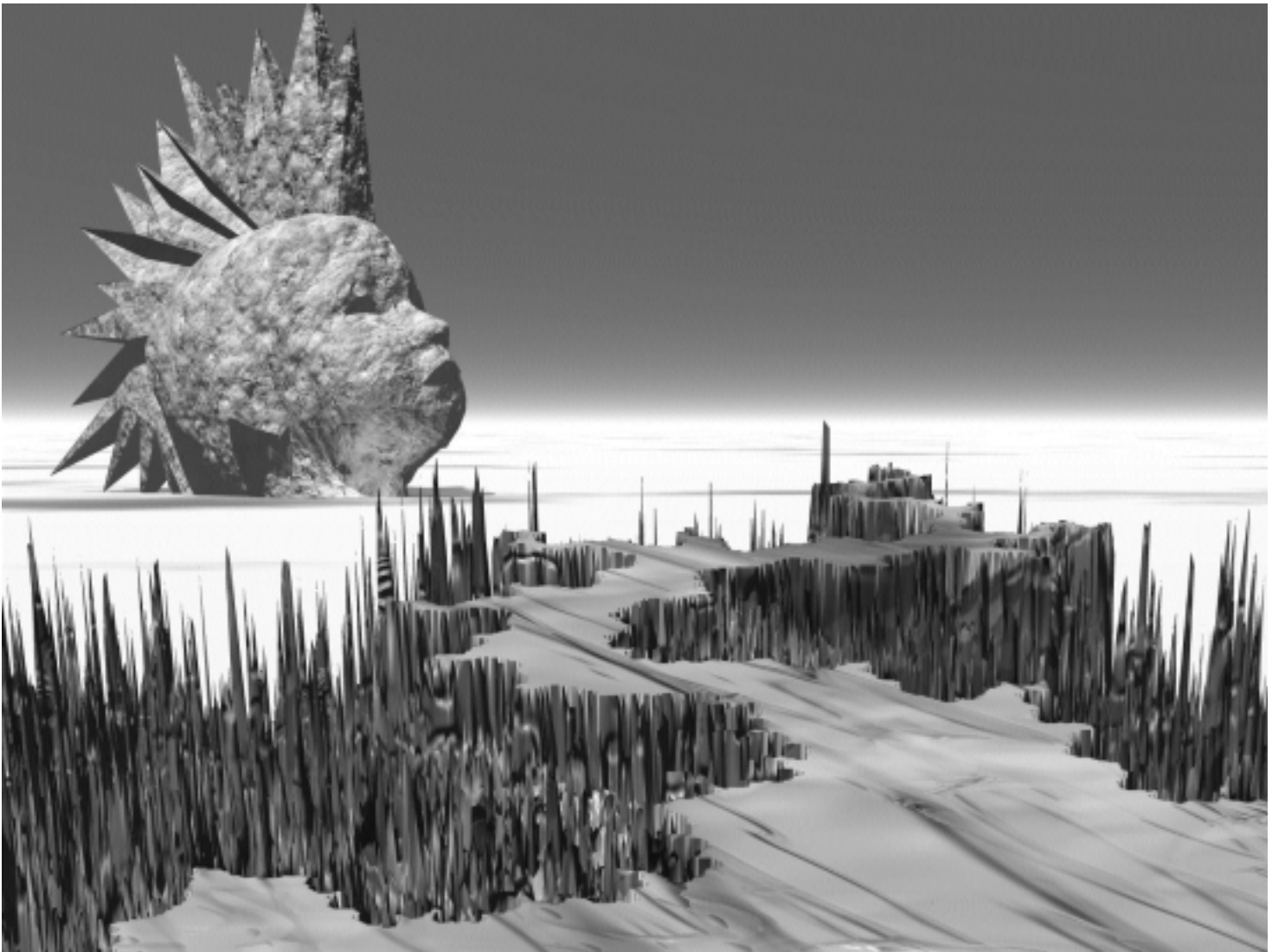


# *Scratch Pad*

*No. 25 November 1997*



*Graphic by Ditmar*

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## Scratch Pad 25

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Based on the non-Mailing Comments section of *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life* No. 13, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the November 1997 Acnestis mailing. Cover: Ditmar (Dick Jenssen).

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### SLIPPIN' AND SLIDIN'

Thanks very much to everybody who expressed good wishes and support on the occasion of Our Very First Burglary. It's hardly cheering that Dave and Hazel Langford suffered the same affliction a month later. It's very annoying to have valuable mementos stolen. Elaine lost pieces of jewellery that had belonged to her grandmother; she was going to hand them onto her nieces.

Elaine and I feel a bit safer because we've installed a monitored burglar alarm. The price of the Chubb system wiped out most of the cushion money Elaine and I had saved. Much gnashing of teeth: this was also cash I was putting aside for a new computer.

I went ahead anyway and upgraded this computer. Big mistake. You can't just install a new, larger hard drive over the top of an older system. You need an entire new brain to run it. That was 500 unplanned-for dollars extra for the new BIOS and Pentium 200 MMX motherboard. We had a week's problems getting all the bits to talk to each other. Richard Hryckiewicz, ace Melbourne fan and computer whiz, did most of the hard work. He spent more than 20 hours on the installation. Fortunately he charged me for only a small proportion of his time.

Never upgrade a computer; buy a new one. In the end, the cost is about the same.

I'd expected to pay for the computer upgrade with a patch of work that never arrived. A few small jobs, yes, and I've sent out the invoices, but there is little new work I can count on, and the Gillespie bank account is sinking like a soufflé. Worse, these unprofitable bits and pieces of work have stopped me doing much else. Not only do I never quite finish typesetting the next *SF Commentary*, but I won't have the money to publish it when it's finished.

Every week I asked myself: should I drop out of Acnestis or invent some maniacally peculiar way of saving my membership? The latter, of course. Acnestis has become a lifeline. SF people who read books are

### WHO IS DITMAR?

Nobody has asked me that question yet. Those cover graphics for recent issues of *Cosmic Donut* are 'Graphics by Ditmar', not 'Graphics by Bruce'.

This is the same 'Ditmar' after whom the Ditmars (Australian Science Fiction Achievement Awards) are named. He is Dr Ditmar Jenssen, known as Dick Jenssen, former head of the Meteorology Department at the University of Melbourne, and a founder member of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club. Wit, raconteur and convention auctioneer extraordinaire, he dropped out of the local scene in the late 1960s, about the time I became active in fandom. After Dick took early retirement a few years ago, Race Mathews (another founder member of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club) persuaded him to meet with a few of us each month to watch films on laser disc. We got to know Dick again, and he has become a welcome dinner companion during recent years. He uses his retirement time creatively. He writes new computer programs, including DJFractals, which he uses to generate wonderful graphics, such as the ones I'm featuring in my fanzines these days. With a bit of luck, Ditmar might, after all these years, finally win a Ditmar.

(All of Dick's programs are free to anyone who wants to contact him on ditmar@c031.aone.net.au or send a 3.5-inch disk to PO Box 432, Carnegie VIC 3163. DJFractals is written for Windows95, and carries on-disk documentation, including the history of and reasoning behind Mandelbrot, Lyapounov and other types of fractals.)

scattered around Australia, but mainly they are Old and Tired Fans. Worse, some of them are academics, who don't talk to fans. I'm sure they are writing interesting stuff, but because I am not an academic I never see any of it. A few of the literate fans are still in ANZAPA. Book people occasionally send me letters of comment, and some even write articles. The invaluable Nova Mob still meets once a month. But there is nothing in Australia at the moment resembling the buzz of activity that emerges from the BSFA/Acnestis crew. Most of the energy in Australian fandom springs from the media/younger fans, who know nothing of worldwide fandom, and don't admit to reading. Balkanisation's the word; sterility's the result.

So thank you, Acnestids, for being there; and to Maureen for forgiving me endless lapses of activity.

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## The next few pages are for Steve Jeffery . . .

In the September mailing, Steve asked (a) if I might send him a copy of the most recent *Donut* with the third page not left blank; I've just done this; and (b) whether I could reprint George Turner's first article for *Australian Science Fiction Review*. Since I can now give myself permission to do this, here it is:

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# The double standard:

## The short look, and the long hard look

by George Turner

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### *Editor's Introduction:*

In June 1967, when this article appeared, *Australian Science Fiction Review*, edited by John Bangsund in association with John Foyster and Lee Harding, had already put Australia on the world SF map for the first time in a decade. The publication of George Turner's first article, 'The Double Standard', helped to give Australian fandom a literary reputation that lasted into the mid-1970s. It's not clear whether or not George had read James Blish's *The Issue at Hand* before writing this article, but comparisons between Blish and Turner were made from then on.

**In hindsight, I can see that in much of his later criticism George Turner backed away from some of the assertions in this article. After he published his own first SF novel, he became a lot more forgiving of other authors' failings. However, he never abandoned his love of excellence and his contempt for science fiction's sacred cows (ideas, not people). Perhaps telepathy, and hence *The Demolished Man*, was merely unlucky to be the first of George's kickable cows. [BRG, 4 November 1997]**

In the course of private exchanges John Bangsund and I have touched on the vexed question of the difference between reviewing and criticism. With his concurrence, I quote John:

'When you mention the "separate and distinct functions of reviewing and criticism" I wonder if you mean what I call the double standard? There are books and there is literature . . . one must often find books which are vastly entertaining but which fall short of being literature. . . . The double standard comes in when one says, This is great sf — but let's not delude ourselves that it's literature.'

Whether or not he really holds this view (he may merely have thrown it out as a hook to force me to a definitive statement) I as a professional writer cannot subscribe to it. Bluntly, *all* books are literature — good literature or bad literature. The only standard by which a book can be measured in a qualitative fashion is to set it alongside the best we know and apply certain tests. The nature of these tests can be discussed later.

There is no double standard, but there are differing functions among the assessors of books, the two best known of the assessors being the reviewers and the critics. Broadly, the reviewer does little more than give the reader of his periodical a guide to what is on the market. He reads a great number of books, reads them in a hurry because he has a deadline to meet, and attempts little more than a superficial relation of the work's most obvious qualities: his own immediate reaction is for or against, and this colours his assessment. He has neither the time nor the distance in perspective to do more; he may condemn the worthwhile because its less evident qualities elude his swift reading, which is bound to fasten on surfaces rather than on total content, and he may praise the worthless because his immediate pleasure causes him to make undue allowance for the weaknesses which he perceives hurriedly but cannot stop to analyse. In the long run he says little more than that he liked the book or he didn't like it. If your taste happens to march with his, then he is a good reviewer for you.

But he is of no use at all to the writer or to the serious reader who considers literature a major amenity of civilization, one which must be treated with exactness and great care.

The job of the critic is much more taxing. He must be able to see the book in perspective — in relation to the writer's other work, in relation to its particular genre, in relation to literature as a whole, and in relation to the civilization of which it is a part. He must assess it not only as a good or a bad book, but as a useful or a useless book, one which adds to or detracts from the author's total stature and as one which will or will not have some effect on the culture whose existence made it possible. Other matters also, but mainly those.

Writers read with care, note his remarks and his references, assess his conclusions and give much consideration to his summation of their weaknesses. They don't allow critics to dictate to them — far from it — but they do appreciate the thinking of minds which have paid them the compliment of considering them worthy of the immense labour which goes into good criticism. I have on two occasions written letters of thanks to critics

who pointed out faults which were hidden from me and the discussion of which has made a difference to my writing and my approach to literary problems of style, construction and presentation.

To the student and serious reader the critic can be an opener of doors, a pointer out of missed values, a guide to pleasures and excitements denied to the reader whose goal is entertainment only. Emotional pleasure is not enough; it is transient and soon exhausted. A good book must give emotional pleasure or it is not a good book, but the final criterion is intellectual pleasure, which makes a book not a thing of the moment but a part of one's experience of life, as easy to browse over and reread as it is to listen to a favourite song repeated or to turn again and again to a fine painting.

To sum up, the reviewer is concerned with the impression of the moment for the reader of the moment; the critic is concerned with causes, effects and ultimate values.

As a demonstration of the great gulf in these functions I propose to take a popular and much lauded sf novel and treat it on several levels of criticism. *The Demolished Man*, Hugo winner, good seller and earner of rave reviews, will do nicely, particularly as it has lately been republished by Penguin, and first appeared sufficiently long ago to allow its position in the body of sf to be fairly assessed.

But first my qualifications for discussing sf at all:

Sf reader — 39 years.

Student of literature — 30 years.

Novelist (with a reasonable local standing) — 10 years.

Practising critic — since I commenced this article 30 minutes ago.

And so to business.

First, the magazine editor who receives the ms of *The Demolished Man*: He demands a moderate literary standard, but is more interested in other qualities. His impression runs somewhat thus:

... hard, incisive style, very compulsive ... plenty of action ... 80,000 words, three- or four-parter, will divide well into either ... telepathy a staling subject, but the writing will carry it ... violent without being unnecessarily sadistic, will go down well ... scientific basis pretty doubtful, but most of the weak points fairly well covered ... terrific tension and speed, should be a winner.

Then the reader, jolted out of his pants and writing feverishly to his favourite magazine:

Dear Ed,

Demolished Man is a winner. But a WINNER!!! Boy, am I caught up in this one. It's absolutely real, but REAL. And can that Bester write! Get more like this, one every month, and I'm hooked for life. After this no one can doubt that telepathy is something real, and the scoffers can go (unmentionable and impossible) themselves. Never before have I had such a kick out of ...

And so on until he runs out of nonsense and relaxes gasping to wait pop-eyed and panting for the next issue. This kind of appreciation hasn't even the justification of the editor's hardboiled but practical summation, but appears so brutally often as to give one severe doubts about the mental level of the average sf reader.

The book is submitted for hardcover publication and a publisher's reader submits his report:

... the background is such that it has to be labelled science fiction, but in fact the scientific content is negligible, and the story is really a hardboiled, fast-moving thriller. On this level it is entertaining stuff and should go down well with the science fiction public. Others may find it a bit too far out for easy digestion. Characterization is almost entirely absent, the persons being cardboard types set up in a few words and developing not at all; since the persons of the story are extreme types, this is probably as well, for they wouldn't stand much psychological penetration. The great strength of the book is the compulsively readable style. We should publish this on the sf list ...

Sam Moskowitz gets at it for one of his fabulous parodies of appreciation:

This magnificent novel sets a new literary standard in sf. Bester fulfils the promise shown in his trail-blazing short stories and crowns his career with a coruscating cascade of sheer genius. This novel marks a new development in sf ...

I don't know whether ineffable Sam ever did a review of *The Demolished Man*, but perhaps my version wouldn't be far wrong.

A daily newspaper takes a cautious fling:

A solid, craftsmanlike work, full of action and ingenuity. The author is a very talented man with a flair for making the noisy nonsense of science fiction seem most real. The brutal, pared-down style is admirably suited to the brutal, pared-down story, but is relieved by flashes of compassionate understanding ...

Robert Gerrand notices it for *ASFR*: (I quote the most relevant portions of his review.)

One of the strong points ... is the author's ability to write so convincingly about psi powers. He not only makes you believe they exist — he makes you believe they *should* exist. And this he does by the brilliant way he sketches in his societies ... These societies are not mere backdrops ... but vivid, necessary parts of the story ... [they] give meaning to the characters' actions: we see how the environment influences the whole.

With all good will I contend that Mr Gerrand has created virtues that are simply not present and missed those that are. Let's see what the critic does to it after a long, hard look.

The critic has done his homework. He read the book when it first appeared and found it a most entertaining tale, hard to put down; but he was troubled by sub-conscious awareness that all was not as well as appeared on the surface. So, after a reasonable lapse of time he read it again, and then knew definitely that the author had subjected him to a brilliantly loaded snow job. Ten years later he read it again, in order to write this article, and found it hard going — the tricks and glosses and deliberate misrepresentations stood out like blackbirds on the snow.

Now, *The Demolished Man*, Hugo and all, occupies a high place in the sf canon. Question: Does it deserve this high place? It purports to be a sf thriller. Questions: Is it good sf and is it a good thriller? Reviewers and editors have made much of the lifelike delineation of existence in a telepathic society. Question: What in fact does Bester tell us about such an existence?

Over-riding question: Does this book in fact represent a high point in the development of sf, or is it a high grade example of how to do it and not get caught?

Having asked himself these questions and a dozen others, the critic set himself to the typewriter, and this is what he wrote:

*The Demolished Man* is an ingenious thriller constructed and plotted by an ingenious man. It is, perhaps, altogether too ingenious for its own good as a novel, for the reader is hurled from event to event and idea to idea without pause for breath or thought, much less pause to consider an idea and evaluate its validity.

Any work of fiction must be consistent within the bounds of its own convention; a work of sf must be consistent within the bounds of the speculative ideas embodied in it, and those speculative ideas must hold up under scrutiny. If they do not, the work is no longer sf but fantasy or daydream, and loses validity accordingly. Since *The Demolished Man* rests on the conception of telepathy, the whole book stands or falls by the handling of that subject.

Bester provides spectacular passages showing telepathy in action, but is never foolish enough to suggest how telepathic powers are brought into existence or to discuss the techniques of using and directing these powers. He makes statements, but never suggests a *raison d'être*. He hits the reader over the head, says 'this is how it is and don't ask silly questions', and so leaves himself a bare field in which he can do as he pleases because questioning what he does is tacitly barred.

But even with this limitless arena in which to play he trips over his own ankles more than once. For instance, there is a short scene in which the detective is pleased to discover the protective thickness of his hotel-room walls, because it will shut out the incessant telepathic gabble of the world's thinking. (So Bester's telepathic function is susceptible to the usual laws governing the behaviour of radiation, is it? The non-telepathic majority would very quickly adopt effective baffles to prevent 'peeping'.)

It appears, then, that the telepaths must exist in a world of appalling, never-ceasing noise, comparable to the position of yourself or myself doomed to spend his life in a never-silent crowd, working desperately hard to

separate one intelligible message from the uproar.

This short scene makes it apparent that Bester was well aware of this difficulty, and removed it by simply ignoring it. And this piece of cheating encourages us to look for more of the same. Such snow-blinding would be unforgivable in a mainstream thriller, and must be considered equally unforgivable in sf. A writer may and must break a lot of rules, but he cannot throw them overboard and pretend they never existed or don't apply to him.

Then there is the telepathic game of building sentence figures. This commits Bester to the admission that his telepaths think in words, not in total impressions. Therefore this game can be played vocally also. I suggest you get a few friends and try it some time; you will soon discover the simple reasons why it can't be done on the complex scale presented in the party scene. The intention of the scene, apart from its role in the plot, seems to have been to impress the reader with the realistic possibility of telepathy. In fact Bester simply presents another *fait accompli* which tells nothing except that the author says 'you gotta believe me, see!' The poor reader has been hit over the head again, and the action moves on while he is still groggy. Never give the poor so-and-so time to think, or all is lost!

Swiftly we come to the matter of the 'tension, apprehension' rhyme. A neat trick, but still a trick. Ben Reich is presented as filling his thinking with this thing whenever telepaths are present who may peep him. Either the telepaths are pretty weak or Reich is concentrating in a fashion which would effectively prevent him carrying on a conversation (which he does) or even of sparing enough attention to hear a sentence spoken to him. The slightest distraction entering his mind would break the interference rhyme and he would be wide open. In any case, the human ability to concentrate without interruption is measurable in seconds, so Bester has played another trick with his snowballs. This time he has falsified the known capacities of humanity. He was aware of this, too. If you read the relevant passages you will discover some careful wordplay designed to divert your notice from the technical difficulty of bringing off the interference feat.

I have now accused the writer of wilful dishonesty with his theme. These are not slips in Bester's thinking; he was aware of the problems, as the text shows, but ignored them because to admit their existence would have made his premise impossible and his plot unworkable.

(Short digression on telepathy in sf. If you are going to introduce telepathy as an operating proposition in a story, you must first have some basic idea of what telepathy is, and how it works. You are free to invent, because the properties and laws are unknown, but if you are to do anything more than wish-fantasy you must devise some framework wherein the talent operates. You should set up some rules, and *abide by them*. If you want to speak of projecting a thought, you must first give some thought to the possibility of a mental mechanism whereby such projection might be accomplished and *controlled* by the projecting person. One reads airy mention of mind blocks, controlled invasion of resisting minds, telepathic shouts and other acrobatic mental

performances. It's about time someone gave thought to the question of how such things could be accomplished. I take leave to doubt that the first full scale telepath will simply do these things without understanding how he does them, and is more likely to be forced into some lengthy psycho-anatomical investigation before he can begin to do anything at all. Even baby seals have to be *taught* to swim. There's a good story waiting to be written about the purely mechanical problems of the first telepath. No copyright — the idea is free to anyone who cares to use it. All present uses of telepathy in sf are pure fantasy. Science is dependent on rules, and even sf must obey a few if it is to have validity or even intelligibility.)

*The Demolished Man* has been praised for its strong characterization. There is little hint of characterization anywhere in the book. There is a forceful presentation of each *type* as he or she appears, but nothing more. The characters never develop beyond our first meeting with them and are as predictable as the sunrise. They are very striking characters, admirably suited to the uses to which Bester puts them, but no more than that. Brilliant puppets, but puppets. One wonders occasionally how an ass like Ben Reich managed to hold his financial empire together; he is shown as too narrow, emotional and unstable to manage anything much more complicated than a newsstall. He wouldn't have needed driving to destruction; he would have fallen to it.

Finally, we must consider the hou-ha about vivid presentation of the society in which the tale takes place.

What society? Aside from Ben Reich and the telepaths we are presented with a brothel which is only a gimmicked-up version of a classy whorehouse anywhere at any time and a peculiarly stupid party wherein the hostess is caricatured to represent the social/wealthy/silly set. It is the same caricature to be met with in any satirical novel set in this day and age. Oh, sure, we have space ships and telepaths and a playboy satellite, but if these things have had any deep effect on social attitudes and behaviour we are not told of it. The society of his novel is indeed a backdrop, and a mighty sketchy one at that. The society of *The Demolished Man* is the familiar twentieth century milieu with some technological trimmings and some telepaths whose existence is suspect because of the anomalies in the writer's account of their talent.

Be it noted also that when it came to the demolition of Reich's mind, Bester was wonderfully vague about that, too. Just what *did* they do to him? The obvious treatment would be to remove his memories (and hence the formative influences of his environment) and start him afresh with a push in the right direction. But just what are these monsters demolishing? In a haze of words we never find out. But it makes a nicely sadistic close to the action and gives the detective an opportunity to think up some completely pointless blather about the future of re-educated humanity.

One can only conclude, then, that *The Demolished Man*, when all its virtues of style and speed and ingenuity are admitted, is a faked-up job, and therefore a bad book. That doesn't make it bad entertainment — so long as the reader realizes it is just that and no more. The snow job, and hence the dishonesty, arises from the attempt to cover the whole shenanigans with a gloss of

deep importance. Plenty of readers and reviewers were fooled, which makes it a successful exercise, but the same could be said of making money with the thimble and pea trick.

What irritates more than anything is the fact that Bester can write thoughtful and serious sf. His short stories are among the best the genre has produced. But in the novel form his weaknesses stand pitilessly revealed, and this is especially noticeable in his non-sf crime novel (can't remember the title) where all the sf trappings are absent and the poor characters stand revealed in all their uninteresting sameness. Even the outre touch of murder motivated by homosexual jealousy cannot enliven it, nor the careful psychological exploration of character put breath into the cast. As for *The Stars My Destination*, my remarks on *The Demolished Man* apply almost in toto. In that book Bester makes the mistake of providing too much information about teleportation without plugging the holes in the techniques involved, and goes through the same routine of drowning the critical faculty in louder and faster avalanches of action.

It remains only to consider the position of *The Demolished Man* in the sf canon, and the conclusions are not sweet.

The book won a Hugo. One can only surmise that either the year was a poor one for novels, or that the judges were hypnotised by the snowstorm of style and movement. The book is a triumph of style over content and inconsistency. It was, unfortunately, the kind of book which encourages serious critics to regard sf as irresponsible and unimportant, and its readers as sadly lacking in discernment.

More deadly is the thought that readers liked it so well, and that editors exist to give the readers what they demand. If this is a sample of what they demand, then sf will be, for the majority, never more than a titillation of the emotions. While readers demand, writers must supply, all but the few who say 'to hell with the readers' and strike out in the direction of quality at all costs.

With those few lies the future of sf. On present signs it does not lie with the readers. They applaud the occasional literate venture (*A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *A Case of Conscience*) but give scant attention to works which pose problems of approach and understanding, though it is these that show the way. *Odd John* remains the most perceptive of all superman novels and Budrys's *Rogue Moon* the most impressive attempt to grapple with the allying of sf with human problems; but what chance has such work in a magazine-ridden genre where Retief and his idiocies gain the plaudits of the crowd, monstrosities like *Skylark Duquesne* can appear in a magazine which has just won a Hugo as the best of the year, and a piece of painfully second hand Talbot Mundy called *Dune* can lay reviewers and readers in fits of adulation?

Under these conditions sf does not need more recognition from the 'establishment' but less. It should get what it deserves — more and harder kicks in the pants — until it throws up an intelligent and literate body of work which does not fall apart at the touch of the critical probe.

Budrys and Blish and Aldiss have it in them to gain worthwhile recognition, but too much other promise

has caved in to the demands of the magazine trade. Heinlein has become a mumbling rebel with nothing much to rebel against and an armoury of outworn philosophy and jingoism as his weapons; Anderson has given up the struggle to be a writer and is satisfied to turn out saleable yarns wherein good ideas are wasted on *Boy's Own Paper* stories; Judith Merrill is writing high flown unintelligibilities in the attempt to prove that what she selects as readable is art, whereas she would prove a great deal more by writing another *Project Nursemaid*; Pohl's highly individual method has degenerated into a tiresome habit.

And the reviewers, God bless 'em, are taking Ballard terribly seriously. So is Ballard. It's about time that gent ceased giving displays of style and started in to write some stories, as distinct from word pictures with doubtful application to anything except the inside of his own mind. 'The Sound Sweep' showed that he can do it, so

why the devil doesn't he? Probably because the readers are content to be bemused by him as he is.

Better sf will be written when the readers demand it, but the readers won't demand it while they are contented with a purely emotional evaluation of their reading material. The majority have yet to learn that the real pleasure of literature begins on the day you stop using it as a drug.

I have nothing against escapism — it is a necessary activity — but the manner of the escape is important. If the magazines are to be taken as the measure of the average sf reader's escape, then the flight is only into daydream and fantasy. He has not discovered that the thinking reader escapes into wider realms than science fiction ever dreamed of.

— George Turner, June 1967

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## BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS

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These are books read since the end of January 1997. The ratings are:

- \*\* Books highly recommended.
- \* Books recommended.
- ☹ Books about which I have severe doubts.

### **KEEPERS OF THE FLAME: LITERARY ESTATES AND THE RISE OF BIOGRAPHY**

by Ian Hamilton

(Pimlico 0-7126-5970-6; 1992; 344 pp.)

Maureen, who put me onto *Keepers of the Flame* by discussing it about a year ago in *Acnestis*, will realise the irony of my reading it just a week after I discovered I've been made George Turner's literary executor. Executors are the baddies of the literary world. They burn old diaries, destroy caches of letters or hide them in attics, and never, never let a truthful word be said about their 'charge'. Hamilton goes on the trail of horrors and perfidies perpetrated by executors, and has delicious fun with what he finds. Boswell's diaries lie deep within the bowels of a country house for nearly two hundred years; as much truth about Hardy as possible is obliterated by his widow. The war between executors and biographers is fought down the centuries. Hamilton traces brilliantly the connection between executorship, biography and hagiography. How does all this affect me? Already I find that Judy Buckrich, George Turner's biographer, has said some things about George that would have annoyed the hell out of him, but I'm not going to object too much, since Judy has done a fine job. George destroyed his own letters and cut his own ties before he died. Secrets, secrets; no wonder Hamilton has such fun in this book.

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### **FAR FUTURE CALLING: UNCOLLECTED SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASIES**

by Olaf Stapledon, ed. Sam Moskowitz  
(Oswald Train; 1979; 275 pp.)

An odd book, which Dick Jenssen lent to me. The 'uncollected stories' aren't up to much, but the essay 'Interplanetary Man' casts some light on the thinking behind *Last and First Men*. The book was worth reading for Sam Moskowitz's two essays, 'Olaf Stapledon: The Man Behind the Works' (his second attempt at a short biography of OS), and 'Peace and Olaf Stapledon', a powerful article, originally published in a 1950s fanzine, about Stapledon's visit to the New York Peace Conference a year before he died.

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### **FERMAT'S LAST THEOREM**

by Simon Singh

(4th Estate 1-85702-521-0; 1997; 362 pp.)

I know this is Mathematics for the Millions — mathematical dummies like me — but Singh explains many things clearly that are incomprehensible in the maths textbooks I 'edit' for a living. Singh has a great feeling for the numinous quality of mathematics; if only I could follow his arguments all the way. He is able to show what Andrew Wiles achieved without feeling the need to transcribe his 100-page proof.

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### **NARROW HOUSES, VOL. I**

edited by Peter Crowther

(Little Brown 0-316-90395-7; 1992; 460 pp.)

So I'm only a few years behind in reading Crowther's anthologies. I'll catch up soon. Here are lots of very conventional horror stories, with a leavening of fine pieces. Two great, very strange stories are Nicholas

Royle's 'Glory' and Pat Cadigan's 'Naming Names', but I also enjoyed 'The Tale of Peg and the Brain' (Ian Watson), 'Bleeding Dry' (Stephen Laws), 'From a Narrow House' (William F. Nolan) and 'The Landlady's Dog' (James Lovegrove). Jonathan Carroll's 'Learning to Leave' has appeared as part of one of his novels.

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### THE MAGICIAN OUT OF MANCHURIA

by Charles G. Finney

(Donald Grant 0-937986-92-5; 1989 (1968); 127 pp.)

A strange, Vancean comedy-fantasy that at first seems to have nothing to do with a real China or real people. Yet its characters are powerful and its style vigorous, and the story proves to be set in a refracted version of modern China. Finney is arch, funny and nicely off balance. His other work is not easy to find, but I must track it down.

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### BARE-FACED MESSIAH:

#### THE TRUE STORY OF L. RON HUBBARD

by Russell Miller

(Michael Joseph 0-7181-2764-1; 1987; 390 pp.)

I have a vision of massed Scientologists combing the bookshops of the world, snatching copies of *Bare-faced Messiah* from the shelves and ripping them apart on the spot. Perhaps that's exactly what they did. Fortunately I found *Bare-faced Messiah* on a remainder table not long after it was published. It would be the funniest book of the year if it were not so sad. Why do people want to be disciples? Especially of somebody as worthless as Hubbard? I can understand Hubbard: he got away with murder because people asked him to pull the trigger. But who invents the gun, the shyster or the shystered? Incomprehensible puzzles, to which not even Miller can offer answers. His writing is crisp, his research exhaustive; I'm glad I found the book before all the copies disappeared.

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### THE SECRET OF THIS BOOK: 20-ODD STORIES

by Brian W. Aldiss

(HarperCollins 0-00-225364-X; 1995; 334 pp.)

I've put off reading this latest Aldiss collection for far too long. Reading it immediately made me read his two previous collections (see below). Aldiss the writer gets younger all the time. At the age of seventy he gives the impression of discovering the sheer joy of writing for the first time. A Dionysian gusher of ideas and visions boils up from the pages: from 'A Dream of Antigone' and 'The God Who Slept With Women', new glittering fables based on ancient fables, to 'The Mistakes, Miseries and Misfortunes of Mankind' and 'Horse Meat', dark meditations on the bleeding sores at the heart of European culture. Aldiss has not quite abandoned an earlier, less glittering style, but he takes such pleasure in his new-found sense of fantasy that I can overlook the few uninteresting stories in this collection.

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### A TUPOLEV TOO FAR

by Brian Aldiss

(HarperCollins 0-00-224033-5; 1993; 200 pp.)

Here's Aldiss sloughing off an older style of story-telling and discovering the approach that would emerge at its dazzling best in *The Secret of this Book*. The 'new' Aldiss can be seen best in 'Ratbird', full of wild disconnections and tropical revelations. A previous, more obviously science-fictional Aldiss can be found in 'A Day in the Life of a Galactic Empire'.

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### SEASONS IN FLIGHT

by Brian Aldiss

(Jonathan Cape 0-224-02271-7; 1984; 157 pp.)

This is Aldiss's most coherent theme anthology of short stories. When it appeared, *Seasons in Flight* must have seemed a bit of an oddity: dark fables set in 'primitive' settings or informed by ancient legends. (To complement the newer stories, Aldiss revives his sublime 'The Oh in Jose', first published in 1966.) Most of the stories feature granular, stripped-down language and unforgiving plots. They are memorable but dour. Reading *Seasons in Flight* more than a decade after its publication, it feels like a curtain-raiser for *The Secret of this Book*.

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### DECEPTION ON HIS MIND

by Elizabeth George

(Hodder & Stoughton 0-340-68930-7; 1997; 568 pp.)

In her recent mystery novels, Elizabeth George has been one of the most inventive writers in the field. Not in *Deception on His Mind*. This is strictly join-the-dots fiction, lumbering its way through 300 pages too many.

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### WALKING THE LABYRINTH

by Lisa Goldstein

(Tor 0-312-86175-3; 1996; 254 pp.)

I still don't know what to make of *Walking the Labyrinth*, the second Goldstein novel I've read. For much of its length it seems as mysterious as *Tourists*. The main character is forced to explore her past when a private detective comes calling, basing his quest on a single newspaper cutting. Later it appears that the main character has been set up to 'discover' family secrets that are only too well known to many members of the family. And then . . . ? Does Goldstein really provide answers at the end of the book? I thought so for awhile, and was disappointed. Later I realised that the point of the quest was never to discover the ending, and all the 'solutions' are just red herrings. Too many tricks to be fully persuasive? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

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### TITAN

by Stephen Baxter

(HarperCollins Voyager 0-00-225424-7; 1997; 581 pp.)

The Novel of the Year, of course. But I wouldn't have



read it unless it had arrived as a review copy. All those acronyms and gung-ho space skiffy in the first 100 pages! If I hadn't enjoyed *The Time Ships* I wouldn't have persevered. If I hadn't reached page 200, then page 300, then found myself on the journey of a lifetime, I would have been a poorer person. Pro-space-race propaganda dissolves into exquisite ironies as Baxter reveals how NASA has been mothballed progressively since 1972. Humanity can reach the rest of the solar system, if not the stars, but has chosen not to. A people who can still plan, build and crew a one-way trip to Titan can also destroy everything. Baxter rarely uses generalisations. Instead, as in *The Time Ships*, he uses visualisations: one dazzling set piece after another. As for the ending: some will hate it, and others, like me, will see it as inescapable outcome of Baxter's Stapledonian view of life. I've grown rather fond of Stapledon over the last year or so, and I'll certainly catch up on some of Baxter's earlier books.

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### **UNDER THE CAT'S EYE**

**by Gillian Rubinstein**

**(Hodder Children's Books 0-7336-0554-0; 1997; 202 pp.)**

While science fiction struggles to achieve any respectability in regular Australian fiction publishing, the Australian children's and young adults' market has given its top prizes to SF and fantasy authors for the last twenty years. Australia's top two writers for young adults are Gillian Rubinstein and John Marsden, both of whom have written almost nothing but SF for the last ten years. In *Under the Cat's Eye* Rubinstein enters into the field of uneasy fantasy — not quite horror, but bordering on it. The result, we find at the end of the book, is science fiction. The trappings — a creepy isolated boarding school and very creepy members of staff — give a nice push to proceedings until halfway through. The science fiction bits at the end are perhaps less persuasive. Rubinstein has a vigorous style that I enjoy a lot, but the story seems a bit rushed. If Rubinstein's books are released in Britain, look out for them.

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— **Bruce Gillespie, 4 November 1997**