybody else. But Australia had plenty of warning, yet still the politicians went down the slope of 'privatisation' and 'economic rationalism' i.e. 'unemploy as many people as possible, and tear the guts out of most people who are still employed'.

In 1977, during his first visit to Australia, Chris Priest was amazed that most Australians looked prosperous. He wouldn't say that now. Even the burglars are probably out of pocket.

There were eleven other burglaries around local streets during the long weekend when we were hit. It's a plague.

On the other hand, our neighbours who share our cul-de-sac back lane have clubbed together to place barbed-wire-capped gates at the end of the lane. That helps to protect four properties, plus two others whose back yards can be reached from the lane. It's not much defence against entropy, but it's something.

THAT UNRELENTING LOOK: TWO OR THREE THINGS I MEANT TO SAY ABOUT GEORGE TURNER AT HIS FUNERAL

Only death could stop George. He was not dismayed by the prospect. He finished another novel, still unpublished, and was hotfooting through another one. But a second, much more serious stroke felled him on 5 June 1997, and he died on 8 June. The day before the funeral, held in St Kilda on 11 June, I heard that I was expected to say a few words at the funeral. Those words were never written down, and they came out rather differently from what I had intended. Here is what I meant to say on that cold day in June.

Here is my most vivid memory of George. I could hear his voice at the other end of a telephone line. I was standing in a phone booth in North Carlton. It was the hottest day of the summer of 1968–69, and it was much hotter inside the phone booth than outside it. ‘George,’ I said, ‘I’m thinking of starting my own fanzine. I’d like you to contribute to it. Could I send you some books for review?’ ‘Certainly,’ he said. ‘Send the books. I’ll review them as soon as possible.’ Which he did. More than anything, this action of support kicked along the first issue of *SF Commentary*.

Another vivid memory, from nearly a year before. John Bangsund invited me to Ferntree Gully to meet the *ASFR* editorial crew as well as other well-known Melbourne writers and fans. Not that they were gathering to meet *me*, of course; it was the first time they had had a chance to meet George Turner. A year and half before, he had astonished *ASFR* readers with his comprehensive demolition of Alfred Bester’s *The Demolished Man*. He continued to pour out reviews and critical articles for *ASFR*. People were in awe of him, but nobody but John and Diane, his wife at that time, had met him.

I was so overawed by everybody I met during that weekend that I barely spoke. George Turner was particularly disconcerting. I would try to start an ordinary conversation. George would stop me dead in my tracks with a comprehensive statement with which I could neither agree nor disagree. Quite a few other people there had the same experience of George.

Little did we know that we were being subjected to the George Turner Unrelenting Look. Many years later he admitted to doing this deliberately: ‘I put on my unrelenting look — which children and small puppies tend to see through at once . . .’ (*SF Commentary* 52, p. 9). If you passed the test, you were okay. Many people over the years have not realised there was a test, let alone that they had failed.

I might have been fooled by George’s mock-ferocious mask if I hadn’t seen him talking to the few women present. There weren’t many women in Melbourne fandom in those days, and those who were regarded themselves as SF widows. Two of them, Elizabeth and Diane, took to George imme-

diately. And here was a different George — chatty, at ease, telling the odd joke. Perhaps this George Turner was not as unapproachable as he seemed.

He wasn’t, of course. George gave as much to any person as that person offered in return. I always found it easier to exchange letters with him than conduct a conversation over dinner. But there was always a conversation going on.

It was only much later that I realised what George’s unrelenting look was all about. In 1972, John Bangsund paid me the great compliment of producing an issue of his fanzine *Scythrop* under the title of *This Isn’t SF Commentary* 26. This magazine, which both sent up and praised *SF Commentary*, included an article by George called ‘The Phenomenon That Is Bruce Gillespie/*SFC*’. There George wrote:

‘I feel that if I could — just once — goad his [Gillespie’s] temper to the point of calling me a drivelling idiot, or if I could catch him doing an imitation of Mae West with a blonde wig and a couple of coconuts, I would be able to get below the surface personality and glimpse what goes on in the deeps.’

Over the years I had misremembered this as ‘If I could catch him *dancing on a table top* . . .’ When George and I were asked to be Guests of Honour at the 1999 World Convention to be held in Melbourne, I wrote to George saying, ‘You wrote in 1972 that you could never imagine me dancing on a table top. Let’s both do this at the Worldcon.’ George wrote back, ‘Yes. *En pointes*.’

I thought I had been observing and taking pointers from the great George Turner. It turns out he was observing me. He was observing us all. The unrelenting gaze was just his way of fooling us into thinking he hadn’t noticed us at all.

George owned up to fixing people with that look in an article he wrote about his experience of the 1977 Monash Writers’ Workshop. He was one of the ringleaders, along with Vonda McIntyre and Chris Priest. His article comes over as a concentrated primer on how to write fiction. Writers’ workshops became one of George’s most satisfying occupations during the last 20 years of his life. Even the failures, he wrote, were in a sense a success. ‘To learn that there is something essential which you can’t do is more useful than attracting praise for something you do easily.’

And how’s this for the George Turner credo? ‘My feeling is that the real writer, the one whose only diet is red-black ribbon, cannot be deterred, crushed, or blown out by anything short of the collapse of civilisation.’ George was still writing until his last days: still looking, still thinking. All we can do for his memory is to follow his example.

— Bruce Gillespie, July 1997

BOOKS READ RECENTLY

These are books read since the beginning of March 1997. The ratings are:

** Books highly recommended.

* Books recommended.

** ***Heartsease* by Lee Harding**
(Angus & Robertson/Bluegum 0-207-19096-8; 1997; 242 pp.)

Lee Harding, unpublished for much too long, returns with his best book so far (although I still hope that *The Weeping Sky* is reprinted one day). It's not science fiction, although in it Harding keeps close attention to some of the 1990s' more disturbing current social movements. *Heartsease* is a tale of loss, as a teenager tries to act in the best way possible as he finds his father's attention and affections slipping away from the family. This is a lively narrative, with no histrionics; I read it at a sitting.

* ***A New Lease of Death***

by Ruth Rendell (Panther 586-02686-X; 1967; 192 pp.)

This is a very early Ruth Rendell Inspector Wexford mystery, with far too many stretched plot twists and hysterical last scenes. The necessary correlative of the statement 'Ruth Rendell keeps improving all the time' is that she was a pretty rough writer in the 1960s and early 1970s. *A New Lease of Death* is one of several Rendell mysteries (much repeated on TV) where Wexford reinvestigates old puzzles; the red herring is much more interesting than the solution.

* ***Explorers of the Infinite: Shapers of Science Fiction***

by Sam Moskowitz (Meridian M202; 1963; 354 pp.)

Thanks, Alan Stewart, for lending this to me. I read it because it contains one of SaM's two mini-biographies of Olaf Stapledon. While I was reading it, Moskowitz died. I considered writing something lengthy about the unique, even zany viewpoint that was the Moskowitz Critical Attitude (more or less: 'Every science fiction story draws its ideas from some previous science fiction story'). But I also remember with affection my discovery of Moskowitz's biographical essays in early 1960s *Amazing* and *Fantastic*. 'Science fiction writers are real human beings!' was my amazed reaction to SaM's pieces. (Are SF writers still afflicted by so much pain, sadness and poverty?) Most of *Explorers'* little biographies are scrappy, but some of them, such as 'Space Opus: Philip Wylie' are worthwhile memorials to valuable authors who now almost forgotten.

** ***Tourists***

by Lisa Goldstein (Simon & Schuster 0-671-67531-1; 1989; 239 pp.)

Lisa Goldstein is one of those authors whose books I've kept buying although I hadn't read any of them. I picked up this novel from the vast book case of as-yet-unread books, and couldn't put it down. It's difficult to describe Goldstein's special talent. She knows what to leave out, which is a good start. Is the story itself original, or does the pert sparkiness of her style make it seem so? This is a story of Americans living for a year in a Middle Eastern country. The revolution takes

place, but this is not a story so much of the Americans' physical survival as of their magical discoveries. Goldstein has a weird and amusing angle on events. I'm looking forward to her other books.

** ***From Time to Time***

by Jack Finney (Simon & Schuster 0-671-89884-1; 1995; 303 pp.)

I could hardly hope that this sequel would be as enjoyable as *Time and Again*, Finney's classic SF/fantasy novel, but it's pretty good. Given that we already know the gimmick (that time travellers somehow pass from one era to another through any place that remains exactly the same in each era), Finney rings some interesting changes. Simon Morley, willing refugee in 1890s New York from our era, is drafted back into service, and finds himself in a vividly recreated New York of 1912. Can he change history or not? Who is the mysterious gal who seems to pop up behind every lamp post?

** ***Live Flesh***

by Ruth Rendell (Arrow 0-09-950270-4; 1986; 272 pp.)

For most of its length *Live Flesh* is a fine novel about a seriously disturbed chap who comes very close to finding redemption. His undoing seems to be more the fault of the lever-puller than that of the helpless character. Rendell could have made this into a major novel about mental illness and violence, but allows its ending to degenerate into thriller (or even horror) cliché. Perhaps 'Barbara Vine' would have done this right.

** **'The Ghosts'**

by Lord Dunsany (Creative Education Inc. 0-88682-494-X; 1993; 31 pp.)

This is a very short story to which Creative Education have given sumptuous illustrations and a large type face. Dick Jenssen lent it to us to prove how useful mathematics can be in a difficult situation. I assume that the story itself turns up in Dunsany collections.

** ***Collected Poems***

by Philip Larkin, edited by Anthony Thwaite (Faber & Faber 0-571-15196; 1988; 330 pp.)

Britain's Philip Larkin and Australia's Philip Hodgins are the two poets whose work led me back to enjoying poetry. Therefore reading Larkin's *Collected Poems* was to be my Big Enjoyable Project for the year. To some extent it has been, but I still felt a slight letdown. Including the 'Early Poems 1938-1945' was not a great idea, although some of the early poems (especially 'Night-Music') are as fine as anything Larkin did later. The problem is that lyric poetry rarely carries the weight that readers expect from it. While 'Aubade', which sums up all my own thoughts about impending death, is probably the greatest British poem since Eliot's best, and 'Church Going' and 'The Dance' are worth buying the book for, many of the other poems seem merely brilliant outpourings of spleen. Most of these poems are about the limits of Larkin's experience and expectations, and no amount of technical brilliance can hide the narrowness of their focus. Equally, nothing can hide their lyrical deftness: Larkin's ability to put all the right words in the right

places often seems magical. This is how good poetry should be; why, then, can it not *do* more?

** *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*

by Andrew Motion (Faber & Faber 0-571-15174-4; 1993; 570 pp.)

Are all writers miserable sods, or just the brilliant ones? It's not every poet who has had a Nazi for a father, but apart from this inconvenience during his early life, Larkin doesn't seem to have been too hit by circumstances. Nevertheless an air of gloom hangs over this life. Larkin's experience of growing up stopped him from marrying, which was annoying to quite a few women who at various times very much wanted to marry him. Larkin's efforts to keep each woman from knowing too much about the other, while trying to run a library and write the odd poem or two, provides much of the humour in the book. Motion does his best to understand his subject, but gives the impression that he was left scratching his head. Why did Larkin fear death so much from such an early age? What is the essential connection between Larkin's limited view of life and the technical brilliance of his poetry? Motion does a fine job of illuminating as much of his subject as is ever likely to be visible.

** *The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy* edited by Jonathan Strahan & Jeremy G. Byrne (HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-5751-4; 1997; 365 pp.)

It always seemed unlikely to me that any major publisher in Australia would take on such a volume. Lo! the tide has turned, and here's the evidence that Australian SF and fantasy has been developing well over recent years. Given that Strahan and Byrne, co-editors of *Eidolon* magazine, run no stories from rival magazine *Aurealis*, the *Year's Best* covers a wide range of fiction drawn from Australian and overseas sources. My own favourite story is Marele Day's 'A Man and His Dreams', an underplayed magic realist fable, but I also gave four stars to the two main pieces of science fiction, Greg Egan's 'Silver Fire' and Andrew Whitmore's 'Ilium', and a fair number of the fantasy stories, especially Simon Brown's 'The Mark of Thetis', Russell Blackford's 'The Sword of God', and Sean Williams' funny horror story 'Passing the Bone'. There were very few stories I did not like, which makes this *Year's Best* an attractive package.

** *London Under London: A Subterranean Guide*

by Richard Trench and Ellis Hillman (John Murray 0-7195-5288-5; 1984/1993; 240 pp.)

Maureen Kincaid Speller, from Acnestis, my other apa, sent me this. One of the best presents I've received for a long time. In Acnestis I'd said I was interested in the London Underground train system, but I had no idea until I read this book and looked at the magnificent illustrations just how much goes on under London (or any city). The book begins with the role of London's tunnels during World War II, then moves back in time to the ancient rivers, some of which can still be found, and moves historically from there to the building of the sewer, water, gas, electricity, traffic and other underground systems. Don't Londoners sometimes look down and wonder when the pavement will cave in?

** *The Stone Axe of Burkamukh*

by Mary Grant Bruce (Ward Lock & Co.; 1922; 246 pp.)

I would never have expected to find a rare book at my mother's house. She's been given a set of first editions of Mary Grant Bruce's books. Most of them are in the

'Billabong' series, which appeared during World War I and during the twenties and thirties. I couldn't face rereading them, but I did find one of my favourite books of my childhood, *The Stone Axe of Burkamukh*. In it Mary Grant Bruce collects thirteen major Aboriginal legends. K. Langloh Parker's collection *Legendary Tales* (1896) was still the standard source when I was a child, but Bruce is a better writer. Although the legendary element in each story tells the origins of various features of the Australian landscape, the stories themselves turn on amusing incidents arising from universal human frailties. A highly readable book, which should be kept in print.

* *The Impostor (Thomas l'imposteur)*

by Jean Cocteau (Citadel Press; 1923; 132 pp.)

Dick Jenssen lent me this in the hope that I would discover a Great Work. I suspect that the writing is much better than the English translation (Dorothy Williams) reveals; there seems to be a murky pane of glass set between this slight tale and me. 'The impostor' of the title is taken to be the son of a general. On the strength of this, he scoots around France's World War I battle lines, accompanying an unlikely crowd of refugees, revelling in the surrealistic chaos of wartime. In English this has a peremptory, rushed tone; no doubt in French the prose seemed more poetic.

** *Notes*

by Eleanor Coppola (Pocket Books 0-671-83583-1; 1978; 270 pp.)

Eleanor Coppola's film *Hearts of Darkness* resulted from the events described in this diary — the making of husband Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. Her film is very much about the making of *AN* and the near-unmaking of everybody involved. Eleanor Coppola's short, poignant book is about the unravelling of her marriage (I think it failed later) — about her partial disintegration and the gathering up the pieces when they all went home to California. It takes a particular kind of courage to follow in someone else's footsteps, then discover one's own path instead. Although Eleanor Coppola does not point out her own strengths, this courage is what I remember best from *Notes*. Thanks to Race Mathews for lending this to me.

** *Gather Yourselves Together*

by Philip K. Dick (WCS Books 1-878914-05-7; 1994; 291 pp.)

I asked people not to give me presents for my 50th birthday, but fortunately Justin and Jenny Ackroyd did not hear me. Thanks for *Gather Yourselves Together*. It's the last but one of Philip Dick's non-SF novels to be published. This might imply some inferiority to his other non-SF and SF novels written during the early 1950s, but that's not the way I read it. It tells of three American characters who are left behind for a week in a Chinese factory complex in 1949 after the company has pulled out and before the Chinese forces arrive. Two of the Americans had met each other some years before; they had been lovers briefly. The other is a raw innocent. The three wander around the empty complex; their lives become relinked; a kind of magic takes place. What's astonishing is how good a writer Dick was during this early part of his career; and in particular how fine these unpublished non-SF novels were compared to much of Dick's published work at the time.

** *David Lean*

by Kevin Brownlow (Richard Cohen Books 1-86066-

042-8; 1996; 810 pp.)

Kevin Brownlow, perhaps the world's best cinema writer and archivist (*Hollywood, The Parade's Gone By*, Abel Gance's *Napoléon*) meets David Lean, the most successful British film director. The biography could have gone in any direction. The problem that seems to have faced the biographer was that the subject became decreasingly attractive as the films became increasingly interesting. Lean, the one British director who escaped the limitations of the British cinema industry, is surveyed by a biographer who does his best to tell the whole truth about the man and the work. Given that David Lean turns out to be a cold fish who deserted his women and often treated colleagues badly, it's remarkable that *David Lean* the book is such an exhilarating experience. Lean lived through cinema; so does Brownlow. Brownlow reveals all and excuses nothing about Lean the man, yet examines the achievement so meticulously that I wanted to see all those films again immediately. Lean saw life, especially after the mid-fifties, as a huge boys' own adventure, so Brownlow goes along for the ride. This huge book contains lots of superb stills, plus exhaustive notes and index.

** *At the Caligula Hotel*

by **Brian Aldiss (Sinclair-Stevenson 1-85619-568-6; 1995; 99 pp.)**

In the past I have never been impressed by Brian Aldiss's poems when they've appeared in his novels and anthologies. Nevertheless *At the Caligula Hotel* is a

very satisfying collection, in its own way the most enjoyable book I've read this year. Aldiss's poetic voice is heartwarming in a way that Philip Larkin's never could be, and in many poems just as musical and deft. Remarkably fine lyrics include 'Moonglow: For Margaret' and 'All Things Transfigure', but my favourites in the collection include funny-haha poems such as 'Government' and 'Stoney Ground' and funny-grimace pieces such as 'Writer's Life'.

** *The Dark Edge*

by **Richard Harland (Pan Australia 0-330-36007-8; 1997; 563 pp.)**

I doubt if *The Dark Edge* will do much for literature, but in its vivid combination of horror and dark comedy it could be seen in years to come as an accurate picture of the way in which many Australians of the nineties view their own country. The Dark encroaches; the horrible people (of whichever type you fancy) wait out there to hammer you to death; all is gloom. Nothing, it seems, can be done. In this book, They turn out to be Us; and the source of the disaster can be found within those who believe they can save us. This is a long book, which only becomes wearisome during the Big Scene at the End (100 pages of it!). The main characters, off-planet detectives, are engaging innocents who suffer some genuinely scary moments. Harland's prose is functional but cinematic. This is a fable for our times, and so gripping that I read it at a sitting.

— **Bruce Gillespie, 30 July 1997**