



'Be careful, you lot, or I'll drop right on your head!' (Polly in the maple tree, Keele Street, Collingwood. Photo by Elaine Cochrane.)

Scratch Pad 45

Based on the non-Mailing Comments section of *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life* No. 31, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the September 2001 mailing of Acnestis.

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Cavalcades

I nearly won an award I did not know existed. In March, Michael Levy of the Science Fiction Research Association emailed me to say that I was equal runner-up in the Pioneer Award for best SF essay of the year. The presentation would be at the SFRA conference at the end of May. Since I didn't win Tattslotto that week, I declined the offer to turn up to accept the certificate. I asked that somebody from the committee should get in touch as soon as the award had been made. In the end, it took several emails (a) to get the certificate sent to me and (b) find out details of the winner and other runner-up. I didn't recognise the names. The winner was De Witt Douglas Kilgore, 'Changing Regimes:

Vonda M. McIntyre's Parodic Astrofuturism' (*Science-Fiction Studies*), and the other runner-up was Anne Cranny-Francis, 'The Erotics of the (cy)Borg: Authority and Gender in Sociocultural Imaginary' (in Marleen S. Barr (ed.), *Future Females: The Next Generation*).

What was my near-award for? My article 'The Good Soldier', about George Turner's criticism, that appeared in *Foundation* 78, the special Australian edition. Thanks to Jenny and Russell Blackford, guest editors of *Foundation* 78, for publishing my essay. I'll probably never appear in an academic magazine again, so it's rather nice to know somebody out there in an ivory tower likes what I write.

Little lost books

I've just bought a book called *Lost Classics*, edited by Michael Ondaatje, Michael Redhill, Esta Spalding and Linda Spalding (Bloomsbury; 2001; 274 pp.). They are the staff of the Toronto literary magazine *Brick: A Literary Journal*. They asked their contributors to:

tell us the story of a book loved and lost, books that had been overlooked or under-read, that had been stolen and never retrieved, or that were long out of print. We wanted personal stories and they began to pour in.

Sounds just like a mailing of Acnestis. I bought the book because some of the contributors named books that I regarded as lost classics — never reprinted, and known only to me and a few other people: Halldor Laxness's *The Fish Can Sing*, Bohumil Hrabal's *I Served the King of England*, and Russell Hoban's *The Mouse and His Child*. Some other listed favourites include novels that are often reprinted, such as William Golding's *Pincher Martin* and Ford Madox Ford's

The Good Soldier, but whose reputations seem to have waned. The list includes several SF titles, including Richard Cowper's *The Twilight of Briareous*, and books I would have looked for if I'd known they existed, including A. E. Housman's *The Name and Nature of Poetry* and Bulgakov's *Life of Monsieur de Molière*.

My 'lost book' is a large book about the history of Australian trains. My parents bought it for me when I was a kid, but I didn't take it with me when I left home. A few years ago I went looking for it at my mother's house, but my mother had got rid of it some time in the last twenty years. The book's strength was its historical pictures: of the first Australian trains; the first suburban trains; the great passenger steam trains of Australia (including the *Spirit of Progress*, with an engine designed in 1940s slipstream style), and the great freight steam trains of Australia (including a picture of a two-mile-long train wending its way across the New South Wales plains, and a train ascending the Zig Zag Line over the Great Dividing Range). The only books about

steam trains I've been able to buy in recent years have featured British, American and European trains. During a recent visit to McGill's in town, I bought a nice book about Melbourne trams, but couldn't find anything interesting about trains. One day I hope to find in some secondhand store this favourite book from childhood.

The best paragraph in *Lost Classics* is in Javier Marais' Afterword:

I met a man who presided over a bookshop that had more rare and select titles than almost any other I had ever been in: first editions of works by Joyce, Dickens and Jane Austen, and by Conrad, some of them signed and dedicated by the authors, and also extreme rarities such as — I remember — the only four books ever published by the mysterious and outlandish Count Stenbock, who succeeded in scandalizing Oscar Wilde. Items like these had to be extremely costly, and were undoubtedly not within my means. Even so, partly out of curiosity and partly to try my luck, I asked how much one of them was. After removing the book from my hands, looking it over carefully and explaining the exceptional characteristics of that particular edition, the dealer's response was, 'This volume is not for sale.' I scanned the shop a little longer, then asked about another book, and the process was repeated; the man — a polished, almost elegant man — took it from me, stroked it, sang its praises and concluded, 'It's not for sale.' And the same thing happened with every volume that attracted my interest, so that, although a certain type of reaction can seem rude

in England, at the fifth attempt I couldn't contain myself and asked him, ill-humoredly, 'Why don't you just tell me which ones are for sale and we can speed things up a little?' The man stiffened with what seemed to be slightly wounded professionalism. He grabbed away the last book I had taken down, blew off some nonexistent dust (in fact there was no dust in that bookshop, which is unheard of) and answered haughtily, 'Oh, most of them are, most of them are, what do you think? I'm not about to work against the interests of my own business.' In light of this response, I inquired about two or three more titles, but always with the same degree of success. 'This certainly isn't your lucky day,' he said; 'that's not for sale either.' I later learned from one of my colleagues at Oxford that the man was indeed working against the interests of his own business, or, rather that despite the fact that his shop opened onto the street and there was a sign on the door saying *Open* or *Closed* depending on the time of day, he had no business. He was a collector so fanatical, so proud of his obsessions, that after having amassed one of the best libraries in the country, he found it unbearable that no one, or only a few acquaintances who came to visit him, ever saw or admired it. So he decided to pass himself off as a book dealer in order to enjoy the astonishment and greed that his exquisite treasures inspired in incautious passers-by or aspiring clients. Small wonder that nothing was ever for sale.

An Acnestid encountering such a shop would suffer from not a book accident but a book heart attack.

BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS

Books read since 26 May 2001

Ratings

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

** SUPERTOYS LAST ALL SUMMER LONG AND OTHER STORIES OF FUTURE TIME

by Brian Aldiss

(2001; St Martin's Griffin 0-312-28061-0; 232 pp.)

What, if any, relationship there is between the film *AI* and the title story of this collection? I've been waiting for months to find out, but the film isn't released here until the end of September. 'Supertoys Last All Summer Long' is a delicate little story, with perhaps enough material for the first 20 minutes of a film. Yet it fascinated Kubrick, and now Spielberg. Aldiss's introduction to the book is interesting, but tells us little about the ways in which the story was expanded into a film treatment. I wasn't overexcited by the two new 'Supertoys' stories that Aldiss has written for this collection. Let's hope that *Supertoys* is the bestseller that Aldiss has needed for awhile now. It's a good introduction to Aldiss the short-story writer, with some of his best work ('Steppenpferd', 'Dark Society' and 'A Matter of Mathematics'), some typical Aldiss stories, and some peculiar little lectures-posing-as-stories. No

copies of the British edition reached Australia.

** DR FRANKLIN'S ISLAND

by Ann Halam (2001; Dolphin 1-85881-396-4; 215 pp.)

The title of the book tells us that Ann Halam is writing a new version of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. She does this, but makes it sound fresh and new. Two girls are the last survivors of a plane wreck. Surviving on the beach of a remote island, they find eventually that they share the island with the secret research establishment of Dr Franklin. They are captured. No spoilers, although I'm itching to tell you how brilliantly Halam enters into the minds of the two girls being subjected to Dr Franklin's experiments. Halam's books officially fit the Young Adult category, but surely the day is not far off when one of her books — perhaps this one — picks up a Clarke nomination?

** EIGHT MILLION WAYS TO DIE

by Lawrence Block

(1982; Orion 0-75283-700-1; 351 pp.)

An early Matt Scudder title (No. 5 in the series), from the period before he sobered up. A sombre overview of the likelihood of any average joe in New York being killed prematurely (hence the 'eight million ways to die'), the novel superimposes a rather tricky crime solution over a foreground of Block's delicate understanding of people trying to survive as best they can.

This novel features one of Block's most interesting characters, Chance the pimp.

* **THE SINS OF THE FATHERS**

by Lawrence Block

(1976; Orion 0-75283-452-5; 182 pp.)

A modest, not particularly interesting beginning to the career of Matt Scudder. The Block style is already perfected here, but the crime described is hardly out of the ordinary, and the solution obvious from about half way through. Even Lawrence Block had to start somewhere, and at least *The Sins of the Fathers* has the virtue of being the correct length for a mystery novel.

** **THE ELEGANT UNIVERSE: SUPERSTRINGS, HIDDEN DIMENSIONS, AND THE QUEST FOR THE ULTIMATE THEORY**

by Brian Greene (1999; Norton 0-393-04688-5; 448 pp.)

This could be my Book of the Year, although I understand less than a half of it. In clear prose, and using brilliant illustrations (and no equations), Greene traces the long path from Einstein to superstring and M theory. Some leaps of logic I don't understand, but at least Greene trusts the reader enough to make those leaps. Only towards the end did I realise that Brian Greene is not just another science journalist, but is one of the leading theorists in the superstring field. Finding the ultimate answer to everything is exciting work, more exciting than even the best science fiction by people such as Greg Egan. What in this book was entirely new to me? Most of it, but especially its demonstration that events at sub-Planck level have both a direct and inverse relationship to events at cosmological level (for example, at the middle of black holes), therefore Hubble observations about the age of the universe are important in giving information about the structure of matter. Maybe from now on I will be able to understand bits of *New Scientist* articles on cosmology. (Thanks, Dick Jenssen, for giving this book to Elaine and me.)

** **THE VINTNER'S LUCK**

by Elizabeth Knox

(1998; Vintage 0-09-927389-6; 241 pp.)

Now that I've read *The Vintner's Luck*, I need to go back through Acnestis for the last two years to see what everybody else said about it. I'll be particularly interested to see what Ken Bailey made of the imagery in this book. Knox grafts an almost medievally literal view of heaven and hell onto a very modern view of life, love and growing grapes. The heavenly stuff is presented so directly that it seems to have been removed from the realm of metaphor, whereas many of the human relationships are murky, perhaps are more metaphorical than dramatic. Yet the novel's final pages suggest some grand overarching relationship between all elements in the book; at this point I felt lost. I'm still not sure whether or not this is a good novel or merely a very sophisticated soap opera; it's certainly odd, thought-

ful, and memorable. Thanks to whoever-it-was discovered it first and pushed it into other people's hands.

** **THE STONE MAGE AND THE SEA**

by Sean Williams

(2001; HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-6994-6; 342 pp.)

I must admit that *The Stone Mage and the Sea*, with its vigorous combination of magic and sea imagery, was refreshing to read straight after *The Vintner's Luck*. Sean Williams, who has been building a reputation as one of Australia's best SF writers, successfully combines a far-future background with a foreground of magical education of the young, innocent hero. The magic is pure cliché, but it is given weight and reality in the imagery of far distant strand, sand dunes, and sea, all based on the Coorong area of South Australia. In what is obviously a far-future Australia, small townships of people are scattered across the countryside and along the coast. A boy and his father enter one of these towns. The boy does not know why his father is constantly on the run. A man with magical powers, the stone mage of the title, who lives in the town, can enlighten them. The rulers of this country are pursuing the boy and his father, who are also disliked by some of the leading citizens of the town. Mysterious and wonderful things begin to happen. Sudden end of book, so we have to wait for Book 2. This book should appear in Britain and America, but let me know if you would like a copy right now. (The cover illustration is by Sean Tan.)

* **A TRAITOR TO MEMORY**

by Elizabeth George

(2001; Hodder & Stoughton 0-340-76723-5; 664 pp.)

664 pages! For a mystery novel! This is madness. Mystery novelists are supposed to write lean and mean books. Some years ago, P. D. James began stretching her novels to 400 pages, then everybody felt compelled to follow, and now Elizabeth George is trying to stretch the mystery novel to the length of *Lord of the Rings*. Mercy. We addicts have to have our next fix. We'd just prefer it to be a 200-page fix, not one of 664 pages. It would be okay if *A Traitor to Memory* was a novel of great suspense, or even if the murderer's identity, when revealed, came as a real surprise. This book kept me turning the pages, and I can't work out why. There are lots of interesting characters introduced in the first 300 pages, but most of them disappear or outstay their welcome. The detectives themselves, Lynley, Havers and Nkata, have to put up with periodic invasions of their private lives, but those private lives are not the central drama, as happened in the early Elizabeth George novels. Why do I read books like this? I don't know. I tell myself I won't read the next Elizabeth George novel. But I said that after the last one.

— Bruce Gillespie, 3 September 2001

Ten Best Short Stories

The other day I found a program sheet for a Nova Mob (Melbourne's SF Discussion Group) that took place some time in the 1970s — on 5 October of that year, which makes it either in 1971 or 1976. On that evening, when we were scheduled to meet at the home of Rob Gernrad, we were to discuss our favourite SF short stories. John Foyster, in his meeting notice, writes: 'Ideally, the meeting should agree on a single list representing the unique best stories the field has to offer, but as the lists below indicate, agreement won't be easy to obtain. The lists below represent a few suggestions from people who will be at the meeting. Prepare your own list, or come to discuss the choices below.'

The first series of Nova Mob had died by October 1971, and the first reincarnation did not occur until sometime in 1972. The meeting to discuss Favourite SF Short Stories must have taken place in 1976 or later, as David Grigg lists Pip Maddern's 'The Ins and Outs of the Hadhya State', which appeared first in *The Altered I* in 1976.

My diary for 1976 shows that I did not attend the Nova Mob on Tuesday, 5 October. My diary for 1980, however, shows that in that year we discussed the Best Short Stories at the October meeting — but on Wednesday, 7 October. Did we have two evenings on favourite short stories, held four years apart, and did I fail to attend the first? Or has the following set of lists slipped out of an alternative universe into ours? Either way, the Final, Definitive List of Best SF Short Stories was never written.

John Foyster:

'The Burning of the Brain' (Cordwainer Smith)
'Metamorphosite' (Eric Frank Russell)
'Sail On! Sail On!' (Philip Jose Farmer)
'Baby Is Three' (Theodore Sturgeon)
'The Big Hunger' (Walter Miller Jr)
'The Voices of Time' (J. G. Ballard)
'The Star' (Arthur C. Clarke)
'In Hiding' (Wilmar M. Shiras)
'Born of Many Women' (Richard Matheson)
'The Executioner' (Algis Budrys)
'The Million Year Picnic' (Ray Bradbury)
'Recruiting Station' (A. E. Van Vogt)
'The Mind Worm' (C. M. Kornbluth)
'No Woman Born' (C. L. Moore)
'Cloak of Aesir' (John W. Campbell Jr)
'Call Him Lord' (Gordon R. Dickson)
'Kyrie' (Poul Anderson)
'The Voice of the Lobster' (Henry Kuttner)
'How Beautiful with Banners' (James Blish)
'The Little Black Bag' (C. M. Kornbluth)
'The Purple Priestess of the Mad Moon' (Leigh Brackett)

Leigh Edmonds:

'A Way of Life' (James Blish)
'I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream' (Harlan Ellison)
'Gunpowder God' (H. Beam Piper)
'Neutron Star' (Larry Niven)
'The Squirrel Cage' (Thomas M. Disch)
'Rainbird' (R. A. Lafferty)
'All You Zombies' (Robert A. Heinlein)

'And Then There Were None' (Eric Frank Russell)

Elizabeth Foyster (now Elizabeth Darling):

'Alpha Ralpa Boulevard' (Cordwainer Smith)
'When You're Smiling' (Theodore Sturgeon)
'The Deluge' (Zenna Henderson)
'Pawley's Peepholes' (John Wyndham)
'The Celestial Omnibus' (E. M. Forster)
'Its Walls Were as of Jasper' (Kenneth Grahame)
'Vaster than Empires and More Slow' (Ursula K. Le Guin)
'There Will Come Soft Rains' (Ray Bradbury)

Robin Johnson:

'The Star' (Arthur C. Clarke)
'Queen of Air and Darkness' (Poul Anderson)
'Giant Killer' (A. Bertram Chandler)
'The Merakian Miracle' (Robert Crossen)
'Surface Tension' (James Blish)
'Mother' (Philip Jose Farmer)
'Inconstant Moon' (Larry Niven)

David Grigg:

'Omnilingual' (H. Beam Piper)
'The Oath' (James Blish)
'The Ugly Little Boy' (Isaac Asimov)
'All You Zombies' (Robert A. Heinlein)
'Fondly Fahrenheit' (Alfred Bester)
'Lines of Power . . .' (Samuel R. Delany)
'To Marry Medusa' (Theodore Sturgeon)
'Child of All Ages' (P. J. Plauger)
'The Ins and Outs of the Hadhya City State' (Philippa C. Maddern)

Bill Wright ('Who else?' — John Foyster):

'Spawn of Eternal Thought' (Eando Binder)
'Lord Tedric' (E. E. Smith)
'Masters of Space' (E. E. Smith and E. Everett Evans)
'The Vortex Blaster' (E. E. Smith)
'Ole Doc Methuselah' (L. Ron Hubbard)
'The Weapon Shop' (A. E. Van Vogt)

Bruce Gillespie:

'The Asian Shore' (Thomas M. Disch)
'They Don't Make Life Like They Used To' (Alfred Bester)
'Alpha Ralpa Boulevard' (Cordwainer Smith)
'The Saliva Tree' (Brian W. Aldiss)
'All You Zombies' (Robert A. Heinlein)
'A Planet Named Shayol' (Cordwainer Smith)
'Farewell to the Master' (Harry Bates)
'The Girl with the Robot with Flowers' (Brian W. Aldiss)

This list proves that Bill Wright's Favourites list has not changed an iota in nearly thirty years — and mine is also largely unchanged. Today I would drop 'Farewell to the Master', and include Stanislaw Lem's 'The Mask' and Cordwainer Smith's 'The Dead Lady of Clown Town'. I suspect that the lists of the other contributors have also changed little since 1976; indeed, almost any SF reader's list of favourite SF short stories is set in stone (between the ears) by the time he or she is twenty years old.