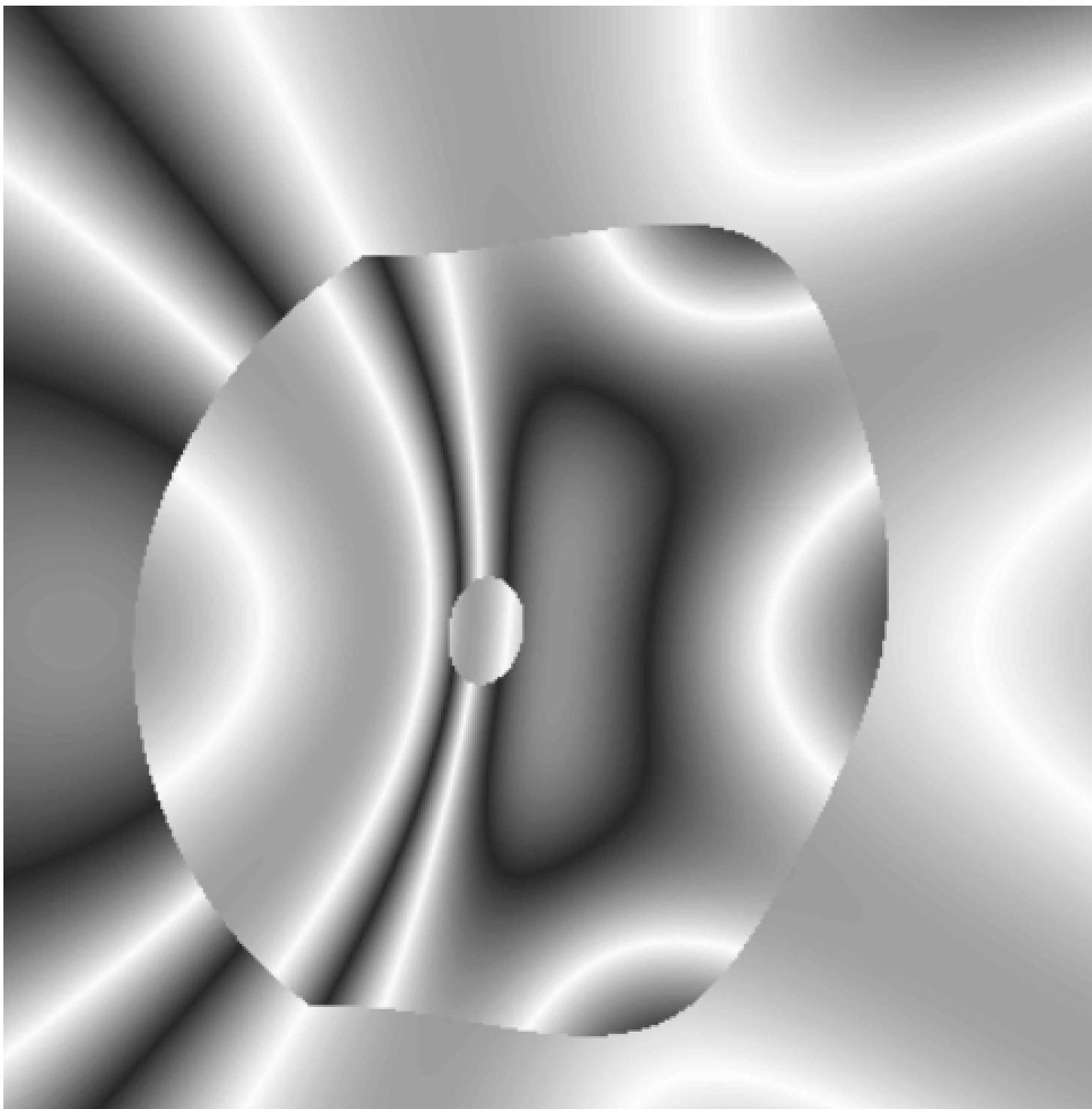


Scratch Pad

No. 27

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'CosmicDonut': Graphic by Elaine Cochrane using DJFractals

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Based on the non-Mailing Comments section of *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life* No. 4, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the April 1998 mailing of Acnestis. Cover: 'CosmicDonut': graphic by Elaine Cochrane using DJFractals.

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It's been a panicky year since The Break-in, but not nearly as bad a year for us as for most other people we know. I feel reluctant to ask friends 'How are you?' for fear they might tell us. Six friends diagnosed with cancer during late 1997; two others with suspected cancer. One relapse: Ian Gunn is currently undergoing heavy chemotherapy because his tumours have reappeared. Two marriage breakups, each marriage having lasted 25 years. Three heart attacks.

All we suffered was a burglary, a financial crisis (being without work for two months is a financial crisis for me), and a part of a side wall pulled down. (In early February a container truck went past, pulling down the overhead electricity wire and quite a few bricks from where the wire was attached to our house.)

Some of our friends have had upturns in fortune recently. Merv Binns, at the age of sixty-two, has just been married for the first time. Merv is the godfather of Melbourne fandom. One of the original members of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club, he remained a stalwart bachelor during all the years he kept the Club going, supplying books to us while he was manager of McGill's Newsagency, then owner of Space Age Books. He went broke, and supported his father during his final illness.

Helena joined the Melbourne Science Fiction Club in the 1950s. She married a photographer named Kelvin Roberts, who died about ten years ago. Merv and Helena seem to have been gravitating towards each other ever since. Held on the hottest late March day ever (summer was supposed to have ended weeks ago), the wedding was enjoyable. The ceremony took place on the front lawn of Merv and Helena's house in Carnegie, followed by a wedding banquet in the back garden, with sumptuous amounts of food supplied by contributions from friends. As an example of how to hold a wedding when you're broke, it couldn't be bettered.

Meanwhile, what's stopping me contributing to apas and producing fanzines? Work, of course. Or rather, the nervousness that comes from doing lots of small jobs, only some of which pay well, but each of which stops me doing anything interesting. During January and February I did an editing job for a company that held me to a time/money budget that had little relationship to the amount of work I did. I lost the equivalent of 50 hours' payment eventually, but I couldn't complain because (a) I need this new client, and (b) I had no other offers of work during January and February.

BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS

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

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

** **TWINS** by Chris Gregory
(Penguin 0-14-025604-0; 1997; 272 pp.)

If you lived in Australia, and had read books by Gerald Murnane or by students of his writing class, you might know what to expect from Chris Gregory, one of his successful students. Indescribable to

those who are not in the know, this kind of writing tests anybody's definitions of 'modernism' or 'post-modernism'. These are stories that give the impression of being essays, with lots of documentary matter and asides. Conventional dialogue and characterisation are missing. Each story is really a very funny dialogue between the author and the reader, yet the events described are taken to be fiction. Yet often they are not; they are rearranged versions of events that the author claims to be part of his experience. This would all be very tedious if it were not for Chris Gregory's unfailing lightness

of hand. His best story, 'Jackie Chan', about the odd events that happened when Jackie Chan was making a movie in Melbourne a few years ago, is really a prose poem in praise of Melbourne. 'Powerhouse' is, similarly, a prose poem in praise of a certain era in American music and one of its most obscure composers. I first met Chris Gregory at the home of Gerald and Catherine Murnane. When I met him again, his story 'Jackie Chan' was nominated for an Aurealis Award. Chris told me that his ex-girlfriend is living in the same flat that George Turner lived in until five years ago; she keeps sending back mail sent to him. Surely there's a future Chris Gregory story in *that*?

** **INVITATION TO A FUNERAL** by Molly Brown
(Vista 0-575-60036-5; 1995; 288 pp.)

Since not one, but two Acnestids sent me a copy of this book, I thought I had better read it immediately. I liked it a lot, but I kept feeling that this really sounds too much like a twentieth-century book to be called a successful historical novel. It is, however, an intriguing mystery, and its main character stays in the memory long after the events of the story have faded.

** **BLACK ICE** by Lucy Sussex
(Hodder 0-7336-0456-0; 1997; 186 pp.)

This is a highly successful Young Adult novel. Syb's family moves into a house that makes them feel cold all the time. The family is breaking up; all sorts of strange things are happening the neighbourhood. At its heart this a haunted house novel, but it moves at such a breakneck speed that one ignores some of the more familiar elements of the genre.

** **WINDOWS** by D. G. Compton
(Berkley Putnam 0-399-12378-4; 1979; 255 pp.)

Windows is the sequel to *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*, which I read again in December. It's very much better than I remembered it — one of the best British SF novels of the seventies. The surprise was to find that *Windows* is just as good as *Katherine Mortenhoe*, if not better. The observer from the first novel, blinded by his own hand, tries to put his life together while a media contingent lays siege to his home. He and his wife escape to Italy, but find that the new venture is no escape. Compton's characters are vivid, but even more vivid is the atmosphere of the midsummer Italian villa, cut off by civil war from the rest of Europe, in which Rod and his family find themselves. Compton is the least appreciated British SF writer; it would be wonderful to have his best novels back in print.

* **STANLEY KUBRICK: A BIOGRAPHY**
by John Baxter

(HarperCollins 0-00-255588-3; 1997; 399 pp.)
This is entertaining enough, but Baxter shows that he did not get anywhere near the subject of his biography. Kubrick, indeed, is the villain of the story. Also, one does not know whether or not to trust Baxter's information. On the three occasions when I could double-check his facts, I found they were wrong. I'm sure a lot of research went into this book, but it feels hastily written and offhand. But perhaps nobody will be able to write a better biog-

raphy until long after Kubrick is dead.

☛ **MEN AGAINST THE STARS**
edited by Martin Greenberg
(Grayson & Grayson; 1951; 253 pp.)

I had vague ideas of catching up on Golden Age SF by reading an anthology that was produced during the era itself. Most of the stories here are so appalling that they would confirm Ian and Kev in their prejudices against pre-1960s SF. Most of them are talkie pieces; eventually the main characters stop yakking to each other and finish the story. The only piece with any life in it is Robert Moore Williams' 'The Red Death of Mars', which doesn't get reprinted these days. Can this Martin Greenberg be the same bloke who still produces anthologies by the ton?

** **THE SUNKEN ROAD** by Garry Disher (Allen & Unwin 1-86448-074-2; 1996; 214 pp.)

This is a highly successful mainstream Australian novel that uses a technique I haven't seen before. Disher divides the novel into a large number of short stories. Each short story tells the same story, about the same characters, covering the same length of time (the lifetime of Anna Tolley and earlier generations of both sides of her family), about the same place (eking out a living in the countryside of mid-north South Australia), yet each story is sufficiently different that the whole narrative can only be told by page 213. If there were any justice, Disher would have won every literary award of last year. He didn't, of course.

* **UNDER WORLD** by Reginald Hill
(Grafton 0-586-20452-0; 1988; 351 pp.)

George Turner sent this to me, naming it as his favourite of the Dalziel and Pascoe novels, of which he had grown quite fond. Well, maybe. After seeing the TV series, I can appreciate the main characters and their style of humour. Up to a point, the situation is interesting. But the denouement is so fake that it makes you feel that this is just another damned detective novel. Which is a pity, since it's also sharply observed documentary writing about the hard-luck areas of the north of England.

** **THROUGH THE DOLL'S HOUSE DOOR**
by Jane Gardam

(Julia McCrae Books 0-86203-278-4; 1987; 121 pp.)
I would have thought Acnestids, who have discovered Diana Wynne Jones, would also have discovered the work of Jane Gardam. Maybe you did ten years ago. *Through the Doll's House Door* is ostensibly a children's book, but its tale of the conversations and travels of the characters who first met each other inside a doll's house reminds me most of Russell Hoban's *The Mouse and His Child*; it reaches a realm of universal meaning.

** **DOCTOR FISCHER OF GENEVA, OR THE BOMB PARTY** by Graham Greene
(Simon & Schuster 0-671-25467-7; 1980; 156 pp.)

I bought this on a remainder table in the early eighties. I thought I had better try reading it before selling it. It did, after all, get terrible reviews when it first appeared. It is a novella rather than a novel; more like the best of Greene's better short stories

than any of his novels. It is a fable about the rich man who likes to hold the ultimate in decadent parties. He lets his imagination rip, and the guests have to put up with his tricks. Until the last party, the Bomb Party. Brilliant story-telling, reminding us that Greene never tired of testing himself and trying new ideas in fiction.

** **MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL** by John Berendt
(Vintage 0-090952101-6; 1994; 388 pp.)

The critics haven't been kind to Clint Eastwood's film based on this non-fiction novel, but it's not quite clear whether they dislike it because it departs from the book or because it sticks to it. The book falls into two halves: the first half made up of very funny Southern Gothic humour, with Savannah depicted as being weirder than a William Faulkner town; and an unexpected slide in the second half into a courtroom/mystery story. Berendt's light but precise story-telling holds together the two halves, if only because we want to know what keeps Berendt in this town for eight years. By leaving himself out of the story, he makes himself into an intriguing central character. The film, of course, would have to show the narrator as just one of the folks, which might be its problem. The book is not officially a novel, but it reads like one. It's more engagingly weird than a Robert Lee Burke yarn.

** **THE PENGUIN BOOK OF MODERN FANTASY BY WOMEN**

edited by A. Susan Williams and Richard Glyn Jones
(Viking 0-670-85907-9; 1995; 560 pp.)

I don't usually buy 'the Penguin Book of' anything, but I thought I'd better buy this one, as it includes a story by Lucy Sussex. Lucy is the only Australian here, and is the youngest contributor. I didn't like her story, 'Kay and Phil', when I first read it, because I thought she was being snide about one character at the expense of other. Rereading the story, I like the way it shows two authors becoming so entangled in their own fictions that each can introduce the other into his or her world. It's a celebration of the act of fictionalising. The collection begins with Elizabeth Bowen's 'The Demon Lover' (1941), proceeds quickly into the 1950s, and finds its main source of good stories in the 1970s and 1980s. These people really know their genre SF and fantasy as well as the mainstream of short-story writing. P. D. James is here, with a deft future-detective story, 'Murder, 1986', but it is followed by James Tiptree Jr's 'The Milk of Paradise'. Daphne du Maurier's 'The Old Man', a classic stinger-in-the-tail, might be expected in such a volume, but only people who know their stuff are going to dig up Joanna Russ's 'The Second Inquisition', which hit me like a brick through a front window. This is a very great story, which persuaded me to prepare a talk about Russ for a future meeting of the Nova Mob (and hence for here). The paperback of this book is around, although you might also still find the hardback.

** **THE BLOOD KISS** by Dennis Etchison
(Scream/Press 0-910489-18-1; 1988; 216 pp.)

Surely you can only call a story a 'horror story' if it creeps up on you and deals you a blow when you least expect it? Try telling that to most horror writers, who signal every frisson with a chthonic eldritch moan. I knew that Dennis Etchison was a Writer to Watch because I read one of his first stories when it appeared in the 1970s. I had no idea that he could be *this* good. There is nothing predictable here, except in the very early pieces. By the end of the seventies Etchison was writing dank, subterranean, deeply twisted stories, some of which don't quite make sense, but are all the more horrifying for that. 'The Soft Wall' is the most disturbing story in this collection, but 'A Nice, Shady Place', 'The Woman in Black' and 'Deadspace' are also very strange. I just hope that eventually I can find some of the other Etchison collections.

* **THE DREAM YEARS** by Lisa Goldstein
(Bantam Spectra 0-553-25693-9; 1985; 195 pp.)

Several people have told me that this is the best of Lisa Goldstein's novels, but I was disappointed by it. I didn't really believe that these characters are French, or infused with the spirit of Dada and Surrealism. The time-slip situation is conventional, at least compared to the devices used in the two other Goldstein novels I've read, and the prose doesn't have that freshness one expects from this author.

** **THE SPARROW** by Mary Doria Russell
(Black Swan 0-522-99777-3; 1996; 506 pp.)

I've seen the US paperback of this book, and I wish I had bought it instead of the British paperback. In fact, I wish I had known about this book a year ago so I could buy the hardback. But it was left to the great Acnestis choir to sound the hallelujah. Since I read it, I've been alerting everybody else I know. There's not much I can say about *The Sparrow* that hasn't been said many times in the pages of Acnestis. Is it *about* religion? or poetry? or music? No, it's about people who can reach out to something beyond themselves. That this something might cruelly betray them does not denigrate the spirit of those who do the reaching. It is a book of funny and occasionally wise conversations. It is a book of vistas; it has a panoramic visual sense that is missing in most SF. It is a book that rides the flood of life itself.

☛ **THE HORSE YOU CAME IN** by Martha Grimes
(Alfred A. Knopf; 1993; 332 pp.)

** **HOTEL PARADISE** by Martha Grimes
(Alfred A. Knopf; 1996; 348 pp.)

I find it inconceivable that these two novels, one appalling, one transcendent, were written by the same person. *The Horse You Came In* is a botched giggly joke, an addendum to the corpus of Jury detective novels; a totally unnecessary book, with occasional vivid pages. *Hotel Paradise*, set in a remote part of southern USA, is one of the finest books about growing up that has ever been written. Its main character inhabits that strange zone that separates childhood and adolescence. She becomes obsessed by the death of a girl of her own age, a girl who died 40 years before. She helps her trouble-beset mother during summer at the Hotel

Paradise, but the rest of the time she has free to investigate the death. In so doing, she makes friends with a wide variety of eccentrics, is befriended by a silent woman who might or might not be a ghost, and nearly, but not quite, solves the mystery. All without most of the adults in her life

realising that she is involved in this search. Grimes's great strength is her precise sensuality; her world is that of low fogs, ripples on the lake, strange sights seen through trees. A great American novel.

— **Bruce Gillespie, 7 April 1998**

'The back half of our garden'. Photo taken by Elaine Cochrane; scanned by Robin Wade. This is an experiment in page filling.

