

SCRATCH PAD No. 48 APRIL 2002



Scratch Pad 48

Based on *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life* No. 33, 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 2002 mailing of Acnestis. Front Cover: 'Tangled Webs', by Ditmar (Dick Jessen).

Contents

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 3 | MICROSYSTEM by Bruce Gillespie | STEPHEN DUNN by Bruce Gillespie |
| 3 | IT'S ALL GREG EGAN'S FAULT, OR, I WISH I HAD A BIG BRAIN by Bruce Gillespie | 7 A MODERN GENRE by Bruce Gillespie |
| 4 | THE GREAT READING SCHEME by Bruce Gillespie | 8 DVD DELIGHTS by Bruce Gillespie |
| 6 | 'AS LOCAL AS YOUR FINGERTIPS': MEMOS FROM | 9 LIFE GOES ON . . . OR DOESN'T by Bruce Gillespie |
| | | 10 LETTERS David Russell :: Bob Smith |
-

Microsystem

During October, November and December I was, as actors say, resting. Publishers stopped sending out books to freelance editors, giving unanticipated holidays not only to me but to almost all the freelance editors, designers, typesetters, etc. in the state. I had too much time on my hands, and wasted a lot of it.

In late January, a Big Book arrived. About 400,000 words on financial accounting. And that's what I've been doing since, seven days a week except when interrupted. Thanks to an author stuff-up, I gained several free days during Easter. Hence this membership-saving issue of *Cosmic Donut*.

The second part of this issue was first prepared for ANZAPA (the Australia and New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association), and might not make sense to members of Acnestis. Andy Butler told me that the BBC classical music station has been dumbing down its programming, as ABC Classic FM has been doing here. But has the BBC gone as far as the ABC, issuing a list of the Hot 100 Classics, based on a listener survey? Those of us who like listening to long, interesting pieces of music on the radio find respite by listening to 3MBS, the subscriber-supported FM classical music station in Melbourne. However, MBS programs bits-and-piecey music at breakfast, lunchtime and 'drive time',

leaving occasional patches of programming time in the middle for real music. (MBS's best programs are between midnight and 6 a.m., when pieces are usually unannounced. I once caused panic for the switchboard person at MBS by ringing the next morning to find out what version of a piece had been played the night before. It took the person on the switchboard ten minutes to find the little piece of paper listing the previous night's items.)

When, two weeks ago, I received my first cheque for three months, I bought myself a new music system for my workroom. Elaine bought me a little 'beat box' quite a few years ago, but its speaker tone is so flat (it has a bass boost, but no treble boost) that I gain little idea of the musical contents of a CD by playing it on the beat box. Elaine has been working all day and half the night, so I have been reluctant to play any music on the main system in the living room. When Bill Wright retired at the beginning of this year, he bought himself a complete new music/TV/DVD system. I liked the tone of his new Sony 'microsystem', because it has both bass and treble controls. Despite the irritating reluctance of the vague Myer's assistant to sell me anything, I've bought my own Sony microsystem, and it sounds luvverly. Lots of unheard CDs to catch up on.

It's all Greg Egan's fault, or, I wish I had a Big Brain

Financial Accounting (2nd Edition) has occupied 200 hours of 2002 so far. When I receive a cheque for all this work, I might be able to pay last year's tax bill (since Elaine and I had quite a good work-year between July 2000 and June 2001) and post the *Steam Engine Times* that have been sitting in boxes for months.

I haven't been reading apa mailings. Apologies to people who have been waiting for well-deserved egoboo.

I've renewed my hunger for reading books. It's all Greg Egan's fault. *Schild's Ladder* (Gollancz; 2002; 250 pp.), his latest novel, arrived in early January. I read it to the end, but found that there are entire pages, let alone great looping

ideas fundamental to the book, that I do not understand. Greg Egan assumes that thinking like a quantum physicist is as natural as breathing. To him, it is.

Dick Jensen read *Schild's Ladder*. He had no problems with the quantum physics that forms the basis of the Big Idea in the book. He admired Egan for not providing too many explanations.

How could I catch up on up-to-the-minute physics? I read Brian Greene's *The Elegant Universe* last year, but string theory didn't seem to apply to the main ideas of *Schild's Ladder*. I read Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (Bantam Press; 1988; 198 pp.). That filled in some of the gaps, but Hawking assumes that the reader is familiar with the essential notions of quantum theory. I'd read a nice little book on quantum theory, with very clear diagrams, about 15 years ago. I can't find it. Elaine suggested reading *Where Does the Weirdness Go?* by David Lindley (Vintage; 1996; 251 pp.). This is an ideal example of how such a book should be written. It includes almost no formulae (a ghodsend for maths dumbwits like me), but offers a series of clear diagrams and thought-models to show how the main ideas of quantum theory were developed. With this essential information precariously clinging to the inside of my brain, I read Lee Smolin's *Three Roads to Quantum Gravity: A New Understanding of Space, Time and the Universe* (Phoenix; 2000; 231 pp.) without too much trouble. In the afterword to *Schild's Ladder*, Greg Egan thanks Smolin for his inspiration and ideas.

The trouble with all this scientific stuff is that it is just a bit too rich for my tiny mind. I struggle, but only bits lodge inside my consciousness. I can't recount the essence of what I learn, in the way I could if I read a history of Russia or a book of literary criticism. I did pick up one theme that recurs in these books: that instead of being a nuisance obstruction to the writing of galactic adventure stories, the speed of light

is an essential building block of the universe. Without it, there could be no structure to matter, because all energy would be infinite ($e = mc^2$ and all that). We do not know anything more about the universe than we can see in the sky. Any or all of those objects might no longer exist, but it doesn't matter until information reaches us at the speed of light. The same principle operates at the size of the smallest object in the universe. The speed of light itself forms the 'edge' of the tiniest element of matter. On this principle, thousands of theoreticians are trying to work out what is the ultimate structure of matter. At the beginning of *Schild's Ladder*, Egan includes a diagram of one of the best-favoured current ideas, that matter is a latticework of joined space, rather than discrete bits of matter. The problem now is: how does the structure of the smallest element of matter imply all the things that have happened to matter since the Big Bang? That's what's needed for somebody to claim to have found a Theory of Everything. What is intrinsic to matter that leads directly to the rules of physics, and hence the evolutionary path of the universe? As Greene shows mathematically in *The Elegant Universe*, the structure of the smallest thing in the universe might also have the same structure as the universe itself. Thus there is a constant interchange between physicists who investigate the largest and oddest things in the universe (especially black holes) and nuclear physicists who investigate the smallest things in the universe.

I felt that not only was I reading stuff that was much more exciting than anything in SF books (except in some pages of Greg Egan or Stephen Baxter), but I was reading stuff that, if it penetrated the minds of SF writers, would re-energise the field. Yet I also felt that quantum physicists would not think in this freewheeling way if it were not for all the science fiction they've read over the years. I just wish I had a Big Brain, so I could find metaphors from which I could make fiction out of all this fabulous stuff. At least science fiction is lucky enough to have Greg Egan.

The Great Reading Scheme

Elaine has a dream. She believes that, instead of buying more books, we should set out systematically to read the books we have already. This is a crazy scheme. Neither of us will live to the age of 100. If we do, we will probably be too blind to read during our last years.

Elaine revived the Reading Scheme that we both tried in the early 1980s. First, a book from the beginning of the paperbacks. Do not bypass a book. If it's on the shelf, I bought it because I wanted to read it. The only exception would be a book that Elaine bought.

The first book of Paperbacks was Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left* (Oxford University Press; 1961/1977; 460 pp.). I'm not sure why I bought this; probably because of an early 1980s bout of enthusiasm about things leftist, or perhaps because I wanted to bone up on the New Deal era. I thought I would learn something about left-leaning American writers and their works during the twentieth century. Not so. In what seems to have begun as a PhD thesis, Aaron investigates only those writers who were recruited by the Communist Party of America during the period from just before World War I to the period just after World War II. Aaron bases his story on the interchanges between writers and various party hacks in the major leftist magazines of the day. American writers who

are usually thought of as inspirational to the working-class movement, such as John Steinbeck, are barely mentioned, because they had little to do with the Communist Party. Instead, the book concentrates on a wide variety of writers, unknown to me, who committed themselves to communism during that period, and were then rejected by the party. These days, we see the main contribution of American leftist writers as their analyses of the social and political dysfunctions of America (especially Dos Passos's *USA*, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*), but in the 1930s leftist writers were judged by their attitudes to the Soviet Union. Many writers lost their faith (religious faith is the metaphor that recurs while reading this book) after the 1936 show trials in Moscow. Stalin's pact with Hitler didn't help, but Moscow's alliance with Washington during World War II led to some writers returning to the Party by 1945.

This fluctuation of affections and relationships would be an interesting story in itself if Aaron had any of the instincts of a novelist. Instead, he's a plodder. He talks about some people for page after page, yet gives little sense of their personality or value as writers. He sparkles only occasionally; for instance, writing of Kenneth Burke (as he might have written of most of people described in this book) that his

attitude to Marxism was 'that of a dog gingerly flirting with a porcupine'.

The most interesting passage in the book is a footnote, a pseudonymous prophetic passage from *transition* magazine, 1928:

Russia interests me but little. I think that it will become a sort of fast, complaisant, second rate United States. It is rapidly adopting the American economic vision because the revolution cleared a way for it. When the country becomes properly Americanized, say in fifty years, it will be producing hoards and hoards of Russian Harold Bell Wrights and Edgar Guests, while the one time Dostievsys will have become merely classical legends, like Shakespeare in England today. I do not expect to live long enough to see anything but trash out of the metamorphosis. The country will become industrialized, radioized, movieized, and standardized, the huge population of illiterate peasants will be taught how to read advertisements, newspapers, and bibles, the country will placidly settle down to the preoccupation of money grubbing.

Surely that's the voice of Edmund Wilson? If so, it's a pity he didn't live until the 1990s to see his prediction come true.

Next category: Hardbacks. I started at the end of the shelves, not the beginning: Stefan Zweig's *Stories and Legends* (Cassell; 1955 (1927/1937); 343 pp.). Elaine doesn't much like these 1950s Cassell translations (Eden and Cedar Paul, and Constantine Fitzgibbon) of Zweig's work, but the author's prose shines despite the translations. During 2002 I will find it hard to discover better short fiction than Zweig's 'The Buried Candelabrum', a variation on Jewish folk history so passionate and vivid that I'm surprised Steve Spielberg hasn't made it into a movie; and 'Twenty-four Hours in a Woman's Life', which is one of the world's great stories about a (male) gambler's obsession. 'An Episode in the Early Life of Privy Councillor D.' is also memorable. Presumably Zweig is still almost unknown in English-speaking countries because Penguin, Picador or Vintage has never undertaken a series of convincing translations of his work.

The object of the Grand Reading Scheme is to give some shape to some of the untidy features of the collections, especially Doubtfuls (which were in a bookshelf of their own, but are now stacked behind other books in the new bookshelf that Elaine had built in October) and Books In Boxes.

It was easy to throw out a Doubtful. (One of the objects of the Scheme is to pinpoint books that might find a better home elsewhere.) Elaine picked out for me to read James Branch Cabell's *Straws and Prayer-Books: Dizain des Diversions* (Bodley Head; 1926; 302 pp.). This is a series of essays in which Cabell tries to support the practice of writing fantasy rather than realistic fiction. An interesting enterprise, especially for the 1920s. I know that James Blish liked Cabell, perhaps because opposites attract. Blish wrote plainly and well, but Cabell writes purplely and badly. Arguments go nowhere, prose rambles like unpruned rose bushes, and all Cabell does is convince the reader to avoid reading his fiction. (I once attempted *Jurgen*, but also gave up after only 20 pages.) I doubt if a first-edition British hardback is worth much, especially without jacket. Perhaps I should try selling this copy on eBay?

Next category: I cheated when I reached for a Book from a Box. The box plainly says 'Books to Go Up on Shelves'. But I very much wanted to read Hilary McPhee's *Other People's Words* (Picador; 2001; 312 pp.), as it seemed to make a match for Diana Athill's *Stet: An Editor's Life* (Granta; 2000; 250 pp.), which Claire and Mark had kindly sent me a few

months earlier.

Athill says that she is not going to tell us the story of her life (and has since produced a book of autobiography), but tell us only about the bits of an editor's life that might interest us. In the first half of *Stet*, she tells how she became part of André Deutsch, a firm with which she stayed until it was swallowed up a few years ago. In the second half of *Stet*, which lifts the book into greatness, Athill tells about some of the more vivid Deutsch authors with whom she worked over a number of years. Her essay on Jean Rhys is a major contribution to Rhysology, and her chapter on V. S. Naipaul makes sense of much that is otherwise puzzling about this author. Athill's instincts are those of a novelist; probably she has also written a novel based on her career in publishing.

Hilary McPhee claims to be telling us candidly about her life and editing, yet she doesn't. Her style is self-conscious and a bit lofty-ideal, whereas Athill's is merrily candid. Hilary McPhee has a dazzling reputation as an editor and entrepreneurial small publisher in Australia, yet the independent firm McPhee Gribble did fail after 15 years, for reasons that are not made completely clear in the book, and Hilary McPhee does not give credit where credit is due for the vast improvement in the amount and quality of Australian fiction publishing in the 1970s and 1980s. She does not mention the inspirational role of small presses, such as Hyland House, that lasted much longer than McPhee Gribble. She tells nothing of the essential role of the Australia Council, whose subsidy scheme, which began in 1973, enabled a vast number of adventurous small publishers, including Norstrilia Press, to struggle along until the middle 1980s. In *Other People's Words*, McPhee's three husbands come and go, but we don't learn much about them, and we don't even gain a clear idea of Di Gribble, who was McPhee's partner for those 15 years. McPhee can rightly claim to have nurtured the careers of many of Australia's most famous writers of fiction over the last 25 years (Tim Winton and Helen Garner being her best sellers), but these writers do not come to life in this book. McPhee is best, for example, at describing the horrors of roaming the corridors of the Frankfurt Book Fair attempting to sell Australian books, competing against large companies whose large staffs work out of gaudy booths.

Both books are necessary reading for anybody interested in editing and the book trade. But Athill is a generous writer, and McPhee isn't.

Our book collection has a section of Critical Books. I tend to forget about them, mainly because they are usually hidden behind the book mountain. That's the book mountain whose photo appears in the latest issue of *SF Commentary* (you did get your copy of *SFC* 77, didn't you?; I sent a copy to everybody in Acnestis, but so far I've heard from almost nobody but Chris Priest). This time my pick from the Critical Books section was Paul Fussell's *Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays* (Ballantine; 1988; 257 pp.). A provocative title; is Fussell perhaps merely an American cold warrior? He proves to be the kind of American pragmatist who holds an entertainingly skewed view on all subjects. By Australian standards, he has leftist sympathies on some subjects, and right-wing opinions on others. In the title essay, he offers a powerful case in favour of dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Fussell was part of the island-to-island Allied campaign that gradually whittled down the Japanese Empire during 1943, 1944 and 1945. Few people seem to remember the horror of that campaign. It incurred similar death rates, on both sides, to those sustained by World War I forces in France. He believes that Japan would not have surrendered in August 1945 without

the dropping of the two atomic bombs, and that such a failure to surrender would have led to the deaths of at least a million American soldiers, and many millions of Japanese soldiers and civilians. His sympathy, as in other matters, is with the ordinary grunts who did the fighting; American ground forces who during World War II, as during the Vietnam War, were almost all from the working classes. In other matters, Fussell's concerns are more theoretical. For instance, he writes a wonderful historical satire about ideas of 'tourism' and 'travel' ("Travel, Tourism and "International Understanding"). In another essay, he attacks the horrible things being done to language by today's academics ("A Power of Facing Unpleasant Facts"). His essay on George Orwell would send any reader to read or reread him. Now I want to find the rest of Fussell's books (though perhaps not his many books about his academic specialty, Augustan poetry).

The book mountain shown in *SFC 77* comprises the Urgent Urgent Shelf. Elaine's Reading Plan allows me an Urgent Urgent book between books from each other category.

Urgent Urgent books are usually review copies, some needing reviewing more urgently others. Lucy Sussex asked *Australian Book Review* to assign me the job of reviewing *Eyes of the Calculator* by Sean McMullen (Tor; 2001; 589 pp.) and *The Halstead Treasury of Ancient Science Fiction* (edited by Matthew Richardson; Halstead Classics; 2001; 191 pp.). See the box on page 7 for the reviews, which have already appeared in *ABR* and — miracle of miracles — been paid for. Before McMullen fans start sending me rude emails about the inaccuracies in the review, bear in mind that *ABR* gave me no time to read *The Miocene Arrow*, the second in the series of which *Calculator* is the third, or reread *Souls in the Great Machine*, the first in the series. I hope to write and present a Nova Mob paper on the trilogy.

I've cheated on the system in order to read far more Urgent Urgents than I should have. Egan's *Schild's Ladder*

was an Urgent Urgent, but I put Hawking's, Lindley's and Smolin's books under the same category so that I could read them together. Patrick O'Leary's *The Impossible Bird* (Tor; 2002; 368 pp.), an ambitious surrealist fantasy that I don't like a lot, falls in this category. (The author arranged for Tor to send it to me, and now I don't know how to review it favourably.)

I slipped Ursula Le Guin's *The Telling* (Harcourt; 2000; 264 pp.) and *The Other Wind* (Harcourt; 2001; 246 pp.) under the Urgent Urgent label. I should do some hard work to review them adequately.

The Telling resembles Le Guin's other political fables, in that again (as in *Four Ways to Forgiveness*) she pits a Hainish representative against a repressive regime, but this time the setting is a single-continent world with a bloody huge mountain range in the middle. The journey over the range has some of the imaginative intensity of the journey over ice in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

In *The Other Wind*, Le Guin returns to Earthsea. You can feel her sniffing the wind with delight at the beginning of the novel, as her main character alights in Gont, and she returns to her true spiritual home. Le Guin never writes better than she does about Earthsea, and, despite some irritating kowtowing to kings and nobles, she takes the reader on a harrowing and deeply imagined journey that raises her work far above all other heroic fantasy, including that of Tolkien. The story has its origins in *The Farthest Shore*, *Tehanu* and a short piece called 'Dragonfly'. In those pieces, she developed some powerful metaphors for, as Peter Nicholls put it, 'teaching children the value of death'. In the years since she wrote *The Farthest Shore* and *Tehanu*, Le Guin has been questioning the meaning of her own metaphors and images. During the first three-quarters of the novel, she seems almost as lost as her own characters. The book's ending has no easy solutions. She overturns many of her favourite notions so thoroughly that I suspect she will now have to write yet another Earthsea novel.

'As local as your fingertips': Memos from Stephen Dunn

There is one more category in the Grand Reading Scheme. Every tenth book or so I'm allowed to read A Book For Pleasure. How generous a concession! (You can see why the whole scheme will fail eventually, as it did in the early 1980s. I can stand reading only so many books out of duty before I kick the scheme and return to reading only for pleasure.)

I went to the shelf and picked up a book of poetry, *New and Selected Poems 1974–1994* by Stephen Dunn (Norton; 1994; 296 pp.). I bought this in the mid 1990s because I selected it from the bookshop shelf and read a few of the shorter poems. Reading the entire book only amplified the pleasure I had felt when I first looked at it. Dunn is sensible and funny about ordinary things, but gives a whole-of-life meaning to matters that would be merely mundane in the hands of a prose writer. Sometimes he tells short stories in verse, such as 'At the Smithville Methodist Church', in which he tries to account for the horror he feels when he discovers his young daughter enjoys attending Sunday School, and is absorbing uncritically New Testament stories. The volume

begins with his most recent poetry (at the time of publication), goes back to his earliest pieces, then works forward through selections from eight books. Only after I read this book did I look up Stephen Dunn on the Net. I knew nothing about him. I found that he has just won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and has published three books of poems since the *New and Selected Poems*.

Here are a few of the Stephen Dunn lines I wrote down while I was reading the book:

Night has come laterally
out of the woods, has risen from the grass. ('A Pretty Thing')

mice are squinching
themselves tiny, getting into homes. ('A Pretty Thing')

and there was my dog Buster with a flea rash,
his head in his privates. Even for Buster
this was something like happiness. ('Something Like

Happiness')

I repudiated Zen because it doesn't provide
for forgiveness, repudiated my friend X
who had gotten in touch with his feelings,
which were spiteful and aggressive. ('Something Like
Happiness')

I remembered how tired I'd grown of mountaintops
and their thin, unheavenly air,
had grown tired, really, of how I spoke of them,
this exaggerated glamor, the false equation between
ascent and importance. ('Something Like Happiness')

I looked at the vase . . .
— and realized how wrong it was
to reject appearances. How much more difficult
to accept them! I repudiated myself, citing my name.
The phone rang. It was my overly serious friend
from Syracuse saying *Foucault, Foucault*,
like some lost prayer of the tenured. ('Something Like
Happiness')

Tell the dogs and the horses
you love them more than cars. ('Some Things I Wanted
to Say to You')

In the converted stable where I work,
after the kerosene warmed the room,
one deadened fly rose to life —
a phenomenon that could turn a boy
from street crime to science
of, if less bright, to the church. ('The Resurrection')

To be a fly
was to fly in the face
of all that could defeat it. ('The Resurrection')

It's vanishing as you speak, the soul-grit,
the story-fodder,

everything you retrieve is your past,
everything you let go
goes to memory's out-box, open on all sides,
in cahoots with thin air. ('The Vanishings')

Then create a list
of what you've learned to do without.
It is stronger than prayer. ('Traveling')

You start with your own body
then move outward, but not too far.
Remember, finally, there are few pleasures
that aren't as local as your fingertips.
Never go to Europe for a cathedral
in large groups, create a corner
in the middle of a room. ('How to Be Happy: Another
Memo to Myself')

So many people walk up to me
and tell me they're dead,
though they're just describing their afternoons. ('One
Side of the Story')

and again Dunn's most constant theme:

In difficult times, we come to understand,
it's the personal and only the personal that matters.
(Introduction to the 20th Century')

I should tack to the masthead of *The Metaphysical Review*, if
ever I get around to publishing another issue.

These lines, written long before 11 September 2001, are
in a poem called 'To a Terrorist':

Perhaps you're hating me now,
I who own my own house
and live in a country so muscular,
so smug, it thinks its terror is meant
only to mean well, and to protect.

DVD delights

Books, films and music are my obsessions, though not always
in that order. If I talk about all the films I've seen recently, I
won't have time to save my Acnestis membership. Before I
can talk about recent music CDs I've bought, I'll have to play
most of them.

As I've probably mentioned, my recent pleasure has been
to watch DVDs on the 19-inch monitor of my computer. Or
Elaine's computer, since hers can play DVDs from all zones,
whereas mine can play DVDs only from Zone 4.

The quality of the prints of most recent films issued on
DVD are better than the theatrical prints. That's true for
Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, my favourite movie for 2002
so far. I've seen it three times on DVD, and once on the vast
screen at the Astor. That should have been a more exciting
experience than watching it at home, but the theatrical print
was fuzzier and noticeably darker than the DVD print. Ang
Lee's DVD commentary for the film (which accounts for one
of the times I watched it) is funny and instructive. *Crouching
Tiger* is one of the few films that is beautiful enough (balletic

enough?) to warrant repeated viewings. Most films can only
be watched once every five years, at most, so I'm not tempted
to buy them.

The other recent film that stands up to repeated viewing
is David Mamet's *State and Main*. Very sharp script and
editing, plus one of the most effective ensemble casts I've
seen on film. My favourite actor, Philip Seymour Hoffman,
steals the film, along with Rebecca Pidgeon. Most unlikely
romantic lead of the decade, Hoffman is described in a
recent *Age* article, reprinted from the *Daily Telegraph*, as 'a
thickset, doughy, 34-year-old blond in heavy-framed glasses
and a baseball cap'. As the male nurse attending the dying
Jason Robards, Hoffman stole *Magnolia* from Tom Cruise,
matched Robert de Niro in *Flawless*, and now, as the rather
glum writer who keeps having to change the film script while
disasters accumulate on set, steals *State and Main* from Alec
Baldwin and William H. Macy. The real star of *State and Main*,
as always in a David Mamet film, is writer-director David
Mamet. He's best known for comedy-suspense films in

which he whips the rug from under the feet of the viewer (*House of Games*, *Homicide* and *The Spanish Prisoner*), but in *State and Main* he plays only one nasty trick on the audience. The script is mischievous, cynical fun, and the film has the kind of pace that Paul Thomas Anderson could well have used in *Magnolia*, or Altman used in *Short Cuts*.

Other great films seen recently on DVD have included a perfect print of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (with a commentary by Peter Bogdanovich), and a less-than-perfect print of *The Trial*, a Welles film that is much better than *Citizen Kane*. About ten years ago, Elaine and I saw a perfect print of *The Trial* at the Astor, so it's annoying that the DVD release seems to use an old TV print.

Dick Jensen showed us *RKO 281*, a sumptuous made-for-TV film (an all-British production, except for the stars) that tells the story of the battle between Welles, Manciewicz and Hearst about the making and release of *Citizen Kane*. Liev Schreiber, an actor I'd never seen before, is brilliant as Orson Welles, although he doesn't look like him. James Cromwell plays Hearst.

Dick also showed us Ed Harris's *Pollock*, one of the best biopics I've seen. It was not shown commercially in Melbourne. Not many of Jackson Pollock's warts are hidden here, but Harris is mainly tries to recreate the way in which Pollock developed his painting method. Marcia Gay Harden, as Lee Krasner, Pollock's wife, won an Oscar for her performance, but Harris was very unlucky to lose out to *our Russell* in *Gladiator*. (It's typical that Russell Crowe, a New Zealander, somehow became an Australian as soon as he began picking up Oscar Awards.)

Marcia Gay Harden comes close to stealing *Space Cowboys* from the four old guys who blackmail the NASA head (James Cromwell, cool and nasty as ever) to let them travel into space (envy, envy). Nice to see this film again. Again, the DVD print is clearer than the theatrical print. Tommy Lee Jones does a nice job of one-upping Clint Eastwood in every scene in which they both appear. This is a neat trick, since Eastwood is the director. Eastwood has become of the world's great directors during recent years, and *Space Cowboys* is one of his best films.

Life goes on . . . or doesn't

Not much to report from what is called Real Life, except death and gloom.

Recently we received news that Cherry Wilder has died, at the age of 71, in New Zealand. Cherry lived a few years in Sydney, so we claimed her as an Australian during the 1970s. Her first successes, especially *The Luck of Brim's Five* and its sequels, were with Australian publishers. Paul Collins published 'Odd Man Search', one of her earliest and best short stories. After she won the Ditmar, she travelled with her husband, Horst Grimm, back to Germany, his home country. George Turner met Cherry and Horst at Seacon in 1979. When Horst died, more than ten years ago, Cherry found herself without friends or relatives in a country in which she did not speak the language well, so eventually she moved back to New Zealand. She kept writing the whole time, and published several novels that have never been available in Australia. It was only because Yvonne Rousseau brought back from America *Dealers in Light and Darkness*, her most recent (and only?) short story collection, that I knew it existed. I met Cherry at the convention held in Sydney over Australia Day weekend, January 1975, but it would have been wonderful to catch up with her again. This did not happen.

On Wednesday, 27 March, Elaine, Sally Yeoland and I travelled by train to Ballarat for the funeral of Jim Dunwoodie. Jim was George Turner's best friend during the last twenty-five years of his life, and Jim shared George's estate with me. (If George left a note explaining the division of his estate, he didn't leave the note anywhere I could find it.) Two more unlikely cobbles than George and Jim could hardly be imagined, since Jim, with almost incomprehensible Glasgow accent, did not read much, and he liked golf, horse-racing and other country interests. George's sense of humour was carefully hidden, and Jim's was ever flowing. In Jim, George found a family he never had, for Jim was one of a large family, all of whom took to 'Uncle George'. Jim's brother Andy ran a well-known butcher's shop in Ballarat (80 km west of Melbourne) until he retired. We had always planned to travel to Ballarat to meet the whole family around the Sunday dinner table, but that didn't happen. I

spoke to Jim on the phone every six months or so, but hadn't seen him since 1997.

After the funeral, we met most of Dunwoodies, then went back to the station. No train. 'The signals have failed at Bacchus Marsh.' Two large buses had to be found in a hurry, and the trip home took two and a half hours instead of one and a half hours. At least I was treated to a tour of an area of Victoria I haven't seen since I lived at Melton and Bacchus Marsh in the 1960s. Bacchus Marsh now includes a new dormitory suburb, but the essential country town is still intact. Melton had 500 people in 1963, and now has 40,000, most of them living in horrible double-story concrete-sheet-walled monster houses packed together on blocks so small that nobody could fit a tree between them. It's a different world out there in the west; it's certainly very different from *Neighboursville*.

John Foyster has received radiotherapy for the small brain tumour that was discovered in January, after several months of suffering from a mystery illness. He's still taking heavy doses of medication, but continues to produce issues of *eFNAC*.

Another favourite Adelaide SF personality, Peter McNamara, was diagnosed in February as suffering from a brain tumour. He's 54, one year younger than I am. Peter and Mariann travelled to the Aurealis Awards on 22 March, and Peter was due to start radiotherapy when he returned to Adelaide. Peter set up Aphelion books in the 1980s (the vital link in Australia between the days of the small publishers, such as Norstrilia Press and Cory & Collins, and the beginning of major-press publishing of SF and fantasy in the 1990s), then organised the Aurealis Awards for five of their seven years of operation.

If Elaine were writing this, she would tell you all about the garden, which looks pretty good to me. If you want to read Elaine's thoughts on gardening, you'll have to join The Secret Garden, the gardening apa. I'm finished for now.

— Bruce Gillespie, 2 April 2002

Letters

DAVID RUSSELL
196 Russell Street,
Dennington VIC 3280

I'm hoping that the 'bootersnike' that Claire Brialey mentions is really S. A. Wakefield's *Bottersnikes*, an Australian series of children's books that feature imaginary intelligent creatures of the Australian bush. I read and loved the books as a child so much that I bought a few of them from the Little Bookroom in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne. I include one of them for you to grok more fully what Claire was on about.

Jam jars feature heavily in *Bottersnikes and Gumbles*. Remember when jam came in tins you had to open with a can opener? I don't actually — comes from being a twist-top lid kid, I guess.

The Diana Wynne Jones book *Tough Guide to Fairyland* is a book I ordered because I fell in love with the title after reading about it in Cheryl Morgan's fanzine *Emerald City*. It's not that amusing a book. The entries should be read a few at a time, not *en masse*, as they tend to dull the senses if read all at once.

I'm having a hard time believing that you thought Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* was more about music and genetics than about God. I thought the loss and regaining of faith by Emilio Sandoz was the focus of the book. Because I'm an atheist, the constant religious ambience was a sore point for me to cope with. Knowing, for most of the book, that Sandoz's hands are going to be horribly mutilated, I can easily see why both Ian and Karen Pender Gunn decided not to finish what they knew would be a horror story. Music plays a small part in *The Sparrow*, Bruce. I think your interpretation is focused on a less important aspect of the story.

I'm sending you Philip Dick's *Counter Clock World* because, as Australia's leading expert on PKD, you must have a copy, even though it's your least favourite PKD book. You'll never know when you'll need to refer to it.

Little news to report from Warrnambool. I went to see *The Matrix*, starring Keanu Reeves, and liked it more for the martial arts scenes between Hugo Weaving and Keanu Reeves than for the depressing view of humans as energy stores for AIs. The impossibility of martial arts movies appeals to me. I recommend you and Elaine see it, as it'll be the most most talked-about SF movie of the year.

(19 April 1999)

The night I saw *The Matrix* was the only night I've seen the Astor filled. Most nights the downstairs section is not open, but that night there were no spare seats, upstairs or down. Therefore I saw it, or failed to see it, from four rows from the front, downstairs. One day I must find out what *The Matrix*

is all about. *The Matrix* is definitely not Elaine's type of film.

Thanks for the presents, David, including *Counter Clock World*. As you say, it might come in handy one day.

BOB SMITH
37 St Johns Road,
Bradbury NSW 2560

I read the John Wyndham novels as they appeared, and don't think I have looked at them since. In fact, to the best of my knowledge none of them is on my shelves. I did like his short stories.

I had thought *So* was still on our shelves, but neither Lyn nor I can find it. We remember reading parts of it for different reasons, all of which are kinda fuzzy now. Lyn said she thought it had reminded her of some Lawrence Durrell — the 'layered' idea — but overall she didn't like the book. For me, there was, I think, experiences in the narrator's early life that seemed to touch upon my life in England. As I understand it, Owen Webster was two years older than me, arrived in Australia some ten years after I did. Did the narrator do his National Service period in the Royal Corps of Signals, and does he mention Catterick Camp in Yorkshire?

It's many years since I read *So*. As I remember the book, Webster wanted to make his main character into an Everyman, so he did not mention precise details of place and time.

After reading 'Last Things', I gathered our four moggies around me, and I guess my eyes were a trifle misty.

I appreciated the back photo of you all, and wondered what kind of films you watch and discuss.

(24 January 2002)

We're still missing Theodore a lot. Oscar has gone quite peculiar since he lost Theodore, although that's mainly because his kidneys are failing.

Films seen over the years? SF films, of course. Too many Powell and Pressburger films for some people, and not enough for others. Since we meet at Race and Iola's place, and it's his equipment, he sometimes shows just what he feels like showing. Sometimes we agree with him, and sometimes we don't. (Last month, everybody except me and Race voted to abandon *Andrei Roublev* half way through.) The largest attendance so far has been for *The 5000 Fingers of Dr T*, the ultimate camp cult classic. Attendance is by invitation only, as there is only so much space in Iola and Race's living room.