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# Scratch Pad 62

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**October 2005** Based on the non-mailing comment sections of *\*brg\* 44*, a fanzine for ANZAPA, by Bruce Gillespie, 5 Howard St, Greensborough VIC 3088. Phone: (03) 9435 7786. Email: [gandc@mira.net](mailto:gandc@mira.net). Member fwa. Photos: Elaine Cochrane (p. 1), Helena Binns (p. 12).

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## The dark side of paradise

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To Elaine and me, refugees from the inner suburbs of Melbourne, Greensborough spread out before us like a beautiful piece of green park with houses and streets inscribed on it (and a dirty big ugly shopping centre in the middle). Surely we would find here the quietness and clean air that, when we lived in Collingwood, we always knew was out there somewhere.

Clean air, yes.

Quietness — yes, except for the host of dogs who sometimes take part in a chat sessions across the

Miles of tiles — the original pile of broken tiles dumped on our front lawn. (Photo: Elaine Cochrane.)

suburb. The other side of our back fence there is one particularly idiotic dog (noise = stupidity = dog) that seems to bark at anything. Possums, the kids down the road, the people who deliver junk mail, the sound of Polly's bell as she skips around the yard. Anything. But that dog does shut up for hours at a time.

In selling up in Collingwood, we hoped that the income would pay for a large house on a large block somewhere out this way. The house is just right for our needs, except that we keep having to replace things that did not look wonky when we moved in. Three burners out of five on the electric stove top don't work. Elaine is



just getting around to replacing the stove with a gas stove top. The back fence needed replacing. The giant air-conditioning unit on the roof, which was going to give us bliss during summer, proved to be so corroded that it probably hasn't worked for years. The heating unit worked for two months, then conked out. With its computer control unit replaced, it has been working since. Et cetera.

I stick to the inside of the house as much as possible, except when I go for walks. Elaine works in the garden whenever she can. It's her garden. In Collingwood she spent eight years creating a native plants garden. She hopes to do the same here.

Elaine's plan is to rip up all the lawn eventually, and replace the whole garden with Australian native plants. She is a member of the Eltham branch of the Australian Plants Society. At one of their garden visits, she saw a demonstration of a novel method of conserving water. (This has been the first time in ten years during which we have received continual winter rains, and the decade-long drought is still by no means broken.) Put rubble in trenches between raised garden beds. Water runoff flows down through the rubble, and circulates upward into the soil. The principle is the same as that used by seemingly dry creek beds lined with trees.

A week later, Elaine was walking along Alexandra Street when she saw that, while demolishing a large house, the demolishers were dumping all the roof tiles in a truck. 'How much do you want for them?' she asked. 'Nothing,' said the workman. 'Where do you live? I'll bring them around for free.'

Which he did. There was one problem. There is no way of getting a truck into our back yard. The only access is through the garage. The bloke backed his truck onto the front lawn and dumped the lot. The broken tiles covered about three-quarters of the front lawn.

This did not worry Elaine. She wanted to destroy the lawn anyway. She started breaking the tiles into smaller bits and lugging them around the back as she prepared each trench-and-garden-bed.

A few weeks later a bloke knocked at the door. He was very polite. He was from the Banyule Council. He said that a neighbour had made a complaint to Banyule Council about the tiles on the front lawn. We needed to move them within a month.

We were flabbergasted. Who could have made the complaint? Nobody had complained to us. What right did anybody have to complain?

This is where we reveal the dark side of paradise. 'Paradise' out here is defined as 'gardens'. Greens-borough gardens are large, and bog-standard Australian in design, i.e. European trees and flowers, with lots of carefully manicured lawns. During spring, lawn-mowing is one of the major industries. So Elaine had inadvertently committed heresy by allowing an ugly thing — a vast pile of tiles — to sit on the front lawn.

We can only guess the identity of the complainant. We did agree with whoever-it-is that the tiles were in the wrong place. We would have had them dumped at the back if that had been possible. Now we had to find a way within the next four weeks to carry them through from one side of the house to the other.

We set out filling the barrow that we were given when we moved in last October. Its tyre burst.

Elaine bought a much bigger, sturdier barrow. We started at the top of the pile and began filling it. I trundled the barrow through to the back. Within a week my elbow went out, and my thumbs felt like hell. (I suspect this was because I was wearing thick gloves to handle the tiles, rather than the tile-chucking action itself.) I went off to see my masseur and chiropractor to try to get my arm and thumbs working okay again. I hadn't visited them for six months. That cost \$77.00, and my thumbs still felt like hell.

About that time, our wonderful builder Harjinder phoned us. He had finished some gigantic project, and had a few spare days before the next one started. We had a page-long list of things for him to do, so he started on the last stage of the inbuilt bookcases. He brought his pleasant Indian assistant, Mika. 'Can we pay him extra?' said Elaine. 'Could he take the tiles through when he's not working on the shelves?' A fit twenty-year-old lad makes one feel old by comparison. In a total of three days' work he carried through the rest of the tiles. It had taken the two of us three weeks to move about a quarter of them.

What next? What happens when we actually start turning the front lawn into trench-and-garden-bed patterns. Suburban wars?

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## Indexing is a hell of a way to make a living

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Not really, but I've been waiting thirty years to use that Cordwainer Smith reference.

These days, indexing is my living, because during 2005 I've been sent only two editing jobs (which earn real money) and have had to scrape along on the proceeds of a scattering of proofreading jobs and some interesting indexing assignments.

I had to sign a confidentiality agreement with the publisher. Luckily I told only one other person, my wife Elaine, about this agreement. 'What's the book, then?' she said. '*The Latham Diaries*?' 'Yes,' I said. So we both had to shut up about my indexing job until the day extracts hit the media.

When Mark Latham quit as head of the Australian Labor Party at the end of January 2005, he made it known that he would publish the diaries he had written during the years leading up to his leadership and the

year when he was Opposition Leader. Some hint of the contents emerged from the interviews he had with Bernard Lagan, whose biography of Latham, entitled *The Outsider*, appeared a few months ago. Despite the revelations made in that book, nobody seemed to be prepared for the impact of the diaries themselves.

It's not clear how Louise Adler, publisher at Melbourne University Press, scooped the other Australian publishers by buying the Latham rights. I've heard it suggested that all the other major publishers in Australia except Allen & Unwin are owned by people mentioned (or insulted) in the diaries. MUP threw all its resources into producing the book as quickly as possible after Latham's departure from Parliament.

My indexing difficulties arose from some quite unreasonable assumptions made by MUP about the task.

Latham or the copy editor had submitted a list of 500

proper names that should go in the index. These items proved to have only a marginal relationship to the material in the book, but the production people had the impression that they could get away with a minimal index. Insufficient pages were left at the end of the book. The note at the end says: 'Due to the extraordinary number of people and events mentioned in these diaries, the index is limited to select references; in most cases, names are listed only when they have multiple entries in the book.' In other words, about 100 people are still to discover that they are mentioned in the book.

I had six days to complete the job.

If Latham gets bored with taking care of his kids, and wants another job in Australia, he probably won't get one. However, he can always take up a career as a writer. The essential quality of *The Latham Diaries* is its readability — and its black humour. Elaine said she kept hearing cackles of laughter as I crouched over the computer.

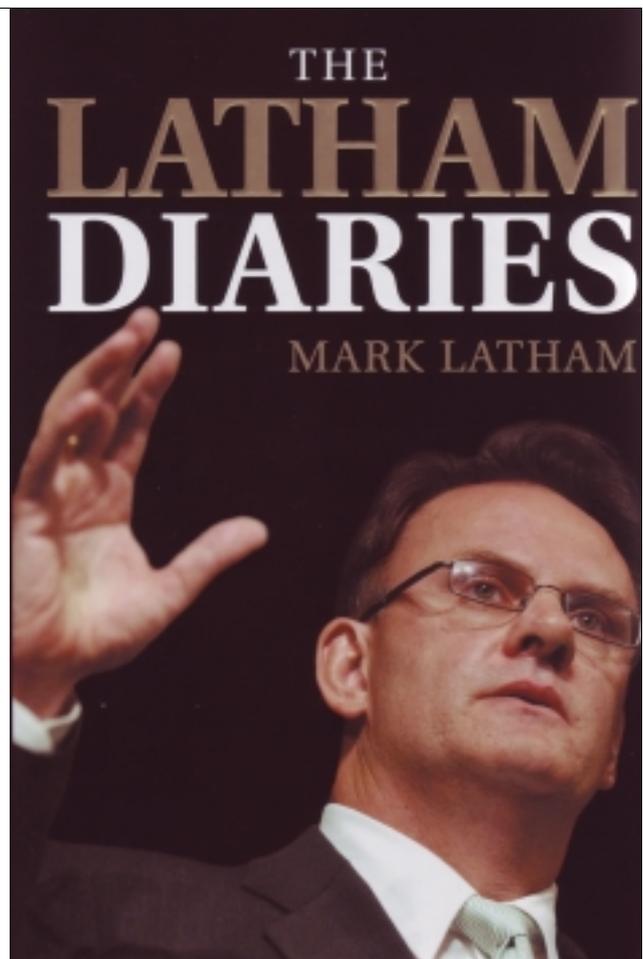
The main indexing difficulties were: (a) Latham knows how to pack a huge amount of information into a page while seeming to write with quite a light style; and (b) he gives nasty nicknames to most of the people he doesn't like. Therefore the number of items grew and grew (4000 items before I started cutting back) and I had to keep remembering which nickname on, say, page 100 fitted a person I had last encountered on, say, page 25. Bloody hard work. If *The Latham Diaries* had been in any way boring, I might have given up after the first day.

*The Latham Diaries* is probably be the most entertaining book I will read this year. It begins in 1994, two years before Labor lost office, and finishes during the days after Latham quit politics early in 2005. It is a diary, not a memoir. Latham paints himself as a *Candide*, an innocent in the halls of Canberra. We don't really believe him, but we tend to accept this invitation to collude with his viewpoint. This emotional viewpoint veers between depression (during the months after the 1996 election loss) and optimism (during the first few months after he became Opposition Leader), with a wild sort of elation at the end of the line, rather like that of somebody who had just outrun a ravening tiger. One of Latham's bitterest periods, however, was during the months leading up to his accession to the leadership; as he describes the situation, only that triumph stopped him quitting much earlier.

Most commentators in the press claim that what they hate most about the book is its hypocrisy — Latham blames everybody for his failures but himself. What they really hate most is his willingness to give glimpses of the true situation in Canberra — the poisonous relationships between politicians and politicians, and between politicians and the press. He gives an odd impression of the great federal tussle, as if members of the two sides, Labor and Liberal/National Party, live in separate fish tanks, only occasionally baring their teeth at each other but spending their time ripping the flesh from their colleagues.

After doing all this hard work on the index, I began to wonder whether the legal experts might not stop publication. Australian writers about politics usually pull their punches because of the threat of the libel laws. Yet oddly, no libel writs have been sent. Although the book gives the impression of offering under-the-counter gossip, I suspect that Latham can support most of his more scandalous allegations.

Every reader will have difficulty with the personality of Latham as revealed here. Why would a man who has such an acute sense of himself as an idealistic outsider



go into politics in the first place? We get the impression that Latham had been pretty successful in the cut and thrust (and odd bout of fisticuffs) of local council politics in Liverpool, Sydney. He also claims to love his electorate, Werriwa; that the most enjoyable part of politics is his vital connection with the voters. But how could anybody aspire to rise to high office without knowing already the nature of machine politics, especially in the New South Wales Right faction of the party?

It all depends how idealistic Latham really was, or is. I haven't read the six books on political theory he wrote before becoming federal leader. The only extended passages of theoretical writing in *The Latham Diaries* are two-page outlines of various bits of his political viewpoint, which he claims to be aligned with Tony Blair's 'Third Way'. Yet I've never understood 'Third Way' politics, and I still don't after reading Latham. I wanted to know how his policies would close the rapidly widening gap between extreme wealth and extreme poverty in Australia, and he doesn't tell me.

Occasionally Latham emits bursts of devastating honesty. Several of these undermine everything else he claims to stand for. For instance (p. 207):

I remember Christmas Day when I was a kid, circa 1970. The streets were full of children on their new bikes, skateboards, a real community event. I went jogging at 11 a.m. yesterday [Christmas Day 2002] and Glen Alpine was like a ghost town, not a kid in sight. People don't see each other any more, not even on major holidays. No talking, no interacting, no community.

We have become an Inside Society, kids on computers, parents petrified of street crime, unwill-

ing to use their front yards. Social capital is in retreat, even on the best day of the year. If you stand in the middle of Glen Alpine on Christmas Day, you can see what's happened to our society — rows of double-storey houses, material wealth but no social wealth, a neighbourhood of nothingness. In my job, I talk about community, but live in a place without one.

If Latham has in two paragraphs can deliver a requiem for the society he hopes to create, why should he be surprised if the people who live in the new Inside Society ignore his ideals and return a government that panders to the 'neighbourhood of nothingness', to a cult of social fear and illusory wealth? If I had been given so sharp an insight, I would have skedaddled from the political arena as fast as possible.

Only one newspaper article (in the 'Business' section of *The Age*, 26 September 2005) picked up on the most self-condemnatory section of the diaries. Latham admits that he completely failed to conduct the 2004 campaign effectively. The whole time I was reading the book, I kept wondering why he was so desperately concerned at the antics of the press. Surely, I thought, the only medium that influences voters is television? Latham could use television well; his campaign for the leadership began unofficially with an appearance on Andrew Denton's *Enough Rope* in mid 2003. But during the 2004 campaign, Labor failed to conduct any sort of TV advertising

campaign in peak hours while the Liberals were plastering the top programs with negative advertising! Then Latham has the hide (p. 337) to blame his campaign director Tim Gartrell!

Latham's viewpoint on federal Labor politics from 1994 to 2005 is pretty much mine, but under no circumstances would I have entered the shark pool, even if I had the personal qualities that make a good politician. Latham wonders why Labor made him leader in 2004. Surely, he says, it was because there was nobody better. We, the voters, had noticed that already. We gave up in despair on Beazley some years ago. We watched horrified as a very able man, Simon Crean, was rubbed into the ground like a luckless cockroach by the press and TV merely because he lacked celebrity charisma. We watched for any sign that some saviour might step into the spotlight. Latham might have been it, but he failed to understand that the conservative forces would stop at nothing to cut him down. If he had understood that from the beginning, he might have triumphed. But to triumph, he would have had to be the sort of person who could never have written these diaries. So why did it take until 2005 for Latham to recognise this truth?

*The Latham Diaries* reads more like a deeply disturbing black comedy novel rather than anybody's diaries. However, I can't help hoping that it begins a trend towards bare-all political books. I hope I get to index one or two of them.

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## Favourites of 2004

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### But first, the usual warning . . .

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Note the phrase 'seen for the first time' in each of the headings below. That's why you won't find mention of the film and the book that actually dominated 2004: di Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard*, Luchino Visconti's movie of the same name, and David Gilmour's biography of di Lampedusa. Last year, *The Leopard* was No. 1 in my list of Films Actually Watched during 2003. Ditto for 2004. In 2003 I saw the copy shown in wide screen at the Astor Cinema. In 2004 I bought the three-CD package of *The Leopard*: the complete, restored version (looking much better than the Astor print), the 20-minutes-shorter English language version that had been the only version we would see during the sixties and seventies, and a DVD of extras. The advantage of the English-language version is that in it Burt Lancaster speaks with his own voice.

The novel of *The Leopard* overwhelmed me this time in a way it had not when I had read it twice before. I still think the film is much more vivid than the book, but the book is very subtle and rich — as if written by a

nineteenth-century French novelist at the height of his powers.

Both the novel and the film make much more sense after reading David Gilmour's *The Last Leopard*. Di Lampedusa spent his whole life supported by what seemed like a small income. He was always mindful of the nineteenth-century glories of his family, which had destroyed its own fortune in a series of court cases that lasted eighty years. Di Lampedusa never held a job, except for a stint in the Italian Army during World War I. Every day he wandered down from his apartments to the Palermo square and bought at least one book. The family home lay in ruins near by, demolished by a bomb during World War II. Di Lampedusa, a lifetime dilettante, began writing *The Leopard* in his fifties, as a challenge to himself. The book became the first Italian worldwide bestseller since the war, but not until after its author had died. Everything in the novel, the film and the author's story reeks of rueful nostalgia, of re-creation of a grand past that had destroyed itself.

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## My favourite novels read for the first time in 2004

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- 1 *The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf* by Kathryn Davis (1993; Hamish Hamilton; 400 pp.)
  - 2 *A Map of the World* by Jane Hamilton (1994; Black Swan; 415 pp.)
  - 3 *Officers and Gentlemen* by Evelyn Waugh (1955; Penguin; 249 pp.)
  - 4 *Men at Arms* by Evelyn Waugh (1952; Penguin; 246 pp.)
  - 5 *Unconditional Surrender* by Evelyn Waugh (1961; Penguin; 240 pp.)
  - 6 *A Perfect Spy* by John Le Carre (1986; Hodder; 463 pp.)
  - 7 *The Time Traveler's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger (2004; Jonathan Cape; 522 pp.)
  - 8 *Seek My Face* by John Updike (2002; Penguin; 276 pp.)
  - 9 *Set this House in Order: A Romance of Souls* by Matt Ruff (2003; Flamingo; 479 pp.)
  - 10 *Thirteen Steps Down* by Ruth Rendell (2004; Hutchinson; 314 pp.)
  - 11 *Mystic River* by Dennis Lehane (2001; Bantam; 527 pp.)
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Nobody has noticed that I've stopped writing my paragraph book reviews in every issue of *Scratch Pad*. Which is a good reason to stop writing them, I suppose. I wrote them initially as a kind of ANZAPA mailing comment to Alan Stewart, who was listing everything he had read, seen, etc in the previous two months. Then I found the book review column a good way of keeping faith with publishers. What I intended to do was gather them all together for a column in every issue of *SF Commentary*, and keep faith with the publishers that way. The column kept being crowded out of *SFC*. Ah well. It still exists on a file somewhere on my hard disk.

*The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf* is an American novel about the friendship between an ambitious but impressionable young woman and an old, tough woman who has been writing operas all her life. The prose is as rich as the music of a great opera, and the plot combines talk about music with a rousing melodrama of a story. I found it in the best secondhand shop I've ever been in: a shop in Woodend. I popped in for 20 minutes while waiting for a taxi to take us out to Jenny Bryce's housecooling last year. Now that Jenny does not live in Woodend, I have no excuse to visit there. But I do know that that fabulous secondhand bookshop was there last year.

I found two more Kathryn Davis books when I was in Seattle.

I found *A Map of the World*, another very ambitious American novel, in a strange bookshop at the south end of Smith Street. At first it seemed like a dumping place for the remainders of one of the major publishers. Then I kept finding high-quality fiction, books I'd never seen on a shelf in regular shops. Just before I left Collingwood for Greensborough, I talked to the proprietor. He seems to be a literary sort of person who likes to select his remainders very carefully. He mentioned several authors I did not know anybody else in Australia cared about.

*A Map of the World* was made into a film that went straight to DVD; I'll be interested to see how it could be filmed at all. A wife and her husband see the same set of dangerous events from totally different viewpoints; it's the interior monologue rhetoric of the book that makes it fascinating.

The World War II trilogy by Evelyn Waugh, *Men at Arms*, *Officers and Gentlemen* and *Unconditional Surrender*,

would be No. 1 in any ordinary year. In his clipped, very funny prose, he tells of a 'war effort' in which nobody knew what he or she was doing, and any victories happened by accident. The main characters weave in and out of each others' lives as they are posted all over Europe and Asia. People fall in and out of love; a lot die; some don't. Riveting stuff; funnier than *Catch 22*.

Most of the books on my list could well have been No. 1. For instance, *A Perfect Spy* made me a Le Carre fan all over again. The 'perfect spy' of the title tells his story as he awaits capture by MI6, who have finally twigged to his lifetime double life. But the main character's double life has been merely an attempt to measure up to the devious life of his father, a perpetual swindler. Nothing in this book is as it seems at the beginning, and not even the explanations explain everything, but this is very much truer and more realistic than most 'mainstream' British novels.

*The Time Traveler's Wife* is one of those books that make your toenails curl each time you think about it. The time travel twists don't bear thinking about, but the great doomed lovers achieve an almost legendary quality, and the scenes of their meeting etch themselves on the memory. We all die; we all lose each other; and in this novel we know from the beginning when the disaster will take place — but *The Time Traveler's Wife* makes us want to defeat destiny.

*Seek My Face* is John Updike's companion novel to the recent biographical film *Jackson Pollock*. Only the names are changed here. A reporter spends a day in the company of the artist's widow, and is told everything the wife wants to tell her. The reporter doesn't understand what she is being told, but at times we do. Updike loves art as well as artists, which is why this book is so enjoyable to read.

Two other novels that might well have been No. 1 for the year are *Set this House on Fire* and *Thirteen Steps Down*. They have that memorable quality of a great SF novel: the 'what if?' idea. I'm not going to spoil them by telling you the 'what if?' idea; you do have to find out for yourself.

And if you've seen the film *Mystic River* you don't need to read the book, as the script actually captures nearly everything that's in Lehane's long novel. But the puzzling, even irritating ending makes much more sense after having read the novel.

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## My favourite books read for the first time in 2004

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- 1 *The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf* by Kathryn Davis (as above)
  - 2 *A Map of the World* by Jane Hamilton (as above)
  - 3 *Officers and Gentlemen* by Evelyn Waugh (as above)
  - 4 *Men at Arms* by Evelyn Waugh (as above)
  - 5 *Unconditional Surrender* by Evelyn Waugh (as above)
  - 6 *A Perfect Spy* by John Le Carre (as above)
  - 7 *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time and the Texture of Reality* by Brian Greene (2004; Knopf; 569 pp.)
  - 8 *The Time Traveler's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger (as above)
  - 9 *With Stars in My Eyes: My Adventures in British Fandom* by Peter Weston (2004; NESFA Press; 336 pp.)
  - 10 *Seek My Face* by John Updike (as above)
  - 11 *Set this House in Order: A Romance of Souls* by Matt Ruff (as above)
  - 12 *Thirteen Steps Down* by Ruth Rendell (as above)
  - 13 *Mystic River* by Dennis Lehane (as above)
  - 14 *Things That Never Happen* by M. John Harrison (2003; Gollancz; 436 pp.)
  - 15 *The Dark: New Ghost Stories* edited by Ellen Datlow (2003; Tor; 379 pp.)
  - 16 *Southern Blood: New Australian Tales of the Supernatural* edited by Bill Congreve (2003; SandGloss; 368 pp.)
  - 17 *Friend of My Youth* by Alice Munro (1990; Knopf; 273 pp.)
  - 18 *The Best of Australian Science Fiction Writing: A Fifty-Year Collection* edited by Rob Gerrand (2004; Black Inc; 615 pp.)
  - 19 *Black Juice* by Margo Lanagan (2004; Allen & Unwin; 218 pp.)
  - 20 *The Last Leopard: A Life of Guiseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa* by David Gilmour (1988; Collins Harvill; 223 pp.)
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*The Fabric of the Universe* is my second attempt at a brain-stretching exercise led by physicist Brian Greene. His *The Elegant Universe* was a highlight of my reading several years ago. I don't understand much of what Greene says, but he is willing to begin with essentials in order to build his argument. He takes little for granted. The ideas, when they hit you, seem much more exciting than anything in SF novels. (Thanks to Dick Jenssen for giving me a copy.)

I was very disappointed that Peter Weston's *With Stars in My Eyes* did not win the Hugo this year for Best Associated Book. The book shows why we all enter fandom, why we publish fanzines (those of us who do), and what fandom gives back to us. In Peter's case, his *Zenith* and *Speculation* found themselves at the centre of the greatest upheaval in British science fiction since H. G. Wells — the New Wave, led by Michael Moorcock. The pro- and anti-New Wavers fought each other, real down and dirty, through the pages of *Speculation* as well as in John Bangsund's *Australian Science Fiction Review*, Dick Geis's *Psychotic* and *Science Fiction Review* and through *New Worlds* itself. Full marks to Weston for surviving, then recalling his glory years with so many wonderful anecdotes and memorable scenes.

Books of short stories tend not to hit No. 1 unless every story is brilliant, but I'm thinking now that these collections should be considered part of a Top Ten that stretched. *The Dark* is yet another great collection from

Ellen Datlow, and *Southern Blood* is an Australian original fiction anthology that is as interesting as any of the better publicised anthologies of recent years.

People either hate or love the writing of M. John Harrison, but I can do both. I hate *Light*, yet keep it in my collection, but I love most of the stories in *Things That Never Happen*, although they show much the same appalled dislike of the human race. Yet it's that appalling quality that's vivid in the stories; Harrison gives ordinary existence the vigorous sheen of Gothic horror. Too many favourites to name, but 'Running Down' remains a masterpiece thirty years after I read it last.

I've already written a long review of Rob Gerrand's *The Best of Australian Science Fiction Writing: A Fifty-Year Collection*. If it's still around, buy it. It's the essential collection for any reader of Australian SF.

The Americans (not only Charles N. Brown) have taken a mighty liking to Margo Lanagan's work. *Black Juice* is not as consistently interesting as *White Time*, her first collection, but it has yielded 'Singing My Sister Down', a story that keeps winning awards, and 'Wooden Bride'.

I'm about four books behind in reading Alice Munro's short-story volumes. Each book is so rich that it's hard to pick individual stories for praise. *Friend of My Youth* is now fifteen years old; I really must catch up with her work since then.

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## My favourite films seen for the first time in 2004

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- 1 *Northfork* (directed by Michael Polish) 2003
- 2 *Twin Falls Idaho* (Michael Polish) 1998
- 3 *The Good the Bad and the Ugly* (restored version) (Sergio Leone) 1966
- 4 *Chimes at Midnight* (Orson Welles) 1966
- 5 *Spider* (David Cronenberg) 2002
- 6 *Wit* (Mike Nichols) 2001
- 7 *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* (extended DVD version) (Peter Jackson) 2003
- 8 *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg) 1993

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| <p>9 <i>American Splendor</i> (Robert Pulcini and Shari Springer) 2003</p> <p>10 <i>Harvey</i> (Henry Koster) 1950</p> <p>11 <i>21 Grams</i> (Alejandro Gonzales Inarritu) 2003</p> <p>12 <i>The Court Jester</i> (Norman Panama and Melvin Frank) 1955</p> <p>13 <i>The Triplets of Belleville</i> (Sylvain Chonet) 2003</p> <p>14 <i>Solaris</i> (Steven Soderbergh) 2003</p> <p>15 <i>Intacto</i> (Juan Carlos Fuesnadillo) 2001</p> | <p>16 <i>A Fistful of Dollars</i> (restored version) (Sergio Leone) 1964</p> <p>17 <i>For a Few Dollars More</i> (restored version) (Sergio Leone) 1966</p> <p>18 <i>West Side Story</i> (Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins) 1961</p> <p>19 <i>To Be or Not to Be</i> (Ernst Lubitsch) 1942</p> <p>20 <i>Legend</i> (director's cut) (Ridley Scott) 1985</p> |
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For the first half of 2004, I was sure that *The Good the Bad and the Ugly* would be my favourite film for the year. Restored in length and quality, it was shown at the Astor Cinema. (The Astor Cinema has been offered for sale; if it ceases to be a repertory cinema, we will no longer see classic films on the giant screen.) Nothing I had read about it had given me any idea of its epic quality. It's not a western, not even a spaghetti western, but a Civil War drama about three equally bad guys on a treasure hunt while the Civil War ruins the nation around them. I'm told that for many years many of the best scenes, featuring a long battle for a bridge, disappeared from the film. It can't have made much sense. Oddly, one remembers the Eli Wallach and Lee Van Cleef characters much more clearly than the Clint Eastwood character. I suppose it's because you know Clint is a magic figure, somebody who will win out eventually.

Also, we now know how much more interesting Clint Eastwood became later, both as an actor and a director. *The Good the Bad and the Ugly*, *A Fistful of Dynamite* and *Once Upon a Time in the West* have far more ambitious plots and story lines than any Westerns made by Hollywood; and every scene in them looks astonishing.

*The Good the Bad and the Ugly* was bumped from No 1 because Dick Jenssen lent me two films by the Polish brothers, co-writers Mark and Michael (Michael Polish directs). Dick had read rave reviews of these films when they were shown in Britain. They have never been shown in Australia or released on DVD here. They are very low-budget films that depend entirely on the quality of the scripts and brilliance of the cinematography — and a lot of ingenuity. As the Polish brothers say in their commentary to *Northfork*, they set up a shoot in northern Nebraska, only to find that the promised \$2 million did not arrive. The brothers' father built most of the sets, and somehow everybody survived. Ostensibly, *Northfork* is the story of a small town threatened with being flooded as a new dam begins to fill. Most of the residents have left already. James Woods heads a group of black-suited bureaucrats whose job is to remove the stay-puts. The eccentric residents of this town just don't want to leave. Everything in this film is magical and unexpected; tragedy is the flip side of humour; the acting is splendid. Order it from overseas or ask an import shop to find it for you.

If I had seen *Twin Falls Idaho* before *Northfork*, I might have liked it as much. Mark and Michael Polish take advantage of the fact that they are identical twins in order to play a pair of Siamese twins, staying in a hotel room, who hire a whore who becomes determined to save them from what seems at first like terminal depression. Again, a small number of characters, very few sets . . . but the intensity of the script and acting make this into a great film.

It's good to know that independent film-making is in so healthy a state in America. A pity it is so difficult to find information about the best new films, let alone see them.

Also on the list are some films I saw only because Dick lent or gave them to me:

- Mike Nicholls' astonishing rendition of *Wit*, a play in which a woman dying of cancer talks to the camera. Emma Thompson plays the woman, and the result is both very funny and heartburning.
- *Schindler's List*, which is too enormous a film to take in during one viewing. I must buy my own copy and watch it again and again. Liam Neeson's performance as Schindler is as astonishing as all the reviews said, but nothing could have prepared me for the epic quality that Spielberg invests in the film. Kubrick planned to make a film about the Holocaust, then decided that the real facts were too painful to render on film. Spielberg suggests this conclusion, but finds a way to tell the story (and render the images) through the story of the unlikely friendship between a businessman, a prisoner, and a prison commandant.
- *Intacto*, which has that strange Phildickian quality that one finds in many Spanish films recently. Lots of wonderful weird twisted game playing here, made mesmerising more by its images and acting than by its story, which I never quite understood.
- *West Side Story*, which was the most surprising film of the year. When I saw it in the mid 1960s, it had been running for so long in the city that the print had already worn out. Restored to perfection, it has stayed a very modern film. The CinemaScope dance sequences seem just as exciting today as when Jerome Robbins conceived them.
- *To Be or Not to Be*: I have no idea how I've missed innumerable TV showings of this Lubitsch classic. It's about as good as a 1940s comedy can be; lots of great lines; given that extra power because it was filmed when America had just entered the war and there was no assurance of winning. I get the idea that nobody in America yet realised what was really happening to Jewish actors in Europe right at that moment; that's why the film keeps its light touch.

I saw *Chimes at Midnight* because Race Mathews bought a copy. The last time I tried watching this film, based on several Shakespeare plays, was at the old Valhalla Cinema in Richmond. I could hardly hear a word being said, so I felt I had never seen the film. Even in the restored copy, the dialogue is hard to hear. Eventually I borrowed the DVD from Race and listened to it through earphones. In some ways, this shows Orson Welles versus Shakespeare, but Shakespeare wins. If Shakespeare had had a cinecamera to play with, he would never have bothered with the stage. The acting is fine, and the medieval battle scenes (filmed on Welles' usual minuscule budget) was among the most realistic ever filmed, but Welles' compressed script makes high demands of even the most devoted viewer.

Hard to describe *Spider*, the most recent Cronenberg film to reach Australia. Like most of his films, it's suppressed and compressed. A man with obvious

mental problems is forced to remember the childhood events that led to his condition. Somehow Cronenberg makes this doleful subject into a tale of enchantment.

*American Splendor* should sit much higher on the list, but somehow it got pushed down. Almost a documentary about a man who described his own life in a comic strip (oops, graphic novel), it has one of the greatest moments ever in film. Harvey Pekar, seemingly dying of cancer, ponders what would happen to his graphic novel if he died. If he could keep writing the story of his own life, would that keep him alive? The real Harvey Pekar has a feature scene.

*Harvey* has been on TV plenty of times, but I've never seen it. It was always supposed to be one of Jimmy Stewart's finest performances, but I couldn't quite grasp how a film about a man talking to a giant imaginary giant rabbit could become a great film. (In *Donnie Darko*, you see the rabbit.) The idea does work. Stewart plays a character who is supposed to be an alcoholic, which means his eccentricities are excused. We never see the Stewart character drunk, but we do see him inhabiting a world at odds with that of his family and friends. There is a slipping-sideways quality to everything in the film. Made in 1950, is it supporting the right for people to be at political odds with the McCarthyist America? No, it's halfway there; it's just supporting the right for individuals to be individuals. A bit soft, I suppose; but the film does have many fine comic moments. And Jimmy Stewart was the best Hollywood actor of his era.

*21 Grams* should have driven me from the cinema. It is almost impossible to work out what is happening during the first twenty minutes, so intricate is the cut-and-paste time-out-of-time technique. Yet, since I survived the first twenty minutes, I could see the complete story assembling itself, bit by bit. I don't know how Spanish director Alejandro Gonzales Inarritu gets away with it. Its intertwined stories and characters are much more tightly entangled than, say, those of *Magnolia* or *Short Cuts*. Therefore the pattern, when it becomes clear, is even more satisfactory than in those earlier films.

I'm glad I've missed *The Court Jester* while it has been repeated umpteen times on Sunday afternoon TV. I'd heard that the TV print had almost pinked out, and thieves had sampled most of the best bits. Now restored, complete, this is a great Danny Kaye film. He was probably the most watchable performer ever filmed, but

few of his films work on their own terms. As a parody of both musicals and Errol Flynn-type adventure films, *The Court Jester* works well. It's a reminder of an era when families went to the pictures on Saturday nights for pure enjoyment.

I don't know whether Sylvain Chonet's animated feature *The Triplets of Belleville* has been influenced by Miyazaki or not, but I suspect that it could not have gained worldwide distribution without manga cartoons having been there first. *Triplets* is very, very French. This tale of a boy, his mother, their dog and a bicycle race is so quaint that it is nearly incomprehensible in places. All becomes clear (or nearly so) at the end of the film. Even the 'triplets' of the title, having been shown at the beginning, do not re-enter the film until over half way through.

I could write an article about the difference between Lem's novel *Solaris*, Tarkovsky's 1972 film of *Solaris* and, now, Soderbergh's 2003 version. I don't have the time. Both the novel and the Soderbergh version lack the Tarkovsky's 20-minute prelude that is so puzzling that not even the actors knew which parts they were playing. Soderbergh's prelude, introducing grim-faced George Clooney, ties in nicely with the end, which owes something to Tarkovsky and nothing to Lem. The middle bits on the space station are pretty much the same in each, except that Soderbergh adds two interesting characters and deletes one. For Tarkovsky's poetic, meditative treatment Soderbergh substitutes a much colder, grimmer kind of confrontation between the astronaut and his unwitting creation. Neither film includes Lem's long essay in Solaristics, or even a visual version of it, but Soderbergh's *Solaris* planet glowers nicely outside the window during most of the film. Soderbergh's ending is very effective, but still his film lacks some of the more breathtaking moments of Tarkovsky's much longer version. Read and watch all three.

I think it was Race Mathews who imported the restored director's cut of *Legend*, but the old, cut version is still the only one available in Australian DVD shops. I'm told that the old one, the version released in cinemas in Australia, is incomprehensible. The restored version delivers a spectacular fantasy ride, many original effects, gorgeous photography and visual atmosphere, and an absurdly youthful Tom Cruise.

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## My favourite short stories read for the first time in 2004

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- 1 'The Silence of the Falling Stars' by Mike O'Driscoll (*The Dark*)
  - 2 'One Thing About the Night' by Terry Dowling (*The Dark*)
  - 3 'Pictures of the Ice' by Alice Munro (*Friend of My Youth*)
  - 4 'Singing My Sister Down' by Margo Lanagan (*Black Juice*)
  - 5 'Basic Black' by Terry Dowling (*Southern Blood*)
  - 6 'In Quinn's Paddock' by Rick Kennett (*Southern Blood*)
  - 7 'Wooden Bride' by Margo Lanagan (*Black Juice*)
  - 8 'A Far Countrie' by Avram Davidson (*Limekiller!*)
  - 9 'El Vilvoy de las Islas' by Avram Davidson (*The Other Nineteenth Century*)
  - 10 'Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass' by Alice Munro (*Friend of My Youth*)
- 

I'm going to squib here. I don't remember short stories in detail unless I go back over them and do full reviews of each story. That's what I used to do, but I haven't written an adequate review of a short story collection for

a long time (except for the long review I did of Rob Gerrard's collection).

I would point out that half the stories are by Australians. Australians don't feature well in my other lists,

but we're doing very nicely in the short story field. Not me, of course; I don't write fiction. But Margo Lanagan, along with Lucy Sussex, is now Australia's most stylish writer, and we're lucky she's writing fantasy stories. 'Singing My Sister Down' is the standout story in *Black Juice*, but I would recommend most of the others, especially the very strange 'Wooden Bride'.

Terry Dowling just gets better and better. He's a stylish writer, but I felt that his style was a stumbling block in his early Tom Rynosseros stories. It's not his style that makes his recent fantasy and horror stories so compelling — it's their originality of concepts. I won't even try to describe 'One Thing About the Night' and 'Basic Black'. Go and experience them for yourself.

Mike O'Driscoll's 'The Silence of the Falling Stars' has dark characters who are lost in a gritty desert that quickly becomes a quicksand of perception. Even after you reach the last line you are not quite sure what kind of landscape they have trudged through.

*Southern Blood* has some gems, but nothing quite like Rick Kennett's hallucinatory 'In Quinn's Paddock'. Like

many of Rick's stories, it's about a ghost catcher, except here the catcher faces a sort of Gormenghast castle of weird ghostly traps.

'A Far Countrie' was the only story from *Limekiller!* that I had not read already, and it is the strangest of all. If you read the first three novellas, you think that they have no link apart from the fact that the main characters live in a Central American backwards country very similar to Belize, where Davidson once lived. Only in the last two stories does he draw the threads into a fix-up novel even stranger and more discursive than most of his earlier novels.

Ditto for 'El Vilvoy de las Islas' — even more of a shaggy dog story than most of his novellas, but grimly satisfying nevertheless.

The Alice Munro stories are fairly indescribable; they seem so plain and straightforward and realistic as you read them, then they hit you at the end. 'Pictures of the Ice' is not strictly a fantasy story, but it would best be appreciated by people who like ghostly fantasy.

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## My favourite popular CDs bought during 2003

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- 1 *Feast of Wire* (Calexico)
  - 2 *Modern Art* (Tom Russell)
  - 3 *Stumble Into Grace* (Emmylou Harris)
  - 4 *Silver Platter: Collection 75-84* (Margret Roadknight)
  - 5 *The Genius After Hours* (Ray Charles)
  - 6 *Extremely Cool* (Chuck E. Weiss)
  - 7 *Growl* (Ray Wylie Hubbard)
  - 8 *Going the Distance* (Neil Murray)
  - 9 *Free Beer Tomorrow* (James Luther Dickinson)
  - 10 *Streets of Sin* (Joe Ely)
- 

The usual warning here. When I went through my list of CDs bought in 2003 and 2004, I found that I still had not played many of them. I can hardly list CDs that I haven't heard yet, but in ten years time my list of 2003 and 2004 favourites might be quite different.

Five of these CDs — those by Calexico, Russell, Harris, Hubbard and Ely — would be called American roots music, alt.country, or 'singer-songwriter music'. Tom Russell's songwriting gets better with every CD, as does Emmylou Harris' (when she writes her own songs, which she does here), Hubbard's and Ely's. Each works with a first-class band.

When I listened to Calexico's *Feast of Wire*, I went out and bought the other Calexico CDs I could find. They are disappointing compared with *Feast of Wire*. Calexico, which I'm told is an offshoot of Howie Gelb's Giant Sand, sound very tentative on the early CDs. Suddenly they find their feet on *Feast of Wire*, with a set of powerful ballads interspersed with Mexicali-styled interludes. During the CD they play almost every type of American roots music, yet still retain that south-of-the-border quality.

Every now again I find a CD release from Ray Charles' great period (1957-1961), when he was considered as much a jazz performer as a blues and rock and roll singer. *The Genius After Hours* combines all three influences in an amazing set of classic songs. Makes you wonder why Charles' style went a wimpy after 1962, but as the film *Ray* shows, he had nothing more to prove after he gained the best-in-industry ABC Paramount contract. *The Genius After Hours* shows Ray Charles still hitting his stride.

Two slam-beat percussion-based rock and roll records are Chuck E. Weiss's *Extremely Cool*, which should have been a huge hit but wasn't, and James Luther Dickinson's *Free Beer Tomorrow*, which is designed for today's version of the good old boys. Weiss sounds as if he has a lot to prove, where Dickinson (alias Jim Dickinson, the most successful American session drummer of the last thirty years) is just having a lot of fun with his family (two members of the North Mississippi All Stars) and friends.

Margret Roadknight has been one of Australia's top folk singers since the mid 1960s. With her enormous 'black' voice and wide repertoire of blues, ballads and cheekily humorous songs, she could easily dominate any blues festival in the world. However, she's rarely left Australia, and has had to be content with sporadic gigs instead of a real career. She's had only one hit — Bob Hudson's song 'Girls in Our Town' — in the mid 1970s, but has performed one great album after another for thirty years. Some of her best songs are collected on *Silver Platter*, but it would be much better if her LPs from the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially *Ice*, could be released on CD.

I just happen to like Neil Murray's voice, style and songs better than Paul Kelly's, but if Paul Kelly wasn't there, set in stone as Australia's best singer-songwriter, I suspect Neil would be much better known. He sings songs about the Australian landscapes, ghosts, lost loves — the usual — but has a fresh style and a good band. If you don't find *Going the Distance*, look for his recent 'best of' collection.

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## My favourite classical CDs bought during 2003

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- 1 Alfred Brendel: *Young Brendel: The Vox Years* (6 CDs)  
(various pieces by Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, Dvorak, Beethoven, Liszt, Schoenberg, Prokofiev, Stravinsky)
  - 2 Rudolf Serkin: *The Legendary Concerto Recordings 1950–1956* (3 CDs)  
(Mozart PC 21, PC 25, Schumann PC, Beethoven PC 5, Brahms PC 2, Strauss: *Burleske for Piano and Orchestra*)
  - 3 Angela Hewitt: Bach: *The Six Partitas* (2 CDs)  
(Partitas 1–6, BWV825–BWV830)
  - 4 Vladimir Ashkenazy (cond.)/London Symphony Orchestra/Concertgebow Orchestra/Cleveland Orchestra: Symphonies Nos 1, 5, 6, 7/*Autumnal/Overture on Hebrew Themes* (2 CDs)
  - 5 Zehetmair Quartet: Schumann: Quartets 1 and 3
  - 6 Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli: *The Art of* (8 CDs)  
(Pieces by Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, Debussy; piano concerti by Mozart and Beethoven)
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I'm buying fewer and fewer classical CDs each year. I already own the best versions of most of my favourite pieces. But there are always exciting new versions to be found, and old favourites that have never before been on CD.

Ever since CDs were first released in 1984, Elaine and I have been trying to find Alfred Brendel's recording of Beethoven's cheeky Fantasy in G Minor, Opus 77. I bought a version by Rudolf Serkin. We didn't much like his version of the fantasy, but his version of the *Hammerklavier* sonata on the same CD is the best we've heard. Elaine had her version of the Brendel on an old Murray Hill set of the complete Beethoven piano music, recorded by Brendel for Vox in the early 1960s. Vox has become an orphan label, with odd bits from its catalogue being released from time to time, but with no company willing to re-release its whole catalogue. Some years ago an English company claimed to have released all of Brendel's Vox recordings, but it just wasn't so. It took me some years to track down the *Young Brendel* set, which does finish the set of Brendel's Vox Beethoven recordings. Readings then took nearly a year to gain a copy. The six-CD set as a whole is much better than I would have expected. Most of these recordings are fully restored. Brendel's version of the G minor fantasy is even better than we remembered.

I didn't know Serkin's music until recently. He recorded with American orchestras from the forties and fifties, which tend to have a dry, rather lumpy sound in

the studio. One day I heard Serkin's version of Brahms's Piano Concerto No 2, not a piece I've ever come to terms with. But there it was: just the way I had always imagined it might sound. So I bought the Serkin boxed set, which has fine versions of some of the other great piano concerti.

It was correspondent Michael Waite from America who first told me about the wonders of the piano playing of Angela Hewitt. Only later did ABC FM and 3MBS begin playing her magical versions of Bach keyboard music. If I had the money, I would buy everything of Bach she's recorded, which is now the lot.

On 3MBS I heard Vladimir Ashkenazy conducting from the keyboard one of the Prokofiev piano concertos. This was supposed to have come from a boxed set that I've never been able to find. However, I did buy this nice Double Decca two-CD set of Ashkenazy conducting four of the Prokofiev symphonies, plus two lesser-known pieces. If there is a better version of Symphony No 5, I haven't heard it. Ashkenazy catches the bombastic power of the symphony, as well as its vast range of delicate detail and tempo changes.

The Schumann quartets are not the most exciting quartets ever written, but Ruth Gould at Readings suggested listening to this fine recording by the Zehetmair Quartet. Thomas Zehetmair is one of the finest violinists I've heard, so I thought I would give it a go. This recording of Schumann is possibly better than Schumann's music really is.

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## My favourite popular CDs bought during 2004

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- 1 *Five Guys Walk Into a Bar* (4 CDs) (The Faces)
  - 2 *Cash Unearthed* (5 CDs) (Johnny Cash)
  - 3 *Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* (5 CDs) (Miles Davis)
  - 4 *The Trouble with Humans* (Chip Taylor and Carrie Rodriguez)
  - 5 *Indians Cowboys Horses Dogs* (Tom Russell)
  - 6 *Pictures in a Frame* (Kimmie Rhodes and Willie Nelson)
  - 7 *Enjoy Every Sandwich: The Songs of Warren Zevon*  
(various)
  - 8 *Journal: Best of* (Broderick Smith)
  - 9 *Lifeline* (Iris DeMent)
  - 10 *Van Leer Rose* (Loretta Lynn)
  - 11 *Convic Pool* (CD EP) (Calexico)
  - 12 *Very Best of* (Sheryl Crow)
  - 13 *Ascension pour l'Echafaud* (Miles Davis)
  - 14 *Never Hear of 'Em* (The Band Who Knew Too Much)
  - 15 *Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks*
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Just when it seemed as if the day of the boxed set was over, three of the best appeared in 2004.

For a short while in the early 1970s, it seemed as if the Faces, with lead singer Rod Stewart, would take the crown of World's Best Rock and Roll Band from the Rolling Stones. However, the Faces made only three major albums before they began to self-destruct. Ronnie Wood joined the Stones in 1976, and Rod Stewart moved to America, took up with a new band, and went wimpy. But, in *Five Guys Walked into a Bar*, if you collect the great tracks from the five albums, plus 31 outtakes, you have several hours of great rock and roll.

In the last few years before he died, Johnny Cash's career underwent a renaissance that's given to very few older performers. Rick Rubin of American Recordings allowed Cash to sing with small groups of top musicians and encouraged him to sing songs by a wide range of 1990s musicians. In spite of (or because) of ill health, Johnny Cash invests enormous passion into these songs. The American Records series of CDs yielded a huge number of outtakes, which occupy four of the five CDs of *Cash Unearthed*. The fifth CD is a 'best of' the five American recordings.

*Tribute to Jack Johnson* has always been my favourite Miles Davis album from his hard-rock/jazz days (late sixties and early seventies). Five CDs of the complete sessions is a bit much for anybody in one listening session, but selecting at random from the discs is very exciting. If you liked the other Miles Davis sets from the same era (especially *The Complete Bitch's Brew Sessions*) you would have to own this.

If there had been no great boxed sets released in 2004, *The Trouble with Humans* by Chip Taylor and Carrie Rodriguez would have been No. 1 for the year. A set of perfect country ballads, sung by two superb singers. What could be better, other than a new set of epic story songs from Tom Russell (*Indians Cowboys Horses Dogs*) or an equally sweet set of ballads from Willie Nelson and Kimmie Rhodes (*Pictures in a Frame*)?

Warren Zevon wrote some of the best songs, both sardonic and heartfelt, of the last thirty years. Losing him was difficult for all his friends, but they didn't let him down when they recorded their tribute, *Enjoy Every Sandwich*. Surprises include Adam Sandler's first-class version of 'Werewolves of London' and the Wallflowers' 'Lawyers, Guns and Money'. My own favourite is Jorge Calderon and Jennifer Warnes' version of 'Keep Me in Your Heart', one of the last songs that Zevon wrote.

Broderick Smith has the finest voice of anybody who ever came out of the Australian rock and roll scene. In recent years, his CDs have been modest, folk-based efforts, but when he led Carson and the Dingoes he was a great blues and rock-and-roll singer. *Journal* might

have rated higher if it had included all my favourite Broderick Smith and Dingoes tracks. This is a useful CD, especially as Smith's first two solo albums have never been released on CD — but there are some gaps, such as 'My Father's House'. There should be a Brod Smith boxed set.

When Brian Wise refused to play a Kasey Chambers track on his 3RRR program, he said: 'Why should I play a Kasey Chambers album when I can play Iris DeMent?' It's a great pity that Iris Dement has never had the success of a Kasey Chambers (the voices are interchangeable), especially as her band is a lot better than the Dead Ringers. On this album, she sings inspired versions of the gospel songs that inspired her childhood. I don't have much time for songs about heaven, but this set is just heavenly.

I would never have bought a Loretta Lynn album if I had not already heard a couple of tracks from *Van Leer Rose*. In a stroke of genius, she hired Jack White of the White Stripes to play the backing for her country album, making this one of the best rock and roll albums of recent years. You might not like Loretta's songs, but listen to some of these guitar licks.

There are only five tracks on the Calexico EP *Convict Pool*, but they show that the band is still improving. Now I'm looking forward to their next full-length CD.

Elaine and I were dining at one of our favourite Thai restaurants in Collingwood (just before we moved to Greensborough) when I kept hearing some brilliant pop songs way off in the background. On some of the songs, you would swear the backing was by the Rolling Stones. I asked the waiter, who said that the CD playing was Sheryl Crow's *Best of*. Had to buy it.

I don't usually like late fifties–early sixties Miles Davis as much as late sixties Davis, but I love his music from the French film *Ascension pour l'Echafaud*. I've never had a chance to see the film, but it must be classic noir if it matches its background music.

Over the years, the Station Formerly Known as 3LO has promoted some groups that otherwise would not have been heard on radio. The Band Who Knew Too Much is a local Melbourne bands that celebrates our life and times with a series of very funny songs. *Never Heard of 'Em* is slightly better than a companion CD, *Come On Let's Go*. Both can probably still be found in specialist shops.

*Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks* is a live album containing Dan Hicks' sixtieth birthday party. He collects every person who has been in any of the many manifestations of the Hot Licks. For some songs, thirty people were on stage! Even better than the live CD is the accompanying DVD, which has some performances by some of the best old jazz musicians in America.

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## My favourite classical CDs bought during 2004

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- 1 Lorin Maazel/New York PO/New York Choral Artists/Brooklyn Youth Chorus: John Adams: *On the Transmigration of Souls*
- 2 Fabio Biondi/Europa Galante: *Fabio Biondi* (5 CDs) (Concerti by Geminiani, Locatelli; pieces by Tartini, Legrenzi, Falconieri, Farina, Mazzferrata, Marini,

Rossi, Uccellini, Vitali; chamber music by Boccherini)

- 3 Angela Hewitt: Bach: Fantasia and Fugue in A minor BWV904, Aria Variata BWV989, and eight other pieces
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In 2004 my income dipped way below 2003 levels, so I bought a total of five classical CDs.

I bought John Adams' *On the Transmigration of Souls* only because Charles Brown recommended I do so when we went CD shopping during the dying days of 2004. Thanks, Charles. This is his lament for people who died during the fall of the New York towers, but it has an iron quality to it, far beyond lament, as if prophetic of what is to come. The first great work of the twenty-first century.

Fabio Biondi has been a favourite conductor–violinist

ever since I heard his highly original version of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* for the Italian Opus III label. Since then Biondi has moved to the English Virgin label, and his sound has lost some of its bite. Most of these performances of Italian eighteenth-century music show Biondi and his group Europa Galante at their best.

And yet another Angela Hewitt Bach recording that I couldn't resist. If ever any money comes my way again, I will probably break down and buy lots more Hewitt. Oh happy day.

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## Seeking Susan Wood

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I find that the BBB Trip Report still lacks a whole sidebar on Seeking Susan Wood. Here's a first draft . . .

First episode was exchanging stories with John Berry in Seattle. John accompanied Susan to Aussiecon 1. She had already split up with Mike Glicksohn, although they had been a couple when we asked them to be our Fan GoHs. John told me some of the stories about Susan's last horror years. That's not the Susan we knew in Australia. When she arrived in Melbourne for Aussiecon, a bunch of fans greeted her plane with a placard, 'Welcome, Dr Wood'. This was very confusing to another group of people standing nearby, waiting to greet another Dr Wood — the Very Reverend Dr Wood, Archbishop of Melbourne, who was on the same plane.

Then there was a very odd conversation with the very drunk Steven Black at Corflu. He had become interested in doing a thesis on Susan Wood's work, but at the University of British Columbia he could only find her academic writing. I did promise to seek out everything fannish I could find when I returned home, but I still haven't had the time. I did find the ANZAPAZine in which Susan tells of Bill Gibson's first day at her science fiction class in Vancouver. Because of this class, Bill became

one of Canada's most active fans, then interested in writing SF. The rest is history, and a Hugo for *Neuro-mancer*.

When I returned home to Melbourne, I found that Mark Loney had sent the 40 DVDs, made in Canberra, containing all the videotapes from Aussiecon I. When Yvonne Rousseau visited next, we sat down to watch a DVD of a panel featuring George Turner, John Foyster and Susan Wood, all of them now dead. George was in good form; in 1975 he showed none of the frailty of his last decade. John Foyster was in that pedantic mood he sometimes adopted on panels; a bit distant. And Susan seemed a bit overawed by the company. There is a sound tape of her interviewing Bob Tucker at Aussiecon I, and that's the *real* Susan Wood, the dynamic lady who could never sit still, who was always totally involved with everybody she knew.

At Aussiecon I, Gerald Smith was attending his first convention. He felt completely lost and alone, until a burbling American (as he thought) came up to him, asked him about his interests, guided him towards a panel item he might enjoy, and started Gerald's fannish career. Yes, it was Susan Wood, Fan GoH of that convention. Gerald did not even find out who she was until some time later.

Twenty-six years after her death, Susan Wood leaves the same gap in fandom as she did when she died.

Aussiecon 1, August 1975  
(l. to r.): Barbara  
Silverberg, Bob  
Silverberg, Susan Wood.  
(Photo: Helena Binns.)

