



### Another Exploration: Black Crime Fiction

IN SEPTEMBER ON A FLIGHT to Newark I had the pleasure of meeting the Indian novelist **Neel Mukherjee** [1]. He was travelling from London to the Brooklyn Book Festival, and on the empty seat next to him I spotted a half-read copy of the **Walter Mosley** novel *A Red Death*. My enquiry, “Is that one of his ‘Easy Rawlins’ books?”, was met with a cheerful affirmative. Neel was evidently happy to find someone who was familiar with Mosley, so I further commented that I had only read Mosley’s science fiction, and he admitted he was unaware Mosley had written any, and thus our occasional conversation began and has continued via email ever since. After he had finished *A Red Death* on that flight he kindly gave the book to me. I have since thoroughly enjoyed Mosley’s first novel *Devil in a Blue Dress* for which *A Red Death* is the sequel, and which will be read Real Soon Now.

Walter Mosley [2] has a style that shows he has a natural way with dialogue that reminds me of Elmore Leonard – okay, maybe not quite as easy and free-flowing as that particular master, but certainly close. At the time it appeared in 1990 the first-person viewpoint of *Devil in a Blue Dress* was unique in the way it portrayed not only a central black character, but also illustrated the wider (and entirely justified) discomfort and distrust blacks in post-war America experienced with whites. All the black characters come across as a community clearly marginal to white America, yet this is not indulged in to the point of stereotyping, and Easy Rawlins’s laconic point of view is a wonderful lens through which to see this perennial, dark side of American life.

Crime as a genre is something I only occasionally

dip into; I have little general exposure to it other than the novels of writers better known for their science fiction, for example Robert Silverberg’s *Blood on the Mink*, Roger Zelazny’s *The Dead Man’s Brother*, Fredric Brown’s *The Far Cry* or Donald E. Westlake’s *361*. Every time I read what turns out to be an enjoyable crime novel I comment to myself that perhaps I really should read more, but the thought of a steady diet of private-eye and police procedurals puts me off. Many years ago I read Joseph Wambaugh’s hefty, comedic *The Choirboys* and swore off reading anything else like it because, amusing as it was, it actually felt like a waste of my time; time that – ever on the lookout for weirder stuff – I could have better spent discovering great science fiction. (Conversely, I am sure there are many for whom crime is their default reading and who have an equally flippant attitude towards science fiction).

It is, pretty much, in this kind of way that I find endless diversions and distractions from my current core reading – Thai fiction, British dystopias and Asian speculative fiction. The next thing I felt compelled to do after reading *Devil in a Blue Dress* was to look into another sub-genre, this time that of ‘black crime fiction’. I’m not talking about black characters created by white writers *à la* John Shaft and Virgil Tibbs (created by Ernest Tidyman and John Ball respectively), nor that phenomenon of the Blaxploitation novel; simply, crime fiction by black authors.

It seems the point of departure on such a quest, at least among popular and reprinted works, is probably Chester Himes’s 1950s ‘Harlem Cycle’ novels, notably the 1965 novel *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, but there is an earlier

touchstone in the shape of **Hughes Allison**'s short story 'Corollary', published in the July 1948 issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. A brief history of Allison can be found in the 2015 article 'The Case of the Disappearing Black Detective' at *The New Republic* [3]. This led me further to discover a message thread at Miskatonic University Press [4] that identifies three earlier black American crime novelists: **Pauline Hopkins** (*Hagar's Daughter*) and the locked-room mystery story 'Talma Gordon') and **John Edward Bruce** (*The Black Sleuth*), both from the turn of the 20th Century, and **Rudolph Fisher** [5] who was active in the early 1930s and had a well-liked novel titled *The Conjure-Man Dies* (1932), reputedly the first novel to feature a black detective, published only two years before Fisher's death in 1934. Of the others above 'Corollary' and 'Talma Gordon' have more recently been reprinted in Paula Woods's anthology *Spooks, Spies and Private Eyes: Black Mystery; Crime and Suspense Fiction* (1995).

Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies* is the first of these I went for. It concerns the mystery surrounding the death of a popular Harlem clairvoyant, and the protagonist detective, Perry Dart, throws himself straight into the whodunnit. By way of introduction, Fisher describes Dart thus:

*"Of the ten Negro members of Harlem's police force to be promoted from the ranks of patrolman to that of detective, Perry Dart was one of the first. As if the city administration had wished to leave no doubt in the public mind as to its intention in the matter, they had chosen, in him, a man who could not have been under any circumstances mistaken for aught but a Negro; or perhaps, as Dart's intimates insisted, they had chosen him because his generously pigmented skin rendered him invisible in the dark, a conceivably great advantage to a detective who did most of his work at night."*

As an introduction to Dart it's straightforward and direct, yet also more than a little sarcastic. This pithy voice Fisher has when describing circumstances and characters surfaces time and again, and he carries the reader along with a not-always-easily-structured narrative that's engaging from beginning to end.

When I finished *The Conjure-Man Dies* I was actually saddened that there were no more 'Perry Dart' novels to be had. Fisher, who was also a physician, died young at 37 of abdominal cancer, probably brought about by his experimentation with x-rays. However Harlem in previous decades is not exactly rare as a setting for novels for the modern reader, and the 'Grave Digger Jones & Coffin Ed

Johnson' mystery novels of **Chester Himes** [6] are probably at the top of any go-to list.

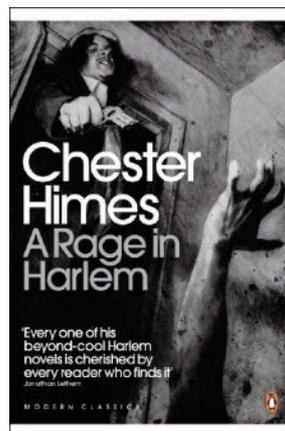
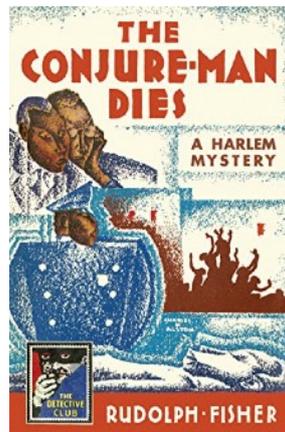
*A Rage in Harlem* is the first of this series, written in 1957. Its title is more evocative of something that the novel itself doesn't touch upon, being mostly about the domestic and financial troubles of the protagonist Jackson and his hopeless attempts to right things. Only rarely do you get a chance to step back and view Harlem from afar...

*"Looking eastward from the towers of the Riverside Church, perched among the university buildings on the high banks of the Hudson River, in a valley far below, waves of grey rooftops distort the perspective like the surface of the sea. Below the surface, in the murky waters of fetid tenements, a city of black people who are convulsed in a desperate living, like the voracious churning of millions of hungry cannibal fish. Blind mouths eating their own guts. Stick in a hand and draw back a nub. That is Harlem."*

...because Himes prefers to throw you in the deep end, from where you can take a perverse enjoyment of the black humour these guys need to get through every single day. Himes himself had only visited Harlem once and wrote the novel in France, half a world away from the country he felt had rejected him.

It would seem that the list of black crime writers of any nationality is still an exceedingly short one. Himes, Mosley, Fisher, the three others mentioned above... we also have **Ishmael Reed** (b. 1938), author of *Mumbo-Jumbo*, and **Clarence Major** (b. 1936), author of *Reflex* and *Bone Structure*, who both prefer to creatively subvert the detective genre. **Hugh Holton** (1947-2001), a Chicago police captain-turned-novelist who has a series of ten 'Larry Cole' detective novels and who, according to *Fantastic Fiction*, often included in his writing science fiction or fantasy elements. More recently there is **Nelson George** (b. 1957), a music journalist and novelist who has authored a short series of crime novels about D. Hunter, a body-guard-turned-PI in the New York hip-hop world. And there list list just about ends.

I'm unlikely to delve far into this thread of writers that are more recent than Walter Mosley, who I certainly will explore further (further beyond his science fiction, that is, with which I'm certainly familiar) alongside Himes, Reed and Major. Nevertheless with so much interesting reading to explore that's closer to my more common preferences, I still make time for a couple of novels every month that take me elsewhere. New avenues to explore, like this one, are always worth discovering.



[1] <http://www.neelmukherjee.com>

[2] <http://www.waltermosley.com>

[3] <https://newrepublic.com/article/124468/case-disappearing-black-detective-novel>

[4] <https://www.miskatonic.org/rara-avis/archives/200403/0214.html>

[5] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolph\\_Fisher](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolph_Fisher)

[6] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chester\\_Himes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chester_Himes)



### Hanging on in Quiet Desperation: Two English Proto-Dystopias

ONE AMUSINGLY SIMPLE but useful definition I have of dystopias is “the story of how society turned to shit and somehow stayed there.” Whereas dystopias are most often described from the point of view of people already trapped inside dysfunctional systems, illustrating their issues with that system and their attempts (usually dramatic) to escape it, less common are stories in which the beginnings of such situations are part of the plot and the story development itself.

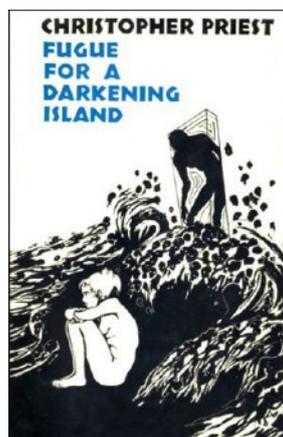
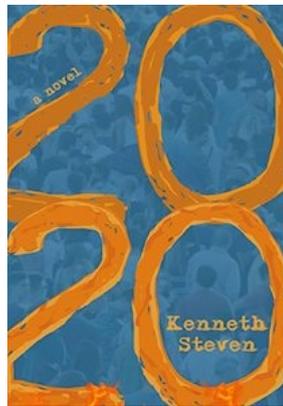
In June this year I read a slim novel entitled *2020* by the Scottish poet **Kenneth Steven** [1], that prompted me to think about how different possible dystopias begin. *2020* is not a dystopia unless one thinks present-day Britain itself is a form of it (as I do), nor is *2020* in fact speculative fiction at all other than by way of it being set a few year in the future. Everything in it is mundane to those who are familiar with the UK’s present racial mix and the right-wing politics that are fuelling conflict between different communities; in other words, a manifest form of dysfunction that has clearly entered government. *2020* is described (and sold) as being the novel that predicted Brexit by virtue of it being written in 2015, although I think this is erroneous other than in the way the 2016 referendum on leaving the EU was used as a moratorium on Johnny Foreigner. Similar politics of hate are very evident in this book, and the popularity of the main protagonist Eric Semple does in some way mirror the current popularity of the real-life ‘Tommy Robinson’ [2] who speaks for the disaffected English racists who are supposedly alienated in their own country. But *2020* does deliver an effective kick to the groin by showing how a single Islamist terrorist act, on a train south of Manchester, could usher in an ongoing fracture to a supposedly tolerant society. With a weak right-wing government in power (and a leader who clearly speaks in the same tones as David Cameron), the initial act begets another, then another, culminating in a saddening and horrific murder that further divides the country against itself, sending the UK into almost complete turmoil. Whatever is the government’s response to all this will determine how close to dystopian seas the country will eventually sail, and whereas the novel is merely pointing the UK in that

direction, some dystopia beginnings along racial lines will probably come after. *2020* is short, elegiac and sobering, worth the few hours it takes to read it.

*2020* reminded me of a much earlier novel which describes the early stages of how Britain descended into a dystopian mess through racial tensions: **Christopher Priest’s** *Fugue for a Darkening Island* (1972), a blunt and rather grim read set in London and broadly across the south east of England. The story follows in a fragmented fashion the lives of Alan Whitman and his wife and daughter as England is invaded by Africans fleeing their bombed-out and irradiated continent. On the visual side, there is a convincing early scene in which the first ship full of thousands of emaciated and dead African refugees arrives in the Thames Estuary. On the political side, there is a cut-and-paste extreme right-wing government in place in Westminster, and the army and the police are factionalising over what to do about the Africans who are taking a rather aggressive stance about being allowed to stay. Then the United Nations gets involved because Britain has basically entered a state of undeclared civil war.

As a protagonist Alan Whitman is a rather enigmatic character; you never really get a grip on him because he can at times be slippery and self-serving especially when it comes to his extramarital activities, yet in contrast to his persistent infidelities there is otherwise an atmosphere of impotence that pervades the whole novel: little gets achieved as Whitman and his family are forced to make constant retrograde steps in order to stay safe and alive. This seems to be one of the themes under consideration in the book: potency vs. impotence, and the 1970s milieu of British social behaviours

described here is little different from what we find today. So what, then, can a twenty-first century reader get out of *Fugue for a Darkening Island*, nearly fifty years after it was written? I think the novel works best today as an assessment of both entrenched and spontaneous racist attitudes – it is interesting to encounter a novel in which a society’s easy acceptance of open racism is the factor that allows this dystopia in the first place, so *Fugue* in that regard is still a useful warning.



[1] <https://kennethsteven.co.uk>

[2] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tommy\\_Robinson\\_\(activist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tommy_Robinson_(activist))



## It's Still Wednesday in Macondo

A RECENT ISFDB PROJECT I took on was to identify all the ‘Macondo’ stories of **Gabriel García Márquez**. To what purpose, I hear you ask? Well, largely to satisfy my own curiosity, although despite all the extensive commentary on ‘Gabo’ and his works available on the internet, I could not find a definitive identification of *all* stories that are connected to Macondo. Even Wikipedia falls down on providing this seemingly necessary list on their page devoted to Macondo [1], and the Spanish Wikipedia is little better. For the ISFDB to have an easily referenced and comprehensive list might prove very useful to bibliographers and García Márquez enthusiasts.

However, firstly, I get that there are probably quite a number of Gabo fans, new and old, who would find such a list an anathema, as half the fun of reading is discovering for oneself. (In which case, please don't consult bibliographies compiled by list addicts.) But I reckon Macondo is important enough to world literature for such a list to have an existence somewhere on the internet, tucked away as a coda to an online bibliography of his speculative fiction and ‘magical realism’.

For the uninitiated, Macondo is the fictional Colombian town featured in several novels and short stories by García Márquez. Generally, ‘magical realist’ stuff happens there (but not always), and its best-known appearance is undoubtedly found in the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), a contender for the most popular novel of the twentieth century. However several shorter stories, such as ‘Tuesday Siesta’ and the novella *No One Writes to the Colonel*, may not even directly reference Macondo and might be considered as self-contained non-genre fiction, but there are definite links to be found in particular characters, locations and events within the stories themselves. For example, connecting *No One Writes to the Colonel* to Macondo means pairing its plot with a narrative thread in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that sees Independence War veterans being denied their pensions. It's a tenuous link that does not require any knowledge of Macondo for *No One Writes to the Colonel* to be enjoyed, but an implicit rather than an explicit connection is still there. Clearly, compiling a comprehensive list of Macondo stories would require some light literary detective work, the kind I enjoy.

There are presently three widely available collections that cover all of García Márquez's short fiction outside his independently published novellas: *Innocent Eréndira and Other Stories* (1978), *Collected Stories* (1984) and *Strange Pilgrims* (1992). Each of them contain a noticeable amount of ‘magical realism’ or speculative

fiction, and of these, many stories, including those that initially appear to be mainstream fiction, contain within their make-up something of Macondo. Add to these the novella *Leaf Storm* (1955) and the novel *In Evil Hour* (1962), and we have the whole body of work in which to find Macondo. All I had to do was explore the short fiction, because the novels have obviously already been identified.

Transferring this to the ISFDB is not as straightforward as one might think. For one, the ISFDB has no function to ‘group’ stories other than to compile them into a series, and the Macondo tales are not a series in the sense of a defined sequence: as explained above, they are loosely connected only by characters, locations and events, written at different times and often with a minor story feeding into a major story or vice versa. Nevertheless, with enough familiarity with his short fiction the identification of stories was simple enough; the next task was to decide how to present the information.

Rather than group all stories together with no distinction between the central Macondo stories and those that are more peripheral, I found it ideal to split them into two groups: one where Macondo is central, and a second group of stories that are connected more indirectly. Apart from the reading, which took around two weeks, the actual creation of the list took about twelve hours over three days: one must also research and identify the names and publication dates of all his short stories in their original Spanish first, and then create translation variants.

The ISFDB's listings for García Márquez were, prior to September 2018, rather neglected. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for example, had just ten English-language editions listed plus a cursory Spanish edition, and to date in all the ISFDB's many thousands of indexed reviews it has surprisingly only one, by our friend Bruce Gillespie in his own *SF Commentary* #41/42. Only a couple of García Márquez's collections were listed and they had only partial contents. This may be because editors were reticent about transgressing that ISFDB barrier known as ‘the threshold’ which is often used to keep out extensive bibliographies of *non bona fide* genre authors, but in the case of Márquez, such is the worldwide interest in his reputation as the world's foremost ‘magical realist’, it was clear his bibliography needed work, deserving to be far better represented at the ISFDB than he had been.

So the work is now done [2], and I can state with reasonable confidence that nowhere else on the English-language internet does such a detailed resource exist, outside the possibility of a student thesis behind a paywall. As usual, this was fun to do.

[1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macondo>

[2] <http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/pe.cgi?51909>

## Markers

lightly edited



**WAHF...**

**Earl Kemp, Fred Kiesche and Alan Sullivan.**

Two missives from John Hertz after #13 went to press, the first evidently arriving rather belatedly and the second enquiring if I had ever received the first...

**JOHN HERTZ**, Los Angeles CA; 30 June 2018

*The White Notebooks* looks like a computer-aided layout. In *TWN* #12 how did you get the letter 'a' out of alignment, as so often with typewriters?

Perhaps I shouldn't have opened so. I have to quarrel with you over *Brave New World*. I can't join you in thinking 'Whatever repulsion the reader may feel is not something that Huxley went out of his way to elicit'. I find scathing satire of what you call 'eugenics'. Nor is it he who scorns democracy, nor believes 'society should be organised as a pyramid of mental abilities controlled by an elite caste of highly intelligent experts'. Nor do I see the book having a 'lightly comical' style, Roscoe help us all. Is this reply enough to spark your re-thinking, and if needed, re-reading, or should I analyse the text in detail?

Alas, there will be no more of Steve Sneyd's zine *Data Dump*. Brother Plummer mentions *Vanamonde*. I admit my failure, which I hope and pray may be less terminal. Poor *Van*'s wide circulation costs hours and dollars; for a while I haven't had both at once. *Van* is still weekly in APA-L. I try to send some copies round. It's reviewed in *The Zine Dump* #43, which you note. No excuses.

*Banana Wings* didn't pick up my appreciation of Brother Byers, but as duly cited there, it can be seen by the electronic at <http://www.file770.com/p=39283>, 'One for All', 2 December 2017. I did know him in person. I cherish that memory but I don't prefer it over his work. I hope and pray he will not merely be 'missed as long as there are people around to remember him.' Nor is he 'gone forever' and I'm not talking about religious doctrines of reincarnation or resurrection. Montaigne isn't gone forever. Chuang Tzu isn't gone forever. Deborah isn't gone forever.

Let me join those who explain that cold-brewed coffee, or tea, is made by steeping at length using cold water instead of shortly using hot. It comes out different; less acidic, and other things.

Also 'vanilla' does not mean 'insipid. It's great and noble.

I commend *The 13 Clocks* (J. Thurber, 1950); ch. 2:

'Hark hark, the dogs do bark,

But only one in three.

They bark at those in velvet gowns

They never bark at me.'

is not the end of the story, nor is the book more recent than 1979, but it's later than Kafka's 1917 story 'Jackals and Arabs'.

**BRIAN AMERINGEN**, Ilford, England; 23 August 2018

Caroline pointed me to your piece about Kersh. I consciously discovered Kersh around 1975 and now have all of his books save two which are short story reprints (but including the completely anonymous one).

I can/have talked about Kersh for some hours (I hope entertainingly) and am indirectly responsible (I think) for his resurgence since 1990 as an author of interest (and not just disappearing over the literary horizon). Some time, if you wish, I will explain some of this (and more?)

Meanwhile, thank you for your article. I regret that many of your speculations are inaccurate...

~ Great that someone I know is so keen on Kersh. Also good to know some speculations are inaccurate (glad you recognised them as 'speculations')... next time we meet up (Tun, probably) we must chat. I haven't come across a lot of information about Kersh other than that found at SFE, Wikipedia, Ellison's site and various book introductions, etc, so more insight would be very welcome. ~

**CHRIS GARCIA**, Mountain View, CA; 23 August 2018

I got *Dead Wrestlers* (literally the next day after you said you'd sent it!) and adore them! Sadly, there are few wrestling zines these days, though Chris Marble brought a few to WorldCon that I'm starting to dig through. Thanks so much! Having such a blast lookin' through 'em!

Just a brief note, *The Drink Tank* is now fully edited by myself and Alissa McKersie et al. I guess would be the official editorial concept. Alissa's with me for every issue, and we're rotating people like Doug Berry, Chuck Serface and others in on the fun. We've got issues on Heavy Metal music, John Scalzi, Musicals, and some esoteric magazines and podcasts coming out the rest of the year!

Hope to get a chance to do a more thorough dive into the issue soon! My one run-in with Soderbergh was right about the time *Kafka* came out, and he was a hoot!

**JIM LINWOOD**, Isleworth, England; 26 August 2018

I liked the item about Gerald Kersh as he is a local boy done good and is known in this article [1] as "The Tough Guy From Teddington" I supplied the photo of his birthplace at 18 High Street.

When I was a kid I read quite a few of his books as they were prolific in the local library and could be

[1] [https://stmargarets.london/archives/2011/01/gerald\\_kersh\\_the\\_tough\\_guy\\_from\\_teddington.html](https://stmargarets.london/archives/2011/01/gerald_kersh_the_tough_guy_from_teddington.html)

picked up for a few pennies in the market. I recently saw one of his novels in a local second-hand bookshop selling for £20. I would recommend the Harvill Press 2001 paperback edition of *Fowlers End* (1957) which has a humorous introduction by Mike Moorcock.

Kersh is probably best known as the author of the book on which Jules Dassin based his classic Brit-noir, *The Night and the City*, and one of the many tales about his reaction to the film has him saying “They bought the title and threw away the book.”

**LUKE MCGUFF**, Seattle, WA; 27 August 2018

I haven't read *Brave New World* since I was an early adolescent, and I'm afraid I was more intrigued by the sex than anything else (Catholic upbringing). But I really enjoyed the sarcasm in your first paragraph. Was it sarcasm? That's probably what the US looks like. Um. Anyway.

I like the *Thai Literary Supplement* quite a bit, I think it's my favorite ongoing feature. Are there people to whom you send *TLS* to as a stand-alone feature? There is always at least one author I try to look up on the Seattle Public Library site, but the search rarely returns any hits. This time it was Colin Cotterill, and I got SEVENTEEN results, a record. Alas, none of them were the work you discussed, so I decided I was doing well enough with the Tempest challenge.

The Randy fanthology is coming along nicely, all I'm waiting on is the back cover. We're working on how to distribute it to Corflu members. Otherwise it will be available on eFanzines. Really looking forward to holding the artifact in my hand!

**DAVID REDD**, Haverfordwest, Wales; 31 August 2018

Thank you for another interesting issue, but then you lead an interesting life. What an itinerary in your covering note will you return to it in *TWN*?

A books issue is fine by me! Our generation difference shows up in your Significant SF Books, which being of their time are so different from my own early reading. Even the two Heinlein titles we have in common were less Significant to my young self than his *Starman Jones* and *Double Star*, both smoothly entertaining and both having lessons in life for the kiddies. Personally my early SF standouts came from John Wyndham, Eric Frank Russell and others of the Fifties, and in the Seventies when my reading time got limited I simply never picked up many of the books you mention. Oh well. I tended to read short stories more, but even there have clearly missed many classics.

But, you mention reading Clarke and Asimov and thinking “Is that all there is?” In hindsight, my early SF reading was like eating breakfast cereal without any main meal to follow. But I didn't think so at the time because children's imaginations can fill many gaps, and as a young teen/pre-teen (1950s) I must have gained the missing nourishment from good mainstream children's writers such as Arthur Ransome, C.S. Lewis, and Tove Jansson. (Admittedly, Lewis's ‘Narnia’ books got absorbed into genre fantasy, and Jansson dealt in bonkers existential surrealism since revealed as Literature, but you know what

I mean. My literary diet wasn't all cornflakes.) Anyway, your choices gave me an alternative view of those decades. Oh, I did read Clarke's *Islands in the Sky* but too late – I'd already found his *The Sands of Mars* which was almost a quasi-YA and much better. But an interesting list. Shouldn't *Roadside Picnic* have been in there?

1984 and others – we British like a good disaster story, even social disaster. But as we say, other dystopias are available. No doubt you'll share more.

Kersh – how enlightening. It's nice that Harlan Ellison took the trouble to commemorate a relatively forgotten writer. Not surprised that you discovered details to amend; every collection of knowledge is a work in progress.

Thanks again for *TWN*, and for *TLS*, which I often put down thinking it seems the best part of the package until I remember the good stuff preceding it in *TWN*. Nice work. Hope everything else in your life goes well.

**STEVE JEFFREY**, Kidlington, England; 9 Sept. 2018

I can image that the ISFDB ‘threshold’ must be a cause for some head-scratching, if not outright argument (and possible Edit Wars?) between editors over what counts as genre for the purpose of inclusion – a problem I suspect Dave Langford encounters when listing obituaries. For instance, if a writer or actor has only one minor toe-dip in the choppy waters of genre in an otherwise mainstream career, do they rate inclusion? And if they then carefully explain that that work isn't really science fiction because it a metaphor for current issues and has realistic characters? (Actually, I think we can discount that last one as grounds for non-inclusion on the ‘walks like a duck’ principle. If people who know about science fiction think it rates as science fiction, then it probably is, despite protestations to the contrary.)

I don't think I've come across Gerald Kersh before, or at least I don't remember the name. Not even sure if I have Damon Knight's *100 Years of Science Fiction* anthology. (One day, I will index my sf anthology shelves. Something I have been promising for ten years now. What are you doing next weekend, by the way?)

Your comment that UK governments seem to treat dystopias as ‘How to’ books rather than dire warnings is uncomfortably true in a country where, it transpires, you can actually watch the progress of two alleged Russian political assassins through the streets of Salisbury in such detail that, as someone remarked on The News Quiz, ‘you could print and collate the stills from the CCTV coverage to make a pretty faithful flick book of the whole event’.

(This has just given me an idea for a new business venture: a lookalikes agency to give people a watertight alibi on CCTV at the time of the alleged offence. Or to only employ identical twins in any new bullion heist, one of whom is sent to wander prominently around a town at the other end of the country.)

Between Orwell and Huxley, I actually think Huxley was nearer the mark, and that controlling a population by feeding and reinforcing their basest and most prurient appetites is more effective than secret

police and armed guards. But Orwell had the constant surveillance and revisioning of 'truth', so on balance I think they both hit the mark. The fact it took both of them to describe different aspects of control recognizable in the current UK makes me think things are probably worse than we imagined.

I've got a copy Frayn's slim little *A Very Private Life* and I'm slightly surprised to see it listed here as a dystopia (I too have always thought of it as a sort of sfnal fable), but I suppose it is, and possibly works as such in a similar way to John Crowley's *Engine Summer*. (Maybe I need to think about this a bit more. And re-read both, except that the latter always makes me cry.)

Good luck with the idea of indexing the run of Steve Sneyd's *Data Dump*. Yes, I can imagine it would be a fascinating and invaluable resource, but it might be one of those projects that sends editors and transcribers mad, like the poor souls researching Lovecraft's *Necronomicon* or the hapless readers of *The King in Yellow*. A lot of people in sf fandom will miss Steve. A true original.

Like David Redd, I had to print this out, surreptitiously on the office laser, so I could read and respond to it, as I really couldn't deal with the font in the on-screen pdf copy. I really must get my eyes tested.

Kate Orman points out that a key difference between Huxley and early twentieth century eugenicist apologists was that Huxley stops short of advocating steps to 'improve' the gene pool by eliminating the "congenitally insufficient". Huxley, in *Brave New World*, saw the benefits of a stratified society that included happily conditioned low aspirational Deltas and Epsilons. The whole thing becomes more chilling now we have the ability (if not the necessary full understanding) to tinker with pre-natal genes and a culture, in some parts of the US, and elsewhere, that supports and advocates intolerance of difference, such as LGBT rights.

Initially, I thought these Facebook memes to challenge people to list x books/songs/albums important to you was mildly diverting, especially when you came across something from your own past you'd almost forgotten about. (Sarah Mooring, I think it was, posted an album cover by Quintessence, a band I've not thought about or heard in a long time, and that sent me on a YouTube search for the best part an afternoon.) But now

they seem to be ubiquitous. Possibly a sizeable proportion of my FB friends are 'list addicts', something I've never quite got.

One of the problems with Facebook (just one, Steve?) is that there never seems to be a way of following though these threads, especially when they bounce between different people, and that if you see something interesting it disappears from view when you refresh the page and try and find it again. (So that two annoyance. There are many more. Perhaps I should make a list. And post it as a challenge on Facebook.)

Of your list (which seems to be rather more than 7), I probably share about half, although I can't claim all those to be significant (certainly the two by Delany, although I'd probably choose different works by Zelazny and Sladek). My own list would almost certainly include Aldiss, Robert Holdstock and John Crowley, although if forced to choose only one work by each I would be faced with that impossible 'name the least favourite of your children' dilemma.

So why is that shop in San Francisco called Needles and Pens? And why does it stock fanzines, rather than, say, pens (or needles)? Enquiring (OK easily distracted) minds want to know. And if there is a subject or activity that doesn't have a fanzine.

I had a look at Colin Cotterill's web site. It's very weird. The giveaway, a couple of pages in, is that he is also an artist and cartoonist. I don't think I've seen an almost completely hand drawn web site before.

**JAMES BACON**, Iver, Bucks; date unknown  
Many thanks for *TWN*#13. A lovely issue.

I love dystopias, although I mix alternate history, invasion literature and dystopias into my favourite books. The greatest lie of our age has been to American workers, white and blue collar, that America is amazing and that no one is better... with NO healthcare, NO labour rights, fuck all holidays they've been conned.

I loved your piece on dystopias and your take on them. I think it's why Americans love invasion lit fear of the external makes what we have look good. Although it's a broad, dreadful generalisation, all my US pals know these things, of course.

Do keep using stamps. They are cool.



I like my dad because he gave me a dog (in Thai and English)

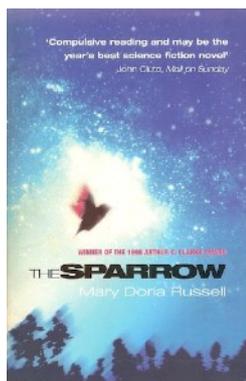
Father's Day card from Miles, 5 December 2061/2018

## Thirty Genre Books of Personal Significance: Part Two, 1997 present

SOMETIME AROUND 1982-1983, I began to feel a bit jaded about the science fiction I'd been reading. I think there were a couple of notable factors that led to this state of affairs: 1) the sad realisation that the science fiction of the late 1960s from Samuel R. Delany was a thing of the past and not the present; and 2) the rise of cyberpunk and virtual reality, most notably Gibson's *Neuromancer* in 1984, seemed like a kind of reality-avoidance scheme that I really didn't want to mingle with ("Why are these guys trapping themselves inside a computer?" "Because they can't be bothered to get lost in a book.").

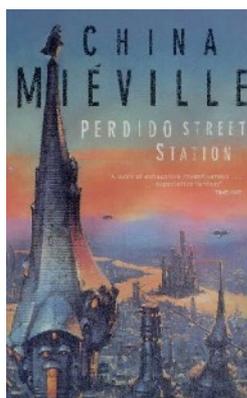
What I turned to instead was mostly non-fiction and occasional fiction about environmentalism and conservation, with a special interest in the oceans, marine life and animal welfare (add to this mix a side order of textbooks on African education). This coincided with the gradual abandoning of my dream of becoming a science fiction illustrator, turning my commercially artistic endeavours to environmental themes instead. I wrote about this process in the essay 'Kitchen Appliances in Zero-G' in *Zoo Nation* #2, and I came up with barely 1% more success in terms of commercial viability.

Again, what turned me back to science fiction literature was probably a disenchantment with what I was reading: a dry and argumentative polemic about the environment does not provide much *sensawunda*, and yet when environmental writers do try to engage a reader's imagination they often churn out so much quackery that would better serve as fiction. I guess I was ready for a switchback, and it happened to me suddenly, one day on Waterloo Station.



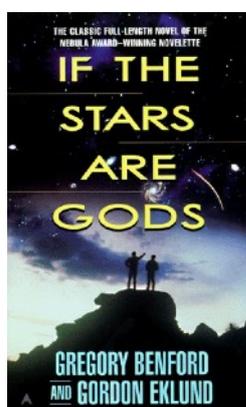
**Mary Doria Russell**  
*The Sparrow*  
1996

This is the novel that changed the course of my reading back onto a predominance of genre fiction, subsequently turning me into a proper science fiction fan as a result. I picked it off the mainstream fiction shelves of WHSmiths at Waterloo Station on 12 December 1997, and by the time I arrived in Paris on the Eurostar I'd read more than half of it. This is the novel that rekindled my interest in SF after a fourteen-year hiatus, and resulted in my bibliophile tendencies coming to the fore to the tune of several thousand genre books. The sequel *Children of God* didn't work quite as well for me, but Mary Doria Russell, I sincerely thank you for this.



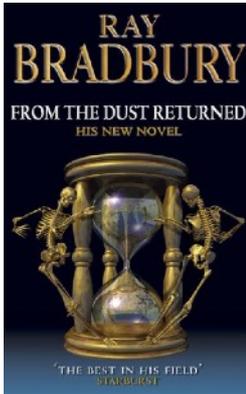
**China Miéville**  
*Perdido Street Station*  
2000

When Brian Stableford calls any novel "stunning", you really have to sit up and take notice. And stunned I was. This is a book I have a big relationship with: I've owned two hardcover first editions; the second one I found in 2003 in a Nairobi bookstore, probably the last unsold hardcover copy in the entire world. I also have the ARC, which I found on the shelves of a Reading remainder store. I also have a signed and personally inscribed paperback. Then there's the movie: the right combination of producer and director really should take advantage of this novel's cinematic quality, and also take up my suggestion for the perfect music for the end credits: Joe Satriani's 'Time Machine'. Some wag on Live Journal (not me) even once mocked up an IMDb page with full credits; I pointed this out to Miéville who was (gasp) "weirded out". This novel still lives vibrantly in my head, and also on my wall: Les Edwards gave me (for free) a big print of the cover. For me this book rocks in every way.



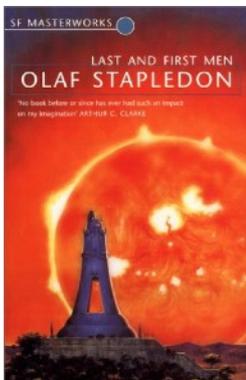
**Gregory Benford, Gordon Eklund**  
*If the Stars Are Gods*  
1977

I wrote in my Corflu 34 trip report about how much it meant to me to finally meet both Greg and Gordon, largely on the strength of this book. It has some of the high-concept *sensawunda* I love to see in writing, about aliens who visit and see the universe differently, although not so differently that we can't understand them. In my opinion the whole idea was delivered perfectly and deserves to be read everywhere, mostly as an indicator of how boringly similar the world's religions are.



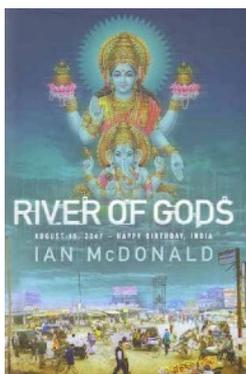
**Ray Bradbury**  
*From the Dust Returned*  
2001

A fix-up of seven ‘Elliott Family’ short stories written between the 1940s and the 1990s. We all have memories of particularly good hours of reading, for me one of my best was a combination of this book, a shaded outdoor restaurant in Cape Town, a glass of Stellenbosch, a halloumi salad, birds in the trees, no mosquitoes, a perfect evening temperature and solitude. Bradbury’s easy style rarely challenged his readers and this was no exception, just a good story well told.



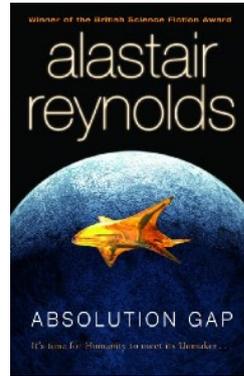
**Olaf Stapledon**  
*Last and First Men*  
1930

There really is nothing available that can properly prepare a reader for Olaf Stapledon’s *Last and First Men* – you simply have to dive in and read this extraordinary future history of our species. Actually, there is something available: a great cover will help, and this is the best cover this book ever received. For a few years now I have owned Les Edwards’s original artwork, bought after I interviewed him for the BSFA in 2005.



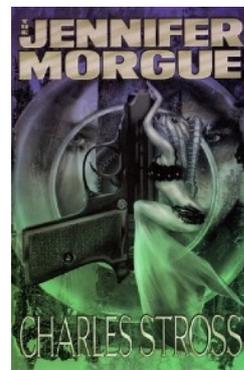
**Ian McDonald**  
*River of Gods*  
2004

Anyone who was around then will attest to what a stunningly good year 2004 was for British SF, and *River of Gods* is probably at or near the top of everyone’s favourites from that year. The novel is something of a pinnacle of what at the time was dubiously dubbed ‘World SF’, ie. SF by Anglo authors that has its root in other human cultures. My first edition is signed with a Hindu ‘om’ symbol and inscribed ‘Best-clever bastard!’ he remembered how I accurately pinned him down on the music he was listening to when he wrote *Chaga*, and later novels included a ‘soundtrack’ playlist.



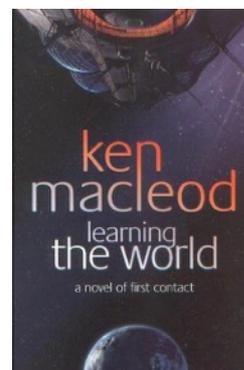
**Alastair Reynolds**  
*Absolution Gap*  
2003

In 2004 Andy Sawyer asked me to review *Absolution Gap* for *Foundation* – very happy to oblige, Andy. Having gone deep into the ‘Revelation Space’ universe with Reynolds’s previous three books I thought this would be a walk in the park, but Reynolds took *Absolution Gap* into new, weirder territory with some heavy gnostic overtones. The image of the constantly moving cathedral is one that I can’t shake off as being perfectly allegorical of humanity’s defining insanity, religion. This for me is the best of the ‘Revelation Space’ series.



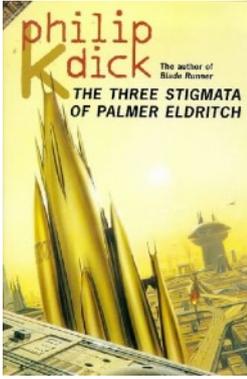
**Charles Stross**  
*The Jennifer Morgue*  
2006

What is personally important to me here is the short story that appears alongside *The Jennifer Morgue* in every edition: ‘Pimplf’ is, as far as I know, the only time I’ve been Tuckerised. Charlie needed a character with the initials PFY ‘Pimple-Faced Youth’ to complement the ‘Bastard Operator from Hell’ that is ‘Laundry’ protagonist Bob Howard. My name lent itself to Charlie’s purposes and I became Peter-Fred Young. One more weirdness is that the person who actually alerted me to this is a Fred, my good friend Fred Kiesche. Thanks Charlie.



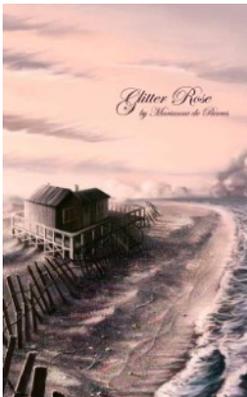
**Ken MacLeod**  
*Learning the World*  
2005

Another signed first edition, this time kindly inscribed “For Pete, who already knows the world”. Ken’s novel of first contact involves a situation I would like to see play out quickly and preferably in my lifetime: after an initial drama, human beings just accept a populated galaxy as being no big deal. This is one of my favourites of Ken’s novels; it’s right up there with the five-star *Newton’s Wake*.



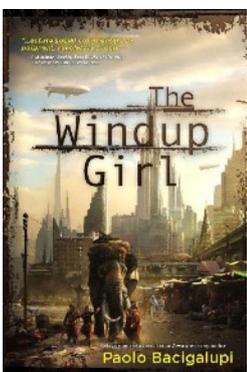
**Philip K. Dick**  
*The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*  
 1965

I wrote in *Journey Planet* #16 about my early explorations of Philip K. Dick's work that had left me largely disappointed, and then I came across *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* which really messed with my mind, and at last I woke up to whatever it is Philip K. Dick can do with your head. To me this is more lucid than *A Scanner Darkly* and darker than *A Maze of Death*, but not as sharp as *Look*, is there any mileage to be had in constantly comparing PKD's drug-frazzled novels? No there isn't. I'm actually well past that point, so time to shut up.



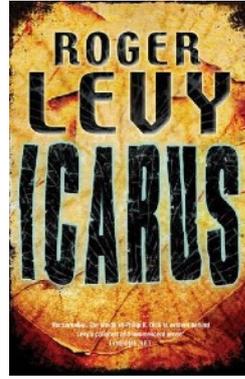
**Marianne de Pierres**  
*Glitter Rose*  
 2010

I woke up on my 50th birthday in Sydney, NSW, which meant a compulsory visit to the Galaxy Bookshop to treat myself. I settled on this lovely little collection of stories about a strange invasion of an Australian coastal island, and spent the rest of the day sitting around in Sydney's cafés enjoying it. Memories attached to particular books are probably important to most of us, and I'm certainly no exception.



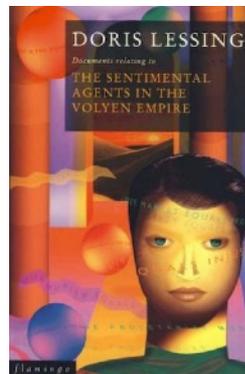
**Paolo Bacigalupi**  
*The Windup Girl*  
 2009

This drew the 'best novel' Hugo with Miéville's *The City & The City*, but the fact that I happen to think both novels were equally deserving is neither here nor there. I have a few issues with it, mostly in some of the details and the excesses of sexual violence, but I found *The Windup Girl* to still be a notably immersive novel that, for the most part, convincingly depicts Thailand in a post-oil future. But sadly, I'm gradually giving up the hope that we'll ever see any more 'Windup' stories from Bacigalupi.



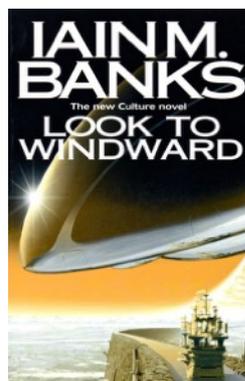
**Roger Levy**  
*Icarus*  
 2006

The words on the back cover of the paperback "There are few authors who explore the pitfalls and danger zones of human psychology as deeply or with such intensity as Levy" were mine, culled from a 2007 *Strange Horizons* review, so this has my first pull-quote. There's a lot to love about the novel, especially the way Levy tunnelled deep under the surface in the huge first chapter, plus right-wing nutters and some comparisons with the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge, on show for all to see.



**Doris Lessing**  
*Documents Relating to The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire*  
 1983

The fifth in Lessing's heavy 'Canopus in Argos' series was very different from the rest due to the lightness of its tone – my god, Lessing was actually writing *comedy* here. 'Canopus in Argos' was a patchy series, by turns too earnest, too depressing or just too flighty, but the left-wingery was always in full flow throughout. The expected social commentary is present in this book too, taking on rhetorical speech and political hypocrisy in caustic fashion, and my estimation is that this is actually also a fairly decent space opera. Some of us have our lists of the funniest books ever written, and this is on mine.



**Iain M. Banks**  
*Look to Windward*  
 2000

Banks was famously furious about the Iraq War, tearing up his passport and sending it to Tony Blair. An earlier, more measured reaction to war was this 'Culture' novel which explored the consequences of misguided military escapades, and he dedicated it to the Gulf War veterans. For me this was Banks at his most finely-tuned, political best.

## Episodic

TO EMPLOY THE COLLINS DICTIONARY ‘Word of the Year’ for 2018, I usually find (in fact we probably all do) that too much genre TV is ‘single-use’.

We watch an episode of a series and we think to ourselves, ‘Yeah, okay, a rather average 50 minutes in the (INSERT TV SHOW HERE) universe. I probably won’t be watching that one again.’

So where are the best episodes, the ones that demonstrate how a show can occasionally rise above itself and deliver something outstanding? Beginning here, and continuing at random intervals, I document the TV genre stuff that has really worked for me.



### *THE INVADERS*

SEASON 1, EPISODES 12 & 14: ‘The Betrayed’ & ‘Panic’

1967, USA *directed by John Meredyth Lucas & Robert Butler*

FOR MY MONEY, the best stories of season 1 of *The Invaders* were set quite close together, with ‘The Betrayed’ preceding ‘Panic’ by two episodes. The latter featured the young actor Robert Walker who is still best known for playing the title role in the 1966 *Star Trek* episode ‘Charlie X’. ‘The Betrayed’, however, features an altogether different breed of class in that it was co-written by Theodore Sturgeon, which is some indicator of quality.

By episode 12, David Vincent is now in a relationship with Susan Carver, the daughter of a Texas oil baron for whom he is working. But after

months of staking out an oil field he witnesses another UFO arrival and manages to steal some important computer tape from an oil tanker railroad car. Events centre around the Invaders’ efforts to get the tape back and find out how much the humans have learned from it. The episode also involves a wonderfully manipulative performance by Nancy Wickwire as Simon Carver’s duplicitous secretary Evelyn Bowers, and another from the regular TV character actor Norman Fell who plays the computer expert reluctantly caught up in the double-crossing.

There were episodes of *The Invaders* that were bigger on drama, but the interplay between the characters here feels more genuine and not overdone. I like to think Sturgeon’s influence on the seasoned scriptwriter John W. Bloch had something to do with it. The special effects were typical for the series but decent enough, and the scenes connected with the oil tanker (actually a guidance beacon for the Invaders) are genuinely claustrophobic.

Comparing this with ‘Panic’, ‘The Betrayed’ wins for sophistication but ‘Panic’ has to be seen too for Robert Walker’s typically manic performance (above) as Nick Baxter, which he pretty much duplicated from his stint as *Star Trek*’s Charlie X in 1966. Baxter is an Invader but a renegade one, and he has an unwanted virus that freezes people by touch alone. I reckon Walker does a fine job inhabiting both human and alien roles as he is hunted down by both sides.



### *WILD PALMS*

EPISODE 2: ‘The Floating World’

1993, USA *directed by Keith Gordon*

HOT ON THE HEELS OF *Twin Peaks*, the next oddball TV series to cross the Atlantic to British TV screens was the understated *Wild Palms*, a five-episode mini-masterpiece of media paranoia and sinister yet superficially attractive scientific advances. The strength of *Wild Palms* is found in some of its less forefront characters, but any cast that can boast of Brad Dourif, Robert Morse, Nick Mancuso, Angie Dickinson and David Warner is pretty impressive, and they all put in performances that hint at danger and unhinged psychology. However for me it’s the perfectly cast Robert Loggia

who steals scenes with an avarice similar to that of his monsterish character Senator Tony Kreutzer, former science fiction author and the creator of the Synthotics cult that is connected to this bright-yet-dark media enslavement... Scientology, anyone?

The Los Angeles of 2007 is in the process of being liberated from reality with the latest holographic developments that have their roots in the video revolution of the 1970s. Family man Harry Wyckoff is witnessing his family coming apart with the discovery of unknown details about both his and his wife’s identities. Are his kids actually his? Is his wife’s *n*th nervous breakdown actually a cover for something more sinister? And what factions are pulling at Harry in this cult-like media revolution he doesn’t fully understand? Harry is beginning to suspect he is way out of his depth with worse to come. ‘The Floating World’ reveals unexpected connections to Japan, with a visit to Kyoto providing a single cinematographic image (above) that has stayed with me for the last 25 years. One film to visit next is David Cronenberg’s 2014 movie *Maps to the Stars*, which frequently references *Wild Palms* in a way that suggests they could even be from the same universe.



For me, the most ironic token of that moment in history is the plaque signed by President Richard M. Nixon that *Apollo 11* took to the Moon. It reads: “We came in peace for all mankind.” As the United States was dropping 7.5 megatons of conventional explosives on small nations in Southeast Asia, we congratulated ourselves on our humanity:

We would harm no one on a lifeless rock.

Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 1994

This fanzine was put together from 1 September – 15 December 2018.

### Another Exploration: Black Crime Fiction

An aside – because I need to put this observation in writing somewhere and here is as good a place as any – about Joseph Wambaugh’s *The Choirboys*. Did any other casual reader notice the way Wambaugh paced his surprises in the novel such that they always appeared at the very top of a page? (I read the first paperback edition, which likely used the same galley as the first edition hardcover.) This must have involved some detailed proofing to create the final copy, and the shock effect was probably lost if the novel had to be reformatted for later editions.

### Hanging on in Quiet Desperation: Two English Proto-Dystopias

Given that both novels described here have as their subject the future consequences of racial discord, I don’t think I really need to ask the question of whether there is such a thing as a ‘racial dystopia’, having recently read of life as experienced by Easy Rawlins in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. How could the historical black experience of America and elsewhere in the West *not* be a real, living dystopia that has been lived by a huge segment of society? And why is it never described as such? Do dystopias have to affect *absolutely everyone*? As far as we have seen them described, dystopias seem to be in the majority a) white, and b) kept comfortably within the realms of fiction until they start to resemble a white reality, which is when the label ‘dystopia’ gets applied.

If there’s any dysfunctional aspect to society, very large numbers of people are there to experience it: women, people of colour, the disabled, LGBTQ. In the age of Trump speculative fiction has already provided *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a rallying point for feminism and an outlet for women’s justified rage. Where are the speculative dystopias that have done the same for racial issues? Answers on a postcard please.

### It’s Still Wednesday in Macondo

This essay’s title comes from a line in García Márquez’s novella *Leaf Storm* (1955).

### MORE GENRE FANZINES RECEIVED / READ SO FAR IN 2018

*Alexiad* #100–101 LISA & JOSEPH MAJOR

*Ansible* #374–377 DAVE LANGFORD

*Banana Wings* #71–72 CLAIRE BRIALEY, MARK PLUMMER

*Claims Department* #25 CHRIS GARCIA

*The Drink Tank* #404–407 CHRIS GARCIA

*Heroes Unlimited* #8 ANTHONY ROCHE

*Inca* #15 ROB JACKSON

*Lofgeornost* #132–133 FRED LERNER

*Opuntia* #421–430 DALE SPEIRS

*Random Jottings* #15 MICHAEL DOBSON

*Rat Sass* #10 & *Doctored Papers* TARAL WAYNE

*Spartacus* #29 GUY LILLIAN III

*Vanamonde*, 8 assorted issues JOHN HERTZ

*Vibrator* #49 GRAHAM CHARNOCK

WELL, THIS IS USUALLY the last piece I write for *The White Notebooks*, as I cast a weary eye over the last four months and wonder what other important stuff I have managed to forget or leave out. My fanac has been limited this last quarter, mostly to reading fanzines and failing yet again to write meaningful LoCs, but I have found a renewed enthusiasm for what I call ‘Finally Sorting My Books Out’.

This mostly came about because I am getting increasingly fed up with the majority of my collection/library still being boxed away in storage locations in both Thailand and England. I have a large number I do not wish to own any more, and these will either be dispatched to Oxfam, or, if valuable, sold on eBay or Amazon – to just cart the crown jewels off to charity shops as well would only be to short-change my own family.

As for the books I wish to keep (about a thousand at present – a comparatively small number) this is divided into three categories: fanwriting, Asian speculative fiction, and books about Thailand. I have invested in some decent database software (FileMaker) and I’m compiling a comprehensive, smart-looking database of what I shall keep. I’m sure this will be useful in the future for all kinds of reasons, but how far in the future is anyone’s guess.

For now, It’s just Mindless Zombie Data Entry.



I came to Thailand to die. I needed to be surprised. I wanted to be shocked. Bangkok is unpredictable and it delivers if you give it a chance. Even the small adventures are memorable.

**Stirling Silliphant**

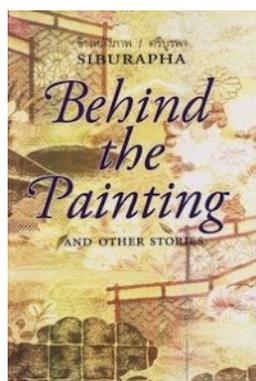
## COLLECTIONS

### Siburapha

#### *Behind the Painting and Other Stories*

2000 | Silkworm Books, ISBN 974-7551-14-4, 425 baht

*Translated by David Smyth*



Siburapha was the pen name of Kulap Saipradit (1905-1974), a prolific magazine editor who enjoyed a chequered reputation in the Thai literary world. Before his run-ins with officialdom, however, he was a popular novelist of romantic fiction during the 1920s, with his later work coinciding with his magazine years tackling themes of social justice and inequality. He was unjustly imprisoned for five

years from 1952 for political reasons, and upon release found exile in China where he lived out the rest of his life.

His most popular novel-length work was *Behind the Painting*, a romance set mostly in Japan. Nopphon, a Thai student studying there, falls dramatically in love with the much older wife of his father's friend, who is visiting for a few months. But it's to remain a platonic love, much to his regret, until Mom Ratchawong Kirati finally moves back to Thailand and Nopphon can continue his studies without distraction, and only much later is there any suggestion that his love for her was in fact reciprocated.

It's hard to properly get a grasp on Nopphon as a person other than as a young man in love, whereas Mom Ratchawong Kirati is a much better developed character, mostly through her more mature dialogue. But Siburapha's storytelling is competent, and the circle of the story, when it is completed, feels smooth and well-drawn.

The book also contains three contrasting short stories from his later period, all of which focus on class divisions in Thai society. If there is a collection of more of these stories, intended to fire the reader with a righteous concern for the poor, I expect it will be worth seeking out.

### S. P. Somtow

#### *My Cold Mad Father*

2018 | Diplodocus Press, ISBN 978-1-940999-31-9, \$13.00

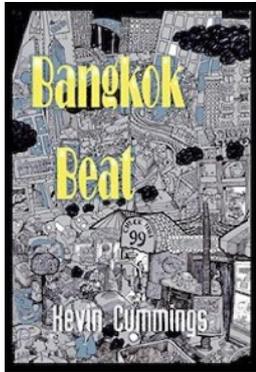


One book that was announced in the early 1990s by the late Pulphouse Press was Somtow's collection *My Cold Mad Father*, which was intended to be the final volume, #30, of their acclaimed 'Author's Choice' series. However Pulphouse folded just before the collection came out, and there it ended for the next twenty-six years, so a quarter of a century late is certainly better than never.

The collection is themed around 'fathers and sons' and contains four stories that may be familiar to aficionados but less so to new readers. 'Kingdoms in the Sky' is the first tale, set in Peru, and tells of an American father who requires his son to participate in an ancient and terrifying sacrificial ceremony. Next is 'Fire from the Wine-Dark Sea', in which a tormented poet with twin sons meets Odysseus on the shore of Cape Cod. Third is 'The Bad News Express' (retitled from 'A Child of Earth and Starry Heaven') in which a teenage boy hallucinates playing a game of baseball with Death on a train from Greece to both save the soul of his father and keep his family together. Finally we have one of Somtow's best and most beautifully realised tales, 'Darker Angels', about a teenage soldier in the American Civil War who meets a Haitian witch doctor and who helps him overcome some dark history with his father. This collection was intended to be the first place this masterful story appeared in print – it turned out to be the fifth. All of which illustrates that historically the path to getting one's work published can often be anything but smooth; with today's technology, however, this book shows how easily taking the self-publishing PoD/e-book route can connect acclaimed authors with new readers.

**Kevin Cummings***Bangkok Beat*

2015 | Frog in the Mirror Press, ISBN 978-06923-9645-4, \$12.99



I enjoy making discoveries of previously unencountered fan-writers these days more commonly known as bloggers in whatever fandoms they are involved in. When they make the transition to published collections of work, the anecdotal pieces often display with frank honesty how committed an author is to his *craft* often it's easy to detect when the writer doesn't really have much to say

or when the writing exposes an intellectual laziness. Happier encounters will show a writer brimming with ideas and an ease with which he or she can communicate them. Kevin Cummings is such a writer who has clearly 'found his fandom' and appears to be just itching to tell everyone about it.

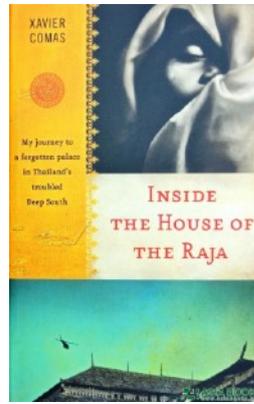
Much of the book centres around the famous nightclub Checkinn99 found on Bangkok's Sukhumvit Road (between Soi 5 and Soi 7) and the more literary end of its clientele, because this is where, and with whom, Cummings seems to spend a great deal of time when in Bangkok. Checkin99 is a focal point for the ex-pat arts scene, sometimes acting as a salon for poets and authors such as with the 'Fiction Night of Noir' gatherings, or the nightly music from an assortment of Western musicians.

A certain amount of name-dropping is par for the course in a collection like this and many current literary names on the Bangkok ex-pat scene make several appearances. The risk is of portraying a clique or an in-crowd that alienates the reader, but I think fortunately for Cummings there is little risk of that happening with such an evidently interesting and welcoming group of people (of whom I currently know only one). The best to be had here are the interviews with authors such as James A. Newman, Colin Cotterill, et al. Cummings is often cunning and detailed with his questions (such that they may elicit the response "Jesus H. Trueman, this is like a bloody university exam. What happened to the good old "Where do you get your ideas from?" Cotterill). As for Cummings's own writing, his best piece is on writers generally: 'I Am Not a Writer and Why the World Needs Them'; it is indeed a good piece of observational fanwriting.

*Bangkok Beat* is a big, generous book from a writer who has plenty to talk about. His love of his milieu is evident and his enthusiasm is infectious. I reckoned I'd be dipping into *Bangkok Beat* for short periods but ended up completing it in a couple of days at the very least, the book achieves its aim of giving the reader many avenues to explore further. Nice one, Mr. Cummings, and I now look forward to getting into its sequel *Different Drummers*.

**Xavier Comas***Inside the House of the Raja*

2018 | Monsoon, ISBN 978-1-940999-25-8, \$16.95



Who hasn't dreamed of coming across an abandoned house by serendipity, and falling under its spell? In the case of Spanish photographer Xavier Comas, his discovery of a curious, not-quite-abandoned Malay palace in Narathiwat around ten years ago, deep in the troubled southern provinces of Thailand, led to a life-changing search for the missing pieces of its history as the residence of a local Raja.

This neglected region of Thailand is rarely visited by Westerners, and is populated by a majority of Malay-Muslims whose forebears once lived in an independent Sultanate, annexed more than a century ago by Siam.

Comas was warned against going to Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala by those in Bangkok who prefer not to even think about those three 'dangerous' southern provinces, but curiosity drove him there and he was able to live in Narathiwat without attracting too much unwanted attention. Gradually, by a few chance encounters he becomes drawn to this large, old, semi-abandoned wooden house on the waterfront of the Bang Nara river. It was occupied by two Muslim sisters and a strange Malaysian *bomoh*, a practicing witch doctor, living there in seclusion. They eventually become familiar enough with Comas through his frequent visits to invite him to live there too, which he does, and at which point his connection to the house and its forgotten history become more meaningful.

There are points in the book that really do come alive in lucid fashion, and these usually involve the presence of spirits from the past that suggest themselves, not so much out of the corners of the eye as out of the corners of the text. That Comas can get this across in English, not his native language, is commendable. Further to this, the suggestion that this house has a kind of spirit of its own that wishes to be remembered by its inhabitants may seem quaint to some but it's clearly something that Comas has come to accept, given his own unlikely role in the house's history finally coming to light.

This book was preceded by a photographic project that has been exhibited in a few places around the world, and also saw the light of day as a large book of dark and moody black and white photographs taken inside the house of the Raja, which you can see in its entirety [here](#). The two books complement each other to give the reader the whole experience.

If travel writing is meant to open our eyes to other ways of being, *Inside the House of the Raja* will be a good book to keep on the shelves once read. It's meditative and thoughtful and, yes, haunting.