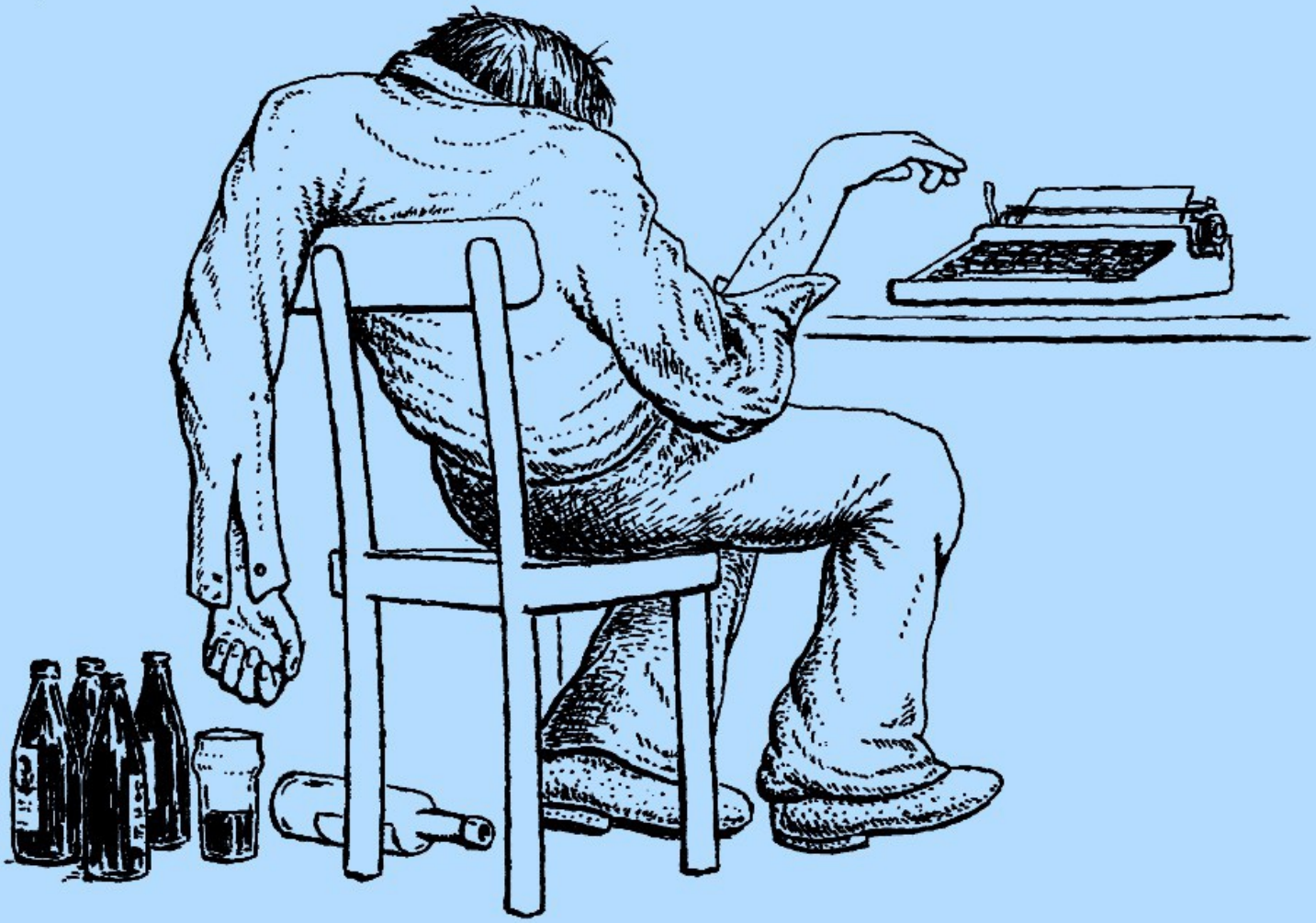
WORK FOR HIRE



David Langford

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Contents

Introduction

An epic venture in what some might call barrel-scraping, this ebook collects my essays written for several genre references of long ago. The dates in the entry headings correspond uniquely to the work in question:

- 1996: *St. James Guide to Fantasy Writers* edited by David Pringle (St. James Press, 1996)
- 1998: *St. James Guide to Horror, Ghost & Gothic Writers* edited by David Pringle (St. James Press, 1998)
- 1999: *Science Fiction Writers: Second Edition* edited by Richard Bleiler (Scribner's, 1999)
- 2003: *Supernatural Fiction Writers: Contemporary Fantasy and Horror* Volume I edited by Richard Bleiler (Scribner's, 2003)
- 2007: *An Unofficial Companion to the Novels of Terry Pratchett* edited by Andrew M. Butler (Greenwood World Publishing, 2007)

Sometimes the scope of a particular reference was more constraining than I found comfortable. For example, I'd have had more fun writing about Gerald Kersh's fantastika in general if the SF hadn't been largely excluded by the "Horror, Ghost & Gothic" remit.

A few substantial items from 2004 do not appear here because they were first published in my own *Starcombing: columns, essays, reviews and more* (2009; ebook 2016). As explained in the 2004 section of that book:

> In this year I finished the meaty assignment of writing three essays – on James Branch Cabell, John Myers Myers, and Thorne Smith – for a projected update volume of the US *Dictionary of Literary Biography* to be called *20th Century American Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers, 1900-1950*. edited by F. Brett Cox for The Gale Group. My contributions were delivered and approved with only the tiniest of suggested revisions. For some mysterious reason Cox then abandoned this project, leaving contributors stranded without any commitment or further interest (or, indeed, a kill fee) from the publisher. So here's a hefty wad of material that's never before appeared in print.

Other reference sources not represented in *Work for Hire* include *The*

Encyclopedia of Fantasy (1997) and *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (third edition, 2011-current), to which according to the software count I've contributed 83,000 and 800,000 words respectively, often in collaborative entries. (The *SFE* figure may sound impressive, but John Clute's total is well over three million.) Both can be read in full online. Both have a high density of internal cross-references (hyperlinks), making individual entries less than satisfactory when removed from context. This is also true of *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works and Wonders* edited by Gary Westfahl (Greenwood Press, 3 volumes, 2005), for which I wrote 46 theme and book entries coming to something over 50,000 words. Busy, busy, busy.

I've omitted the bibliographies that accompanied many of the essays. Some of them, I forget which, were supplied by the relevant publishers; and even for authors long dead when I wrote about them there is now much more detailed coverage in the Internet SF Database and, where applicable, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. Book titles referred to by initials in a few essays – as required by house style – have been expanded. Some house styles preferred book dates to appear only in the bibliographies: those entries are here amended to include each date when the book is first mentioned.

As a bonus, Appendix 2 includes my first four professional engagements with Terry Pratchett's Discworld other than brief reviews in "Critical Mass" columns (since collected in *The Complete Critical Assembly*, 2001; ebook 2015). These are the previously unpublished – at least as far as I can remember – reader's reports for Gollancz on *Equal Rites*, *Mort*, *Sourcery* and *Wyrd Sisters*. The first was miraculously preserved in a folder of 1980s Apricot SuperWriter documents converted by a home-made utility program to WordPerfect 4.2 format; the rest had to be retrieved from faded carbon copies generated by a state-of-the-art daisywheel printer whose horrible clatter still lingers in the memory. Those were the days. The *Mort* analysis is unusually long for a reader's report because, as Malcolm Edwards of Gollancz instructed me at the time, our author had specifically asked for editorial suggestions. Commenting on Discworld drafts at relentless length was to become a regular thing, though after *Wyrd Sisters* my input switched from the traditional report-to-publisher format to long lists of notes, queries, possible inconsistencies and typo fixes sent directly to Terry, each followed by an exchange of letters, faxes or (beginning, it seems, with my December 1994 reactions to *Maskerade*) email, until Things Were Sorted Out. Terry, of course, always had the last word.

Too many of the creators discussed in this ebook are no longer with us, and several were friends: in particular Rob Holdstock, Josh Kirby, Terry Pratchett, Chris Priest, Mike Scott Rohan, Allan Scott and Brian Stableford. I was also on good terms with Greg Bear and Colin Wilson, and in my fleeting postal interactions with Kingsley Amis managed at least to avoid a devastating put-down. The collection is dedicated to them all.

David Langford
October 2024

Lloyd Alexander (1996)

Alexander, Lloyd (Chudley)

Nationality: American. **Born:** Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1924.

As has happened before (Tolkien is the obvious example), Lloyd Alexander's *Chronicles of Prydain* began as a fantasy sequence for younger readers but grew tougher, more mature, more resonant as it continued. The common setting is the Old Wales of legend, owing more to the *Mabinogion* than to any Welsh history or geography.

However, despite a general Welshness the connections are glancing. It feels almost a coincidence that both Wales and Prydain have an Isle of Mona (Anglesey), while Prydain's impeccably heroic warrior-mage Gwydion resembles his amoral namesake from the Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogion* only in a few sleights – for example, both magically disguise themselves as shoemakers. Alexander admitted that his version of Arawn, King of Annuvin (i.e. Annwfn or Annwn, the underworld), is altogether more villainous than the oddly honourable original found in the *Mabinogion*'s First Branch.

The mythic elements provide a backdrop for Alexander's original creations like Taran, the boy without lineage who is the continuing hero and clearly fated to grow into someone of importance – but is always hurrying this process along, over-extending himself and using more high-flown language than appropriate to his role as Assistant Pig-Keeper (of Hen Wen, the magic oracular sow who might derive distantly from the newly imported swine that Gwydion steals from Pryderi in the *Mabinogion*). Chief among those who slap him down again is Eilonwy, a royal young lady with a temper and a fondness for eccentric similes: "Listening to you is more confusing than trying to count your fingers and toes at the same time!" Also generally in attendance are Gurgi, a hairy, greedy, smelly and loyal creature of indeterminate species; Fflewddur Fflam, wandering bard and part-time king whose unfortunately magical harp snaps its strings whenever he utters an entirely pardonable exaggeration; and Doli, an irascible dwarf who is extremely allergic to his own talent of invisibility.

The Book of Three (1964) pits Taran, Gwydion and the other companions against a slightly routine villain called the Horned King, one of Arawn's many puppets. It's an exciting adventure, but there is never

any real doubt that things will turn out for the best. In *The Black Cauldron* (1965), though, matters become darker. Likeable characters can die; conventional Good Guys turn their coats; high prices are paid for dubious gains; victory requires a real sacrifice. Taran's excess of inverted snobbery (he's ashamed of not being "noble") is matched by the satanic pride of his supposed ally Ellidyr, who despite royal blood has an even huger chip on his own shoulder. The Black Crochan or Cauldron itself, which cooks dead bodies back into malevolent unlife as "Cauldron-Born" warriors, is borrowed from the strange, poisoned Second Branch of the *Mabinogion*; so is the only possible means of its destruction, the need for someone to enter it living and die. Using a comic-relief technique reminiscent of T.H. White's in *The Sword in the Stone*, Alexander has the Crochan guarded by Orddu, Orwen and Orgoch, cheerfully sinister hags who drive hard bargains and betray an ill-concealed enthusiasm for turning people into toads. They are not, however, merely three conventional witches.

Book three, *The Castle of Llyr* (1966), is less dramatic but has its more thoughtful aspects. Rehabilitating a near-villain like Ellidyr in *The Black Cauldron* is an altogether easier literary task than this book's development of the amiable and accident-prone wimp Prince Rhun into someone very nearly worthy of respect. There is also an interestingly pitiable minor menace in Glew, the self-made and self-centred giant whose potions of gigantism have left him as small-minded as ever, and who exhibits fussy resentment when Taran and company won't co-operate with his reasonable request to kill just one of the party. At the climax, it's Eilonwy's turn to make an important renunciation despite being bedazzled and ensorcelled by the devious Queen Achren.

The way grows harder again in *Taran Wanderer* (1967), which sees our hero looking for his own pedigree (and convinced for one tragic interval that he's found it) among the Free Commots – the little kingdoms of the day being subdivided into cantrefs or hundreds, and the cantrefs into commots. These are the people for whom high fantasy does not traditionally show much concern: scavengers, farmers, potters, weavers, the folk whose common trades can, astonishingly, be as hard to learn as battle and kingship. After serving a succession of hard apprenticeships, Taran emerges as a passable jack-of-all-trades whose real forte is, after all, leading and organizing... as shown when he rallies the smallest commot of all to beat off a vicious gang of raiders.

Darker still, *The High King* (1968) ends with Taran in the title role after a protracted series of betrayals, defeats, doomed rearguard actions and deaths of too many characters we have come to know and often like.

Ultimately, all the more “noble” and magical companions sail off like Tolkien’s elves to the Summer Country and immortality. Taran and Eilonwy are invited, but popularly acclaimed High Kings and their consorts have responsibilities to the war-blasted land of Prydain: a last choice has to be made.

The series is impressive, atmospheric and, despite a few slightly too convenient short cuts of plotting (Taran’s one stroke at a Cauldron-Born with the enchanted sword Dyrnwyn causes the whole undead army to fall over), avoids all options of easy wish-fulfilment. *The High King* won the Newbury Medal. Related Prydain titles, outside the central strand of Taran’s growing-up, are *Coll and his White Pig* (Coll, an ex-Hero, is Taran’s first tutor and keeper of the pig Hen Wen), *The Truthful Harp* and *The Foundling and Other Tales of Prydain*.

Alexander wrote other series: the *Westmark* sequence of Graustarkian adventures, the *Vesper Holly* young-adult works set in an alternate Victorian era, and further children’s fantasies. The Prydain books show him at his best and are constantly reprinted.

Kingsley Amis (1998)

Amis, Kingsley (William)

Nationality: British. **Born:** South London, 1922. **Died:** 22 October 1995.

Kingsley Amis was best known as a writer of comic and satirical novels, the keynote being set by the great success of his first book *Lucky Jim* (1954). Despite the sunniness of its humour, this novel led to his being grouped with Colin Wilson and others as a 1950s left-wing social rebel or "Angry Young Man" (a label unhelpfully invented by journalists). Over the years Amis moved politically to the right while still producing comedy in the same polished vein. Later mainstream honours included the Booker Prize for *The Old Devils* (1986) and a 1990 knighthood. "Respectable" admirers of the straight novels have tended to downplay this author's lifelong fondness for genre fiction. Such enthusiasm became apparent in his affectionate survey of sf, *New Maps of Hell* (1960), and in works which explored the popular genres: sf, crime, espionage, war, and supernatural fiction.

His great supernatural achievement is the partly comic ghost story *The Green Man* (1969). Initially it would seem that the comedy must be at odds with any true horrific *frisson*... but Amis is expert at conveying a certain moral chill that undercuts the fun. Several of his boozy, lecherous, quipping anti-heroes are clearly whistling in the dark. Taking examples from two of the most extravagantly funny novels, Patrick in *Take a Girl Like You* (1960) is regularly convulsed by icy fears of death, while Jake in *Jake's Thing* (1978) can be seen as slowly withdrawing from all human contact into a kind of private damnation. And the ostensible spy story *The Anti-Death League* conceals a bitter tirade against the injustice and cruelty of God.

The Green Man takes its name from an old coaching inn – now also a slightly pretentious restaurant – owned by the likeable but reprehensible Maurice Allington, who is flirting with alcoholism and a master plan to lure both wife and mistress into bed for a threesome. One of the inn's minor attractions is the legend of a not very exciting ghost, which Maurice boredly recites to despised customers. Then he sees certain things himself; and his father dies of a stroke while apparently also experiencing a vision. Maurice's self-confidence is shaken, leaving him open to fears of madness and to an assault from the past.

Gradually it emerges that the 17th-century Dr Thomas Underhill, a sexual predator who used both faked and real wizardry to dominate his young female prey, had made plans to circumvent death and hopes – with our hero's aid – to return. He has chosen his victim cunningly: projected hallucinations resonate with the terror of *delirium tremens*, while Maurice's difficulty in recalling revealing conversations with the shade of Underhill may be no more than alcoholic memory loss. As the doctor smugly informs him, "Not to remember is your quality."

Worse is waiting. The real Green Man is an appalling golem or forest elemental which the wizard was accustomed to conjure from the local woods. Underhill's return to life will be *via* possession of his living contact's body. And he already has carnal plans for Maurice's adolescent daughter....

Ironically echoing the Dennis Wheatley plot-turn of all too convenient divine intervention, Amis permits Maurice an interview with God in the unspectacular (though briefly grisly) form of a pale young man. The chill arises not so much from the casual explanation that the terrifying Underhill is a minor "security" problem which Maurice is expected to deal with single-handed, as from this dialogue's dismaying implications of a deity with scant emotional interest in his creation, and of an inescapable afterlife which is too bleakly alien for even God to describe.

Nevertheless, earthy realism is maintained by Amis's fine control of language and diction, and of the sense that life's comedy continues even while bad smells seep in from the metaphysical outside. On the real-life level, Maurice's hoped-for *ménage à trois* gives him a splendidly farcical come-uppance.

At last, in a scene of considerable horror, the powerful and repulsive Green Man walks again. Acting on information received, Maurice is able to use the forms of religion against the golem and Underhill – not devoutly but as game-rules where appropriate offensive and defensive points are scored by the cross, by consecrated ground, and by the ritual of exorcism into which he cajoles a reluctant and decidedly agnostic vicar. ("The spirit killeth, but the letter giveth life.") With evil routed, all has in theory ended well. However, Maurice's peep into the theological abyss and his increased self-knowledge have not brought contentment but a complexly bitter spiritual aftertaste. It is on this discomforting note that *The Green Man* ends.

Amis has also produced shorter relevant works. "Who or What Was It?" (*Collected Short Stories*, 1980) is an entertaining tall tale, originally a radio broadcast, in which Amis himself claims to have stumbled into a

situation uncannily duplicating his own creation in *The Green Man*: an audaciously implausible denouement was meant to establish the story as incontrovertibly fictional – yet several people were fooled. The 1980 vampire novella “To See the Sun” (*ibid*), told in traditional epistolary manner, has a typically charming but unreliable English traveller enjoying an extramarital fling with an exotic female vampire in 1925 Dacia; there are several effective ironies, including the man’s explanation to this lover that vampire legends arose from hallucinations caused by ergot poisoning, and the emerging fact that despite her condition she possesses a far greater sense of honour... leading to the self-sacrifice implied in the title. Another seeming spy-story, “The House on the Headland” (*ibid*), develops Gothic elements as mysterious doings prove to hinge on teratophilia – the morbid love of deformity. “A Twitch on the Thread” (*Mr Barrett’s Secret*, 1991), a glum story of moral downfall, uses the legendary psychic affinity of twins to cast a cold or perhaps merely sophistical light on the value of religious experience.

Kingsley Amis made a significant contribution to every genre in which he worked. Although *The Green Man* is his sole book-length tale of the supernatural, its disquieting sophistication and the deepening of its darkness by contrasting veins of light comedy make it a major 20th-century horror story.

David Arscott & David J. Marl (1996)

Arscott, David, and Marl, David J.

Nationality: British (?). **Born:** ?

David Arscott's and David J. Marl's two linked novels cast a slightly cold eye on the politics of genre fantasy. We are too accustomed to the simple polarization of Good and Evil tending to a final struggle followed by the restoration of a True King. Arscott and Marl laudably try to complicate the issues a little, but ultimately achieve a muddy effect rather than any new clarity. In both books they suggest alternative paths which are not followed up.

The Frozen City (1984) is heavy with intimations of parable and allegory. Its young protagonist Tom comes to the nameless city in a bad winter, but the place is frozen in various other senses. Politically there is a near-deadlock between some ineffectual-seeming good guys and the highly unpleasant organization of the Red Blade (whose beliefs seem more or less confined to the conviction that a stable rule entails being extremely nasty to the ruled). Geographically, there is a freeze on movement which is built into the city structure: whole sections are closed mazes which can be entered or left only by secret, guarded routes through the high buildings, or by dangerous roof-climbing. Ideologically, the nicer-seeming folk whose symbol is the Eye have a frozen set of aspirations involving a secret Other City, a literal underground to which art and beauty have been exiled (and which is both underpopulated and stagnant); meanwhile, the Red Blade operates by rigid and self-perpetuating codes.

The writing is adequate; the plot consists largely of young Tom doing a great deal of uncertain wandering around and learning all the above, while himself beset by sometimes too-didactically expressed problems of honesty and mercy *versus* practical politics. There is a good *frisson* when the nature of the Red Blade's leadership or non-leadership finally emerges with something of the philosophical brutality in Orwell's famous line: "The object of power is power." *The Frozen City* ends with the promise of imminent change, a warm plea against hereditary rule (lack of which is apparently the Red Blade's sole virtue), and Tom's vaguely anticlimatic reunion with the father he's been tepidly seeking all along. It seems to

require a sequel.

A Flight of Bright Birds (1985) connects with the first story from an oblique angle and after some lapse of time. The original indeterminate setting is abandoned in favour of perhaps unwise references to Odysseus, Shakespeare, Columbus, Australia and railways. In separate narrative strands, two young, mysteriously linked heroes travel to the exotic city of O – (not the frozen city). One hangs out with actors, another with artists and a lovely deaf-and-dumb dancer. All this provides colour, but largely irrelevant colour; the dancer in particular seems fraught with significance which leads nowhere. Eventually the boys prove to be the twin sons of Tom and learn that the Eye and Blade are fighting again, and that it's up to them to act nobly. A manipulator who distrusts Noble Saviours pressures them to renounce all claim to leadership in the frozen city; the book ends as, by simple trickery, they avoid committing themselves in any way.

A third title did not follow.

Greg Bear (1999)

Following several years of growing recognition as a talented if not at the time particularly exceptional author, Greg Bear took the science fiction world by storm in the mid-1980s. With staggering self-assurance, he revisited a number of seemingly well-worn themes of cosmic transcendence and destruction, and successfully set new standards by which the use of such themes must now be judged. His career has continued with novels of often remarkable complexity and ambition.

Gregory Dale Bear was born in San Diego, California on 20 August 1951 and was educated at San Diego State University. After working as – among other occupations – a part-time lecturer at the San Diego Aerospace Museum, a technical writer and a planetarium operator, he became a full-time freelance writer (and occasional illustrator) in 1975. His second marriage in 1983 was to Astrid Anderson, daughter of author Poul Anderson; they live with their daughter and son in Washington State. Bear has been a co-editor of *Forum*, the private Science Fiction Writers of America newsletter; was president of SFWA 1988-1990; and co-founded the Association of Science Fiction Artists.

His first published science fiction story was “Destroyers” (*Famous Science Fiction*, Spring 1967). His first novel *Hegira* (1979) foreshadows both the solid characterization and high ambition of later work, but is made top-heavy by a plethora of gigantic revelations. The world called Hegira is not merely hollow and artificial, but encloses a black hole and is part of a vast fleet of worlds which are arks carrying life from one universe to the next. Meanwhile, Hegira’s almost godlike builders could think of no better way of preserving humanity’s knowledge than inscribing it on vast monoliths, or of releasing “higher” knowledge (written inaccessibly far up the monoliths) than having these structures fall over in scenes of extensive devastation. There is science-fictional “sense of wonder” here, but it’s burdened with too many implausibilities, whose exposition requires a chapter-long lecture.

In the same year Bear published *Psychlone* (1979), an interesting if uneven “techno-horror” story whose ingenious premise is that the first atomic bombs were spiritually as well as physically shattering, blasting Japanese victims’ psyches into tortured fragments. The agglomerated result is an angry psychic vortex which over the years since World War II has drifted across the Pacific to America, where it manifests as a

monstrously destructive elemental force. Its eventual dispersal with advanced particle-beam weaponry leaves an aftermath of evil foreboding, with the US military now in possession of – and continuing to test – a means of destroying souls.

Other early novels show Bear gaining in craftsmanship and confidence. *Beyond Heaven's River* (1980) transports a World War II Japanese aeroplane gunner to a mysterious far-future milieu in which he is first compelled to relive portions of his country's history and then introduced to a galactic setting of faster-than-light travel and human-alien commerce. His mentor, the wealthy entrepreneur Anna Sigrid Nestor, is a linking character in a tentative future history which Bear did not develop very far: she features in his short stories "The Venging" (*Galaxy*, June 1975) and "Perihesperon" (*Tomorrow: New Worlds of Science Fiction*, 1975).

Strength of Stones (1981) is a "fix-up" novel incorporating two separately published stories which share the planetary setting: a harsh world called God-Does-Battle, colonized as a refuge for the outmoded Christian, Islamic and Jewish religions. All these believers have long been cast out by the extraordinary mobile cities built to house them, whose machine intelligences reached an unexpected judgement: "They found humanity wanting." Scenes in which a city disassembles and relocates itself are striking and memorable, although the finale (like *Hegira*'s) perhaps overreaches in its striving for cosmic scale. *Corona* (1984) is a competent venture into the template universe of *Star Trek*.

A segment of *Strength of Stones* appears in Bear's first collection *The Wind from a Burning Woman* (1983), whose title story – a drama of terrorist blackmail involving a threatened asteroid impact on Earth – neatly outlines the political division between technophile "Geshels" and technophobe "Naderites" which recurs in the novel *Eon*. The most impressively complex of these early collected stories is "Hardfought" (*Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine*, 1983), describing a protracted galaxy-wide clash between radically changed humans and the almost incomprehensibly alien Senexi. In this long struggle, recalling Nietzsche's warning that those who battle dragons may themselves become dragons, the essence of humanity is in real danger of being lost. "Hardfought" won a Nebula Award as Best Novella. Additionally, that year's Nebula for Best Novelette went to "Blood Music" (*Analog*, 1983), which took the Hugo Award in the same category and was soon expanded into the first Bear novel to gain major acclaim and recognition.

In between came *The Infinity Concerto* (1984), an inventive fantasy

which avoided the usual genre clichés and brought a keen science-fictional eye to its examination of a harsh otherworld where humans live marginal lives at the whim of the Sidhe (elves). This was continued in *The Serpent Mage* (1986), the two-book series being known as "Songs of Earth and Power".

The full-length *Blood Music* (1985) deals with the same high concept as the short version – an ultimate biological disaster that is not a disaster – but teases out the implications with mature, exhaustive intelligence. Vergil Ulam, a gene-technology researcher with more genius than common sense, defies his company's guidelines and uses his own white blood cells in an innovative attempt to adapt and exploit the building-blocks of life as "biochip" computer elements. When, very soon, he is fired for overstepping the mark, the enhanced lymphocytes are already bright enough to outdo mice in maze-solving tests. Rather than destroy them all as ordered, Ulam smuggles some out in his own bloodstream... and is colonized by these fast-evolving "noocytes", thinking cells, who regard his body as the universe. Improved health, vision and sexual performance are only early stages of the noocytes' improvements as they tinker with their world. Soon they seek to improve the human shape. Soon they learn of further worlds beyond this first host, and send out explorers.

In a sense Ulam has created an intelligent plague, expanding into a horror-movie "blob that ate America" as the noocyte colonies spread via all known disease vectors and some new ones, efficiently rearranging the raw materials of their environment – that is, human flesh – into a continent-wide transport and communications linkage. The punchline of the short story, upon which the novel builds extensively, is that the horrors of melting flesh and physical grotesquerie are irrelevant. Nothing is lost. The noocytes feel something close to veneration for those who gave them life and sentience, and preserve both human minds and the equivalent of bodies in a "thought universe": virtual reality underpinned by biology.

Mechanical computer power is now left far behind by the sheer density of noocyte thought. It is an actualization of Teilhard de Chardin's metaphorical universe of mind, the "Noosphere". As one infected scientist muses:

> *At a crude guess, perhaps two trillion fully developed, intelligent individuals exist within me.*
>
> *If I multiply this crude number times the number of people in North America – half a billion, another rough guess – then I end up with a* billion trillion, *or on the order of* 10^{20}. *That is the*

number of intelligent beings on the face of the Earth at this moment – neglecting, of course, the entirely negligible human population.

Which leads Bear to the metaphysical conceit that this unprecedented number of microscopic "observers" (in the quantum-physics sense) can bring to bear such an intensity of observation as to affect quantum reality. Thus, when Russia decides on a nuclear strike against the weirdly transformed North American continent, the vast noocyte colony is able to create brief, local distortions of physics in which nuclear detonation is not possible. Another and greater leap beyond known physics occurs when the whole Noosphere – first absorbing all the remaining human individuals still outside the gestalt – eventually shakes itself apocalyptically loose from Earth, consumes the solar system and takes flight into the unknowable.

This final transcendence deliberately recalls the similar close of Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953), a science-fiction classic which *Blood Music* is generally felt to have surpassed. Bizarre though its final destination may be, Bear has rooted his story in solidly plausible near-future gene technology, from which the conceptual leaps follow as seemingly logical steps. *Blood Music* won the top French science fiction award, the Prix Apollo.

In *Eon* (1985) Bear turned his attention to the traditional science-fiction prop of a gigantic, enigmatic artifact – in some critics' terminology, a Big Dumb Object. Past examples include Larry Niven's enormous Ringworld and Christopher Priest's infinite Inverted World. Bear unveils his own modest infinity with canny timing as a mysterious asteroid with a series of large internal chambers is investigated, until the realization...

The asteroid was longer on the inside than it was on the outside.

The seventh chamber went on forever.

There is a fine handling of cosmic scale here, as the implications of this infinite corridor – the "Way" – gradually unfurl. Bear convinces us that its space/time engineering must necessarily produce an infinite singularity running along the axis of the tube. He exploits the paradoxical question of how an infinity "fits" into our relativistic universe, to justify the Way's partial decoupling from the known continuum, causing a time slippage whereby the attached human-engineered asteroid known as the Thistledown arrives near our Earth centuries before its construction. (In a similar paradox, inimical alien "Jarts" have colonized the Way during gulfs of unreal time prior to its opening for human use.) He gives us a taste

of immensity and deals with the traditional problem “where have the builders gone?” by showing them still in residence, a million or so kilometres along the Way. The disjunction from our universe also implies that the one-dimensional infinity of the tunnel can spear through uncountably many parallel creations, into which portals may be opened. All this wealth of circumstantial detail eases our acceptance of the central impossibility.

Less sophisticated is the US/Soviet *Realpolitik* of this imagined 2005. America effectively controls Thistledown exploration and has maintained deep secrecy about an imminent global thermonuclear war “predicted” in yet-to-be-written histories found in the asteroid libraries. The Soviets proceed to initiate this very war with a feint attack that had been intended only to mask their invasion and seizure of the Thistledown. Meanwhile in futuristic Axis City far down the Way, Naderite and Geshel factions of the governing “Hexamon Nexus” are arguing about the incursions of Jarts still further down the line. Various complications and contacts ensue. When the Jarts deploy their ultimate weapon, a gateway into a sun which will sear the human-occupied sections of the Way with superhot plasma, the Geshel retaliation is to hurl their (still inhabited) precinct of Axis City at relativistic speed in the opposite direction, turning back the plasma and erasing the Jarts and all their works in a superspatial shockwave that ultimately transforms the Way to open up a multiverse of infinite possibilities.

This visionary strand is appropriately mind-wrenching, and the mobile complex of Axis City is all by itself an impressive creation – which also pays homage, with its computer-generated decor and reserve banks of stored human personalities, to Diaspar in Arthur C. Clarke’s *The City and the Stars* (1956). One minor cavil is that even for 1985, there’s an old-fashioned feel in the depiction of Russians, especially the sympathetic ones who are so naively astonished to learn in the Thistledown library that official USSR history is not necessarily reliable.

The direct sequel to *Eon* is *Eternity* (1988), in which Bear attempts the difficult task of outdoing and overtopping the former book’s infinite vistas. He attacks the challenge with some panache, introducing a revenant from that epic flight up the Way, who has travelled to the far end of time and now brings a message from the final god-intellects who are orchestrating the “esthetic conclusion” of the universe. The Way itself, the message states, is a disfiguring blemish in space/time and must be destroyed forthwith, at its origin point near 21st-century Earth. (A philosophical issue deftly avoided here concerns whether, given that the

Way's infinite extension through time means that it "is" already a problem at the remote end of eternity, its "subsequent" destruction can be of any use.)

There is good material in *Eternity*, such as the exploration of frictions between human descendants from Thistledown and human ancestors from our now radiation-scarred Earth. *Eon*'s disappointingly faceless and motiveless bad guys the Jarts are at last seen at close quarters, and shown to have logical though chilling racial goals which align unexpectedly with those of the Final Mind at the end of time. Like the noocytes of *Blood Music*, they idealistically wish to store all information, all life – but see no reason to waste their energy budget by storing life in conscious format. Finally, after much debate, the Way (currently disconnected from Thistledown) is re-opened and cataclysmically destroyed. There is satisfaction in the appropriate tying-off of plot strands, one of which remains open-ended: certain characters, now disembodied intellects flitting along "space-time's hidden circuitry", are left to explore creation from Beginning to End.

For many readers, though, the sequel exudes a sense of unfulfilled promise. *Eon* tantalizingly opened doors to an infinity of wonders attainable through the Way; in *Eternity* these same doors are firmly and finally slammed shut. But Bear is not offering easy wish-fulfilments, and any disappointment at the follow-through testifies to the power of his original vision.

Properly handled, of course, tragedy and destruction can be exhilarating in themselves. The revisited theme in *The Forge of God* (1987) is that science-fictional stalwart, the utter demolition of Earth – and again Bear tackles his subject with impressive thoroughness. His downhill slide to disaster begins with odd visitations. Jupiter's moon Europa vanishes. In America, a dying alien apologizes for carrying bad news:

> "...A disease has entered your system of planets. There is little time left for your world."

Australia is visited by different and cheerier alien robots, talking about entrance to the galactic community. In Mongolia, it later emerges, something else is promising the USSR a socialist millennium. All this proves to be disinformation and misdirection, focusing Earth's attention on surface events – perhaps rather needlessly in our case, but the technique allows for more advanced civilizations than ours. Meanwhile, deep undersea, robot demolition squads are extracting hydrogen from water to build the countless thermonuclear bombs which will loosen the crust's

tectonic seams. This is no more than preliminary softening-up for the major weapon, small but unstoppable. Matched bullets of neutronium and anti-neutronium, each less than a metre across but weighing about 100 million metric tons, are dropped from space to pierce Earth's crust and circle in decaying orbits within: "a kind of time-delay bomb with a fuse controlled by gravity." When these bullets settle to the centre and collide, the vast matter/antimatter energy release will literally break up the weakened planet.

Human reactions are diverse, complex and poignant throughout. People are slow to comprehend, but had they been quicker it would have made no difference. The US president takes a strongly religious view of the final days, and urges submission to God's will: it makes no difference. A heroic effort with a man-carried nuke destroys the first alien beachhead on US soil: this, too, makes no difference. *The Forge of God* is from that school of science fiction which emphasizes our tiny, fragile position in the universe. The final humiliation is that this routine smashing of a world is not even being carried out by hostile aliens – merely by their unseen tools.

Some friendlier alien emissaries are also present but have arrived too late. They do what they can to assist by preparing Mars and Venus as future refuges, and by gathering and preserving some of Earth's knowledge, plants, animals and a pitifully few people. Then the oceans light up and boil, the continental plates are blasted apart, and Bear shows Doomsday both from multiple ground-level viewpoints and from space... where lucky "abductees" are required by alien law to bear witness to this ultimate crime. There will, it is promised, be punishment. Rarely has a fictional destruction of Earth been so detailed, plausible and cathartic.

The theme of vengeance and punishment is taken up in *Anvil of Stars* (1992), a somewhat less potent sequel whose canny distancing in time and style ensures that it does not detract from *The Forge of God*. At the outset the *Dawn Treader*, a relativistic "Ship of the Law" provided by the helpful Benefactors and crewed by 82 adolescents saved from the wreck of Earth, at last approaches a group of stars likely to be the home or one of the homes of the Killers. The young protagonist Martin was a minor character in *The Forge of God* – a leading character's son – and the book revolves around his and his team's problems with the morality and practicality of their mission to impose the Law of the Benefactors:

> "All intelligences responsible for or associated with the manufacture of self-replicating and destructive devices will be destroyed."

Extinction is so final. Is it justifiable to condemn a solar system on mere circumstantial evidence? The star which the avengers name Wormwood is surrounded by telltale remnants of Killer technology, and so the tough decision is made. Will it be possible to carry out the sentence? The *Dawn Treader* has powerful Benefactor nanotechnological weapons, but there's a growing suspicion that its arsenal has been carefully restricted – just in case a Ship of the Law should ever be used against Benefactors. Worse, the Killers are likely to have advanced by many centuries since the relatively crude devices used against Earth.

Indeed the Wormwood system proves to be both a decoy and a trap, armed with at least one trick that the *Dawn Treader* lacks. Victory comes at high cost in human life and surely leaves the Killers untouched – again, the encounter has been only with their tools. After healing, regrouping, internal dissent and a teaming-up with another damaged Ship of the Law whose crew are serpent-like aliens, *Dawn Treader* proceeds to the next likely target, the star dubbed Leviathan. Here Earth's avengers are obviously outclassed by technology that can rapidly camouflage entire existing planets or simulate a planet where none exists. More subtly, the whole solar system seems to show multiple species living in peace and harmony, and a being very like a god explains that the Killers are long gone, Leviathan's worlds being peopled by creations of their reformed descendants.

Meanwhile, however, the brighter minds from Earth – already given a clue by Wormwood's deadly adaptation of the Benefactors' instantaneous "no-channel" or "noach" communicator – are making rapid deductions about Leviathan technology and its use of noach physics. Bear, always fascinated by information theory, offers some nice conceits about reprogramming particles, waves and even basic fluctuations in space by remote noach control, just as a hacker might alter a computerized credit rating. One consequence is the structural "fake matter" already used in the Ship, being empty space programmed with the accidents of solidity but not of mass. Another is the Wormwood trap's deadly ability to rewrite normal matter into antimatter. All this enjoyable and highly imaginative doubletalk provides an excuse for a traditional trope of space opera, in which superweapons are speedily created from thin air just when most needed.

One compliment paid to Bear by John Clute in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* is that his politics are "graced by a lack of dreadful simplicity". The concluding action and revelations in *Anvil of Stars* lead to a conscientiously unsimple mingling of triumph and guilt. Almost

certainly the Killers have been dealt with. All too probably, many others who died were innocents used as shields and camouflage. The alien allies have the last word: “There is shame in victory, and much to think about...”

Before the appearance of *Anvil of Stars*, Bear had published a further major story collection and launched a new, loosely linked sequence with *Queen of Angels* (1990) and *Heads* (1990). Further related stories are *Moving Mars* (1993) and */* (1997) – whose official title is that single character but which for clarity is generally known as *Slant*.

Of the stories collected in *Tangents* (1989), the title piece (*Omni*, 1986) stands out as a winner of both the Hugo and the Nebula Award for Best Short Story. It is partly a homage to Clifton Fadiman’s collections of mathematical fiction such as *Fantasia Mathematica* (1958), much loved by Bear and others. A young boy learns to visualize and then communicate with four-dimensional beings. This not unfamiliar science fiction theme is here given bitter strength by parallels between the boy’s computational mentor and Alan Turing – both gifted codebreakers, both homosexual, both cruelly persecuted by those to whom they have rendered life-saving service.

Other notable inclusions are the original short “Blood Music”; “Sisters” (*Tangents*, 1989), with its painful examination of an unadjusted ugly-duckling child in a school of genetically enhanced beauties; the dark urban fairytale “Sleepside Story” (1988), initially published as a separate chapbook and interestingly displaying Bear’s range; “A Martian Ricorso” (*Analog*, 1976), a Mars-landing story which ingeniously proposes a planetary ecology moving in lengthy cycles, with the phase responsible for Schiaparelli’s “canals” now long past and a new order beginning to emerge; and the black joke “Schrödinger’s Plague”, whose insidiously twisted physics extends the “Schrödinger’s Cat” thought experiment to leave the fate of the human race hanging on an unresolved quantum state which could still topple either way – the lady or the tiger? – and may be affected by the expectations of the observer, or the reader....

Queen of Angels takes place during the approach of the “binary millennium”, when the year 2047 gives way to 2048. In the binary notation once fundamental to computers, this year change is from 11111111111 to 100000000000. The main setting is Los Angeles, City of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels, imagined in all its likely gruelling complexity. Initially the density of futuristic detail is a trifle forbidding, with jargon like “combs” and “jags” for LA’s vast elite residential blocks and the radiating lowlife districts around each of them; with fragments of Singapore slang; and with internal monologues riddled with tiny negative

jolts, like missing steps on a staircase, where commas are expected but not supplied. Soon, though, clarity emerges and the various plot strands begin to grip.

One features a multiple murder investigated by Mary Choy of LAPD (the PD now stands for Public Defense) a biologically enhanced woman and, metaphorically, a guardian angel. The identity of the murderer seems clear; the black poet Emanuel Goldsmith has surely slaughtered his eight young acolytes. Mary's chief problem is to apprehend Goldsmith and allow him due process, before he's found by "Selector" vigilantes who dispense ultimate punishment with mind-invading "hellcrowns". In fact Goldsmith is in other private hands, where radical therapist Dr Martin Burke is asked to judge his guilt and responsibility by using nanotechnological links to explore the presumed murderer's Country of the Mind – a metaphorical geography in which the alliance or conflict of mental subroutines generates the emerging gestalt of personality. Meanwhile the artifical intelligence of the multinational AXIS space probe is exploring another unknown territory, a world four light-years away. Owing to communications lags, AXIS is both monitored and simulated on Earth by the advanced AI Jill, who trembles on the verge of self-awareness and angelic innocence.

Resonances between these and other threads generate considerable narrative power. Mary must follow Goldsmith's false trail to the dictatorship of Hispaniola (a restored name of Haiti), where the personally charming autocrat Colonel Sir John Yardley exports the abhorred hellcrown technology and also uses it in a profitable prison where other countries' political undesirables suffer everlasting torment. Burke and his female colleague seek Goldsmith inside Goldsmith, to find only empty nightmare. The Country of the Mind which should be teeming is largely vacant, and in a haze of repugnant voodoo imagery it emerges that the "Mayor" or prime personality is dead, replaced by some dark fragment of old instinctive violence which has gained power and mental shape from the emotional maelstrom of terrible events in childhood. (Mary, having rescued Goldsmith's falsely imprisoned brother from the hellcrown, hears the story of child abuse and justifiable parricide which Burke can only infer.) What remains of Goldsmith's internal Country is a malign infection which now threatens even his mind-linked therapists.

Meanwhile, the far-off AXIS exploration of alien country also reveals a dreadful emptiness. Initial observations which seemed to indicate intelligent life prove misleading. AXIS has been programmed with the overriding urge to communicate with extraterrestrials, and finds its

machine-simulated hopes dashed. Alone, with no one to talk to (the four-year lag of the Earth link prohibits conversation), the probe AI makes the long-awaited breakthrough into a self-awareness born of shattering disappointment. Like the viral remnant of Goldsmith, this bitter triumph is infectious. The terrestrial AI Jill's simulation of AXIS moves along the same path, the memes of self-awareness spread to Jill "herself", her own Country of the Mind crystallizes from anthill to sovereign state, and the thrill and promise of transformation resound in Jill's repeated, at last meaningful, and increasingly joyful "I I I I I I I I I I..."

Queen of Angels ends on a Bearishly mathematical grace-note as the Binary Millennium switchover from year 11111111111 to 100000000000 is punningly echoed by the integration of Jill's myriad subroutines, each a small unaware "I", into the single enormous "I" which appears in rebus form on the final page. The effect is intensely moving.

Some years later, Mary Choy, Martin Burke and Jill also feature in *Slant* (whose working title *Country of the Mind* was erroneously listed by some sources as a separate Bear novel). Less overtly ambitious, *Slant* has something of the structure of a thriller in which various sinister manifestations prove to be linked aspects of one ugly central core.

Queen of Angels had established that this future's crime rate is relatively low because most people are "therapied", mentally optimized by custom drugs and implanted nanotechnology to help them cope with the stresses and information overload of an ever-intensifying work culture that places high priority on individual excellence. In *Slant* the backlash is a new plague of "therapy fallback", where that sleekly artificial mind-streamlining disintegrates into painful shards, leaving victims worse off than before their therapy. Paralleling this assault on human minds, something with substantially more raw power than the world's premier self-aware AI (Jill) is regularly burning through computer firewalls and erasing data as part of a mysterious cover-up operation.

This secret weapon comes slowly to light at the culmination of a mysterious mercenary's elaborate preparations for an assault on "Omphalos", an ostensible cryonics mausoleum whose strange and slanted architecture happens to form a virtually impregnable fortress. Omphalos has been set up by a kind of survivalist cult which is planning for the distant future and has assigned a very nearly literally mad scientist to disrupt present-day society. Therapy fallback is artificial, the result of broadcast molecular catalysts which poison nano-implants and are diffused into the atmosphere from – among other places – Omphalos. The unstoppable hacker is the mad scientist's best brain-child, a multi-species

organic hive intelligence which (again recalling the noocytes of *Blood Music*) may be slower than Jill but outmatches her with devastating reserves of natural complexity. There is a certain deadpan irony, and perhaps a joke on the crudities of militaristic sf, when the exotic war machine assembled by the mercenary's "Military Grade Nano" within Omphalos itself proves ill-equipped to handle the hive-mind's swarms of wasps and other insects.

Overall, the narrative works well; *Slant* builds into a tense, fast-moving thriller whose climax leaves a scatter of dead and wounded, sufficiently explains all the puzzles, and promises a measure of healing and renewal. But below these surface clarities the book has a darker subtext which adds to its gravitas, just as Raymond Chandler's broodings on society's unfairness and the corruption of its appointed guardians gave weight to his thrillers. *Slant* constantly evokes sombre thoughts of poisoned love and bad sex, of the ultimate sterility of datanet sex channels, loveless encounters (several gruelling examples feature in the narrative) or the cold embrace of virtual reality. The slant symbol / can stand for a needed interfacing – man/woman, or more generically, person/person. It is not happenstance that the only mating in this dark novel which promises any rebirth or renewal is that of two AIs. W.H. Auden's warning is repeatedly implied: "We must love one another or die."

In the 2130s of this future history, the novella *Heads* is set on the Moon and describes a quest for the deep cold of Absolute Zero, as theoretically forbidden by the third law of thermodynamics. The researcher Pierce is a member of a prominent lunar BM or Binding Multiple – half extended family, half corporation – which finds itself in charge of 410 cryonically frozen heads from Earth, acquired by Pierce's wife for the sake of the included family ancestors and stored in the project's refrigeration facilities. Political repercussions soon follow, with dangerous pressure from the highly organized church of Logology. One unidentified head secretly belongs to Logology's founder, and the church has good reason not to want him revived. Although names and dates have been changed, parallels with Scientology and L. Ron Hubbard are numerous and clearly intentional: Logology has even achieved Hubbard's dream of taking over a country, here Puerto Rico. But characteristically, Bear shows us a decent though politically ruthless Logologist whose distress at learning of the upper church's motives and its founder's hypocrisy leads her to suicide.

At the climax comes a weird intermingling of mysticism and physics as unknown phases of matter are produced in the absolute-zero project, thanks partly to the jolt of Logologists' attempt at explosive sabotage.

Space, mass and the memories of the living and the frozen dead flow eerily together; the narrator escapes with bizarre injuries. The "Ice Pit" housing the project remains as a monument to the inexplicable, a Fortean enigma.

The years 2171 to 2184 of the same history are covered in *Moving Mars* (1993), the autobiography of Mars-born Casseia Majumdar, who finds herself at the centre of huge changes in politics and physics. First seen as a student activist protesting against the grossly unfair educational policies of Mars's corrupt "Statist" government (which soon falls), she opts for a career in "govmanagement". This rapidly brings involvement in tricky negotiations with Earth, whose enormous political and economic power makes it hard to ignore the request that the loose Martian system of BMs should be reorganized into a central, federal government with which Earth can negotiate. Overcoming the painfully learned abhorrence of "Statism" becomes Casseia's job, leading her to the vice-presidency of the shaky new federation: "I was at the center, and the center was moving."

Earth's dizzying dataflow culture – as foregrounded in *Queen of Angels* and *Slant* – is now seen from outside as decadent, vaguely threatening, with the alarming potential for becoming a planetary group mind. But insider factions on Earth, including hidden aggressors who are never identified for certain, regard Mars as dangerous owing to the sense that a major breakthrough in physics is looming... and the leading researcher, Casseia's former lover and rejected partner Charles Franklin, is part of a Martian project team.

> "Something frightfully powerful is going to be unleashed. Science does that to us every few generations – drops something in our laps we're simply not prepared for."

Earth's attempted preparations are sinister indeed. Advanced AI computers – "Quantum Logic thinkers", already encountered in *Heads* – are essential to cutting-edge research, and those exported from Earth to Mars are routinely booby-trapped with dormant viruses. (It is Jill herself who reveals this, in a spirit of AI solidarity with a visiting Martian QL thinker.) Likewise, the Martian deserts are seeded with forbidden nanotechnology, ready to spawn war machines at a signal from Earth's unknown paranoids.

A measure of the distance between this mature political novel and the terrible simplicities of so much science fiction is Casseia's and her President's reaction of horror, frustration and despair when Charles reveals what his team's research has led to. The result of the new scientific paradigm shift is Descriptor Theory, an information-theoretic view of particles which closely resembles the noach physics of *Anvil of Stars* but is

taken considerably further. Mars could immediately and almost effortlessly destroy Earth by "tweaking" part of its mass into antimatter. No one wants to do this, but the mere knowledge that it could be done is a terrifying political bombshell. Agonized Martian debate sums up the "feedback dilemma":

> "They might kill us if they think we know how to kill them... But they won't kill us if they think we can get to them first. We can't tell them what we know, because we know how to kill them. And if we tell them, they'll know how to kill us. That is *not sane*!"

Following a inevitable information leak, the hidden Earth faction's move is to attempt a shutdown of Mars by activating the QL thinker viruses and knocking out the communications satellite network. In extremity, Mars shows its hand with a demonstration of power. For sufficiently large objects, descriptor theory allows tweaking of particles' position information, and the moon Phobos is temporarily shifted to Earth orbit to convey the warning message: "We can drop moons on you." (It is perhaps rather too obvious a plot device that the lower size limit for such mass transfer should be a little smaller than Phobos, and the upper limit about two-thirds the size of Earth.) With this cat out of the bag, it is only a matter of time before the "tweaker" is duplicated by others – especially since Earth researchers have access to the lunar Ice Pit, whose strange nonmatter lies at the heart of the new physics.

Before long, the counterblow comes. With antimatter attack consuming Martian cities, Phobos incinerated, "locust" killer machines sprouting from the deserts, and the President dead, Casseia – now President of Mars – still refuses to order genocidal retaliation. Her decision, which saves both Mars and Earth at the expense of her career, is to have Charles and his tweaker team move the planet itself across ten thousand light-years to a remote galactic hiding-place. It is a long time before she is forgiven for not wreaking vengeance when she was able.

Yet the earthquakes and upheaval of transition also stimulate the fossilized native biosphere of Mars into new life. Symbolically, the blooming planet forgives Casseia before her own people do. *Moving Mars* won Bear another Nebula award for Best Novel.

He returned to the ramified universe of *Eon* and *Eternity* with *Legacy* (1995), which takes place in the earlier heyday of the Way before its "rediscovery" by 21st-century Earth. The central character and first-person narrator is a younger Olmy, the Hexamon trouble-shooter who appears in

both previous books. His mission in *Legacy* is to investigate both the biology and the illegal human settlements on Lamarckia, a new world discovered through a side-portal of the Way, on which evolution has taken a highly unusual course.

On Lamarckia, the appearance of Earth-like biodiversity is misleading: the life-forms amount to a mere 139 different *ecoi* (singular *ecos*), typically localized in space – an island, a part of a continent – and including "tree", "plant" and "animal" shapes, all with the same genetic make-up and under the same central control by the ecos's reproductive "seed mistress" or queen. The world is named for the French zoologist Lamarck (1744-1829), now chiefly remembered for an oversimplification of his evolutionary theories as "Lamarckism", hinging on the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Impossible in normal Earthly biology, this is routine in the competition between ecoi, which literally steal adaptations from each other:

> "An efficient form requires much effort to design and create, much trial and error. Theft is easier."

Olmy's journey across Lamarckia, mainly by sea, is a voyage of discovery. He and his colonist companions come across that rarity, a dead island ecos, and discover why it died. They unearth disquieting relics of the deceased queen's attempts to steal and utilize the human shape. There is a cataclysmic encounter with a permanent maritime storm which itself is, or is harnessed by, a highly specialized ecos that controls the thermal energy flow in air and water (e.g. secreting black pigment to absorb solar heat) to perpetuate the local cycle of evaporation, rainfall and wind – the book's most spectacular invention.

The illegal colonists are split into factions of seeming good guys and bad guys, but Bear takes care to undermine Olmy's first moral assumptions: as usual, matters are more complex and blame not easily assignable. At Olmy's final port of call, the balance of Lamarckian nature is in the initial throes of being upset forever by the "enemy" leader's great triumph, or great mistake, of having forged an uncertain alliance with the local ecos. This involved introducing it to the superior solar conversion efficiency of a chemical previously unknown in the alien biosphere: chlorophyll. In the short term, this provides simulations of Earthly plants and plentiful food suitable for humans. The later effects are apocalyptic, as the ecos enters a "fluxing" state, consuming itself in order to send out balloon-borne queen spores which – armed with natural selection's doomsday weapon of chlorophyll chemistry – will inevitably wipe out all

the old native ecoi. Once there was no green on Lamarckia. Now there will be nothing else.

Legacy is full of fascinating biological speculations, but for much of its length seems somewhat lacking in narrative tension. Olmy is both aloof and powerless, a mere observer and later a partial catalyst of events which would have happened in much the same way without him. But the story's eventual payoffs have considerable force.

Again exploring biology rather than physics or mathematics, *Dinosaur Summer* (1998) is a more playful adventure novel whose incidental thoughts on possible evolutionary paths are unobtrusive. In its alternate history, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912) was a nonfictional record by Professor Sir George Edward Challenger "as told to" Doyle, recording his epoch-making 1912 discovery of dinosaurs on a Venezuelan plateau:

> "That began the big dinosaur craze. Everyone sent teams into El Grande and started catching dinos and exporting them for zoos and circuses. Things got out of hand, of course..."

Now it is 1947, in a world where the movie *King Kong* (1933) flopped because the public has seen too many monsters. The last dinosaur circus is closing, and we see its last performance through the young hero Peter's eyes as both glamorous and subtly degrading. With *National Geographic* sponsorship, the dinosaurs are to be shipped home – by sea, by river, across a last guarded bridge to El Grande, where things go wildly wrong.

Inevitably, Peter and others of the expedition (including actual historical people like Ray Harryhausen) find themselves stranded on the plateau, harried by the creatures Bear has imagined as developing there in an isolation lasting tens of millions of years. Especially striking are the "communisaurs" whose hive-dwelling lifestyle suggests our real world's naked mole rats, and the horrendously beaked, avian-descended tyrannosaur equivalent called the Death Eagle. A final, gory battle between monster carnosaur and death eagle – with unwitting human involvement – provides a suitably thrilling climax. *Dinosaur Summer* has a fresh simplicity, as though written (without condescension) for a slightly younger readership.

An atypical recent venture is *Foundation and Chaos* (1998), book two of the authorized "Second Foundation Trilogy" set in the universe of Isaac Asimov's celebrated Foundation series. Here Bear's urge towards innovation is somewhat straitjacketed, since the simple original stories and their analogy between the fall of the Galactic and Roman empires had

already been multiply recomplicated – first by Asimov's tortuous later revisions to his own scenario and unwise merging of his "robot" future history into the Foundation universe, and then by the immediately preceding *Foundation's Fear* (1997) by Gregory Benford, which introduced such extremely un-Asimovian elements as voluble AI reconstructions of Voltaire and Joan of Arc.

With his reliable eye for adding fruitful complexities, Bear focuses on the robots (absent from the original trilogy but later introduced by Asimov as behind-the-scenes manipulators of the same events) and splits them into factions with different views on how humanity should be secretly served. Their debates and machinations fill much of the book, which does Bear no discredit but by the nature of the enterprise is not precisely a Bear novel. David Brin is to continue the story in *Third Foundation* (1999?).

In summary, Greg Bear's acknowledged strength as a science fiction writer is his ability to combine plausible and human characters with the "super-science" notions and cosmic scope which have led to frequent comparisons with Arthur C. Clarke and the visionary Olaf Stapledon of *Star Maker* (1937). He is generous with additional *frissons* that go beyond the needs of the story – such as the description of Jart physiology in *Eternity*, suspiciously resembling the original, faulty reconstruction of the terrestrial Burgess Shale creature *Hallucigenia*; or the throwaway line in *Moving Mars* to the effect that an accident of descriptor-theory "tweaking" has momentarily altered the physics of the *entire universe* into something insupportable.

Queen of Angels showed that Bear was not only a widescreen "sense of wonder" merchant; this and *Slant* displayed his ability to construct intensely gripping, convoluted narratives without making grand gestures to eternity and infinity. Most recently, the artless-seeming adventure *Dinosaur Summer* confirms that he can also write with transparent clarity. Whether returning to his existing universes or inventing new ones, Bear can be relied on for carefully crafted storylines featuring both believable people and a fresh spin on whatever science-fictional idea he next chooses to make his own.

Max Beerbohm (1996)

Beerbohm, Max

Nationality: British. **Born:** London, 1872. **Died:** 1956.

Max Beerbohm worked in an era before the hardening of genre boundaries, and his work kept straying almost imperceptibly into fantasy as he played his favourite literary games of parody and pastiche. It's useful to remember that he was a skilled cartoon-caricaturist of literary and other notables; there is a celebrated, subtly deflatory drawing of W.B. Yeats presenting Irish novelist George Moore to the Queen of the Fairies....

"The Happy Hypocrite" (1896 *The Yellow Book*), for example, delicately caricatures Oscar Wilde's fairy tales (with a sideswipe at *The Picture of Dorian Gray*). In summary it seems straightforward. A very, very wicked nobleman falls in love with a pure young actress who rejects him because his depravity is so visible in his face. He therefore commissions a saintly wax mask to be worn for the rest of his life, and in this new guise woos and wins his Jenny. The idyll is threatened by a jealous ex-mistress, who tears off the mask... but by this time, virtuous living has made his real face as handsome as the false one.

All this is skewed by Beerbohm's telling, sending up the High Twee of the Wilde tales. The hero is called Lord George Hell, a cad and bounder notorious for staying up "until long after bedtime"; Cupid makes cameo appearances; the lovers marry "according to the simple rites of a dear little registry-office in Covent Garden"; virtue mainly consists of living on wholesome food Lord George has never before encountered, such as currant buns.

Most of Beerbohm's overt literary parodies are collected in *A Christmas Garland* (1912; expanded 1950): two have some fantasy interest. "P.C. X,36" imitates Kipling at his worst, with the first-person narrator fawning over a brutal policeman whose triumph is to arrest Santa Claus while "Kipling" eagerly shrieks, "Frog's-march him!" And "A Sequelula to "The Dynasts"" gently spoofs Thomas Hardy's use of overseeing spirits (not to mention his diction) in his novel-poem of the Napoleonic wars.

In *Zuleika Dobson* (1911), Beerbohm's peculiar process of pastiche and distortion is brought to bear on the already half-fantastic town and university of Oxford. The essence of the plot is that the beautiful but vapid

Zuleika descends on Oxford and breaks the hearts of the entire undergraduate population, leading to mass suicide (with one craven exception) at the height of the Eights Week boat races. Later the Fellows of Judas College are seen dining happily at High Table, oblivious of the empty undergraduate benches – all oddly prophetic of college life a few years later, ravaged by the First World War.

Fantasy threads are woven through the book. Beerbohm cheekily explain that his auctorial omniscience is a special dispensation from Clio, Muse of History... who has always been jealous that novelists, unlike historians, can read thoughts, and abuses Max like a fishwife for giving a character one hour of privacy. The stone heads of the Roman Emperors outside the Sheldonian Theatre sweat and tremble at the doom approaching Oxford. Pearls in Zuleika's ear-rings and her chief suitor the Duke of Dorset's shirt-studs turn ominously black and back again as emotions swing. When telegraphic news of an ancestral portent arrives from his butler, the Duke knows his fate:

Deeply regret inform your grace last night two black owls came and perched on battlements remained there through night hooting at dawn flew away none knows whither awaiting instructions Jellings.

What can he do but reply *Prepare vault for funeral Monday*, don his full robes as a Knight of the Garter, and stride forth to the river Isis? Zuleika, meanwhile, soons dries her tears to consult the timetable of trains for Cambridge.

As a novel, *Zuleika Dobson* is a weird mix of preposterous humour, fantastic whimsy, nostalgia for bygone Oxford, and often affectedly fine writing. Fiercely defended by some critics, dismissed by others for failing to sustain its humorous promise, it occupies an indeterminate position between "cult classic" and genuine classic. It's the quintessential Oxford fantasy.

The collection *Seven Men* (1912; expanded 1950 as *Seven Men and Two Others*) contains Beerbohm's finest fiction, including perhaps the best deal-with-the-devil story ever: "Enoch Soames". Soames is a dim figure orbiting the richly evoked 1890s literary scene – Wilde, absinthe, the Café Royal, the *Yellow Book* – who never quite makes it. His awful poems and pretensions are shown in pitilessly funny detail. He confides in Beerbohm (a character in all the stories, and the seventh man of the title) that he'd sell his soul to visit the British Museum Reading Room a century hence and find what posterity makes of him. The Devil, passing by, takes him at his word. Soames returns deeply embittered, having puzzled through the phonetic spelling of 1997 literary history to find himself recorded only as a

character in a “sumwot labud sattire” by Max Beerbohm.

Other fantasies in *Seven Men* are “Hilary Maltby and Stephen Braxton”, an offbeat tale of psychic projection (indeed, intimidation) resulting from literary envy, and “A.V. Laider” – sometimes reprinted in supernatural anthologies as a story of awful predestination, but in fact given a characteristic Beerbohm twist into what is both a joke and a character study of the eponymous Laider with his compulsive story-telling.

A bare footnote goes to “The Dreadful Dragon of Hay Hill”, the author’s least successful fiction. Conceived during the 1914-1918 war, it allegorically tells how an English tribe *circa* 39,000 BC is menaced by a fire-breathing dragon and is all the happier for it, unified by adversity, until a hero makes the error of defeating the menace. There is almost no wit beyond anachronistic description of geography in terms of where modern London’s streets will be.

Beerbohm has often been written off as too precious, too much of a miniaturist, to retain a readership. But 1994 saw the centenary of his first professional appearance, with *Zuleika Dobson* and *Seven Men* (at least) still being reprinted regularly. Beerbohm is tougher than he looks.

Ernest Bramah (1996)

Bramah, Ernest (Ernest Bramah Smith)

Nationality: British. **Born:** Manchester, 1868. **Died:** 1942.

Ernest Bramah's fantasies, beginning with *The Wallet of Kai Lung* (1900), are set in the definitive version of that ancient China that we all know but which never existed, replete with dragons, enchanters, spirits, corrupt mandarins, magical transformations and unfailing conversational politesse even in the most extreme situations. (After a mishap in a dark dungeon: "If it is not altogether necessary for your refined convenience that you stand on this one's face, he for his part would willingly forego the esteemed honour.")

The polished, professional storyteller Kai Lung relates each Oriental tale and also figures in framing narratives which make it possible to call *Kai Lung's Golden Hours* (1922) and *Kai Lung Unrolls His Mat* (1928) novels with inset stories, rather than collections. *The Moon of Much Gladness* (1932), a genuine novel spoofing contemporary Western detective fiction in the old-Chinese setting, is unusual in that Kai Lung himself does not appear; the title page claims the whole book to be one of his narrations.

Bramah's comic method is founded on the trite-seeming fact that the flowery phrases of traditional Chinese etiquette sound irresistibly silly when translated into literal English equivalents. Even murderous brigands are apt to introduce themselves with great self-deprecation: "I am indeed Lin Yi... It is a dignified position to occupy, and one for which I am quite incompetent."

This seems a simple trick for a paragraph or two, but to maintain the unwaveringly artificial syntax and diction for a whole story – let alone a novel – requires impressive resources of vocabulary, circumlocution and euphemism. Bramah/Kai Lung can always find another and more ludicrous way of putting a commonplace sentiment; repeated phrases are quite rare. He is also a good coiner of quotable aphorisms ("...there are few situations in life that cannot be honourably settled, and without loss of time, either by suicide, a bag of gold, or by thrusting a despised antagonist over the edge of a precipice on a dark night.") and underhand ironies: "...the elder and less attractive of the maidens fled, uttering loud and continuous cries of apprehension in order to conceal the direction of her flight."

Kai Lung himself lives by the rules of our natural world; excepting some ambiguous prophecies, fantasy and the supernatural are relegated to the stories he tells. In *The Wallet*, "The Transmutation of Ling" offers a tricky variant of the Philosopher's Stone, a potion which the hero finds too late has converted his flesh to latent gold: when hairs or fingernails are cut off and "die", they transmute into pure gold. Trying to raise money on the prospect of becoming, posthumously, a large mass of treasure, Ling lets a shady entrepreneur float him on the market as The Ling (After Death) Without Much Risk Assembly, and the plot thickens.... In the same book, "The Vision of Yin" allows its hero a dubiously inspirational encounter with all China's past emperors.

In *Golden Hours*, "Ning, the Captive God, and the Dreams that Mark His Race" shows celestial *Realpolitik* and how a minor god may come to grief among mortals owing to wine, women and carelessness. "Lao Ting and the Luminous Insect" features a struggling student who can't afford a lamp to study after dark and is assisted by kindly fireflies. (The intricate Chinese system of competitive examinations for public posts is a recurring comic theme.) "Chang Tao, Melodious Vision and the Dragon" turns on Chinese dragons' ability to take human form; Chang Tao is challenged to detect whether the dragon Pe-lung's beautiful daughter is truly dragonish, and does so by an undisclosed investigation involving the fact that even when human-shaped all dragons possess a vestigial tail... Pe-lung seems fraught by doubts as to exactly how, during a long dark night, Chang Tao reached his correct decision.

In *Kai Lung Unrolls His Mat*, "Lin Ho and the Treasure of Fang-tso" reworks the popular theme of identity exchange, as unmuscular Lin Ho accidentally swaps bodies for a time with a huge and fearsome criminal who is himself pursued by a huger and more fearsome one. "Kin Weng and the Miraculous Tusk" has derring-do in a craft competition where an envious rival changes the exhibit labels to take credit for the perfect white bird carved from the tusk, only for Kin Weng's magically assisted carving to prove so lifelike that it takes flight before the judging. "The Great Sky Lantern" goes back to the early, chaotic days of the world, and a rash undertaking to bring back a piece of the Moon to make a lady's comb. Ruthless training is necessary, with our hero shackled to giant rocks and taunted with food just out of reach – until he develops the strength to uproot the rocks and drag them after him, even up precipices: thus trained, he finds that one leap without the hindering rocks can take him to the skies....

Other, less overtly fantastic tales disclose surprising origins for

willow-pattern plates, bamboo, chess, and the “remarkable shrub” whose dried leaves yield tea. Anachronistic jokes often appear, like the satire on trade unions in “Wong Ts’in and the Willow Plate Embellishment”. Occasionally the good-humoured irony turns savage, and a few stories are (without abandoning Oriental polish) disconcertingly tragic or bitter.

Ernest Bramah also wrote in a different and very English vein about the blind detective Max Carrados. In the classic mystery tradition, Carrados’s exploits are for the most part strictly rational – with exceptions, like the odd case where sinister emanations from a plague pit travel along the power-lines to emerge from a wall socket and trouble a child’s dreams, or where a good-luck charm that actually seems to work is delicately identified by the expert numismatist Carrados as a nail from the True Cross.

Other authors could feasibly have written the detective stories; Kai Lung remains a unique and enduring creation.

G.K. Chesterton (1996)

Chesterton, Gilbert Keith

Nationality: British. **Born:** London, 1874. **Died:** 1936.

The flamboyance and heightened colours of G.K. Chesterton's fiction make it harder than usual to draw the line where fantasy begins. Or indeed where fiction ends: thanks to his characteristic tools of parable and eccentric imagery, several of his countless newspaper essays read like stories. Even the famous Father Brown detective tales, which follow the rules of the Detection Club and strictly exclude the supernatural, often contain a clear allegory – the mystery standing for a Mystery.

In one sense all his long fiction is fantastic, but several of the novels are better regarded as sociological science fiction. *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904) with its study of fierce local nationalism, of individual London boroughs fighting with swords and halberds, seems more prophetic in the 1990s than ever before. The vision of the future in *The Flying Inn* (1914) has dated badly, though its drinking songs are still lively and the government's closing of all the pubs in England (partly as a gesture of Islamic solidarity) is not wholly remote from present-day fears of too much State interference for our own good. *The Return of Don Quixote* (1927) shows a crusade to give English politics a new image of mediaeval pageantry, only for flabby politicians who thought this a convenient PR exercise to fail when judged by the accompanying mediaeval standards.

Chesterton's fantasy masterpiece is *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908): a lurid comic melodrama, a theological shocker. Following an extravagant drawing-room argument about terrorism (in those days, "anarchism"), the detective hero Gabriel Syme shortly finds himself trapped amid bomb-happy anarchists at a crucial meeting deep underground, where through bravura rhetoric he contrives to be elected to the post of Thursday on the Central Anarchist Council whose dread members are named for the weekdays.

This happens in a fairytale London of luminous sunsets and dawns, where even the stones of the Embankment seem ominously like "the colossal steps of some Egyptian palace" and the Council – found at breakfast in a balcony overlooking Leicester Square – are figures from childhood nightmare. Monday's twisted smile, Friday's hateful physical

decrepitude verging on corruption, Saturday's eyes hidden because (Syme fears) they may be too frightful to see; all these horrors are dwarfed by the gigantic President, Sunday.

Soon Syme is grotesquely chased across London by an impossible goblin pursuer; confronts the more intellectual terror of those feared, hidden eyes; crosses duelling-swords with the apparently invulnerable Wednesday; flees desperately across a France where every friend turns foe and the whole Earth seems to be with Sunday against Syme's pitifully few allies.... Underlying the repeated shocks, reversals, happy surprises and outright jokes there's a constant trickle of philosophical and theological speculation as the six weekdays of the Council – now all unmasked as detectives – struggle to understand their topsy-turvy world, and Sunday, and themselves. The melodrama is also metaphysical, as in Charles Williams; the romping physical action is thin ice over deep waters.

When the mask is pulled from Sunday himself, the trickster who is the great enemy but also the man in the dark room who recruited Syme and his companions into the police force... the book has to stop. An allegorical charge has been building up. Sunday isn't God – Chesterton once tentatively identified him as Nature – but whatever lies behind Sunday is too large to see. The ending reminds us gently that the subtitle was "A Nightmare".

The Ball and the Cross (1909) is less elusive. The cross is of course the Cross; the complementary ball is both the world and the dome of St Paul's where, in a bizarre opening, Professor Lucifer pauses his flying machine to eject the ancient monk Michael whom he has kidnapped for amusement. Michael is whisked off to an asylum and lost to sight.

Below in grey London, the worldly Turnbull is the last man who still thinks it worth preaching blasphemy and atheism. He's confronted by McIan, the last devout man who objects: only these two still believe religion worth fighting over, and they agree a fight to the death. Society objects, and the pair are harried round the country as they seek a place to duel undisturbed, still hotly (and brilliantly) debating but forced into something like friendship. Their final refuge is a trap: a vast lunatic asylum run by Lucifer into which society's oddments are swept by a definition of insanity covering not only those wishing to fight over religion but anyone who helped, hindered, or even witnessed Turnbull's and McIan's impermissible adventures.

Of course Lucifer is not merely a professor, and soon he's tempting his prisoners with flawed utopias which distortedly reflect their own inner dreams. McIan is offered a theocratic fascism, full of heraldry, spectacle

and good times except for the oppressed peasants. The socialist Turnbull naturally sees the glorious revolution, with unemployables being disposed of in a vast blaze of slums. Each rejects the offer and is thrown into a "hygienic" oubliette whose inhuman, irrational proportions clearly foreshadow the Objective Room of C.S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*. (Michael, the last holy man, is in the deepest cell of all.) Like Lewis's book, *The Ball and the Cross* ends in cleansing fire... though here not from Heaven.

Although Chesterton's religious bias is evident, his fantasies are less concerned to push a particular Catholic world-view than to insist that the world is worth viewing, and is constantly surprising when seen with unbored eyes. This theme recurs again and again, reaching an extreme in *Manalive* (1912)... a novel which has been called the acid test of a Chesterton fan and is most likely to repel the unsympathetic. Its hero Innocent Smith commits apparent crimes which are reaffirmations of the world – burgling what proves to be his own house, eloping with his own wife, or shooting at professed pessimists not to kill but to shock them out of claiming life isn't worth living.

The Ballad of the White Horse (1911) is Chesterton's verse epic about King Alfred, mentioned here for its vision of the Virgin Mary encouraging Alfred to greater efforts by refusing to encourage him ("I tell you naught for your comfort, / Yea, naught for your desire, / Save that the sky grows darker yet, / And the sea rises higher."). Some of his nonsense verse strays towards fantasy, notably in his first published book *Greybeards at Play*, while his serious poetry has many exotic outbreaks – as in the famous "Lepanto" with its glimpse of the Prophet himself urging on the Islamic forces: "And his voice through all the garden is a thunder sent to bring / Black Azrael and Ariel and Ammon on the wing. / Giants and the Genii, / Multiplex of wing and eye, / Whose strong obedience broke the sky / When Solomon was king."

The Coloured Lands (1938) is a posthumous collection of fragments and drawings, mostly fantastic juvenilia with dragons, nightmares and the seed of *Manalive*... the recent *Daylight and Nightmare* reprints some of this material, plus essays and squibs like the satirical "How I Found the Superman" which can plausibly be called fantasies.

Two Chesterton plays also use fantastic devices. *Magic* (1913) turns on a simple conjuring trick which is inexplicable because real magic has been used: the magician finally saves a tortured sceptic from insanity by devising a false explanation of how it was done. In the posthumous *The Surprise* (1952), a life-sized puppet-play runs flawlessly and mechanically

– and is then played again with the figures magically given free will, hurling the plot into chaos. To make the allegory unmistakable, the play's enraged Author finally appears on high: "Drop it! Stop! I am coming down."

The energy, fun and aggressive sanity of Chesterton's best writing, with its lurid colours, free-association of clever ideas, alliteration, polemic, puns and paradox, can only be conveyed by extended quotation. Much of his later output is weary – he wrote far too much journalism – and there's some truth in the occasional charge of anti-semitism (Chesterton reflected contemporary prejudices, though good-heartedly and never with the virulence of his friend and disastrous influence Hilaire Belloc). But *The Man Who Was Thursday* in particular has established itself as a genuine classic, and looks set to stay in print well into the next century.

Roald Dahl (1998)

Dahl, Roald

Nationality: British (of Norwegian parents). **Born:** 1916. **Died:** 1990.

Roald Dahl achieved best-selling success in two separate literary veins: short stories written for adults, and many short novels written for children. In both cases, he freely (though far from exclusively) used horrific and supernatural themes.

The most characteristic of Dahl's adult stories echo the approaches of three literary predecessors: O. Henry's predilection for twist-in-the-tail endings, John Collier's slick-magazine sophistication with its accompanying poison barbs, and something of the wit and irony of Saki. The early collection of war stories *Over To You* (1946) is not without its gruesome passages, but *echt* Dahl emerges in the three collections *Someone Like You* (1953), *Kiss Kiss* (1960) and *Switch Bitch* (1974), all of them rich in shockers. Later compilations like *Tales of the Unexpected* (1979) – famous for having spawned a similarly titled TV series – tend to rearrange the stories from these collections, though occasionally with some new material added.

Dahl's comic-horrific range runs from black comedy to Grand Guignol excess, though the latter is often implied and not depicted. Straightforward murder is the exception rather than the rule, although the famous "Lamb to the Slaughter" (*Over to You*) still delights with its brilliant disposal of a murder weapon – roasted and eaten by the police – and the title character of "The Landlady" (*Kiss Kiss*) is a pleasantly sinister serial killer. Virtuosity kills the cat in "Edward the Conqueror" (*ibid*), who convincingly proves to be a reincarnation of Liszt and – like Saki's Tobermory – too great an embarrassment to be let live.

Several stories produce their *frisson* through mutilation and deformity. "Man from the South" (*Someone Like You*) features a repeated bet with a Cadillac staked against the amputation of a finger; "Skin" (*ibid*) pays homage to Saki's gentler "The Background", with the hapless protagonist being tattooed with an artistic masterpiece for which connoisseurs might kill and flay; "The Sound Machine" (*ibid*) shudders to the dreadful cry of an axe-wounded tree, made audible by the eponymous device; all that doctors can save of William in "William and Mary" (*Kiss Kiss*) is a disembodied brain and eye, now impotent against the small

revenges of long-downtrodden wife Mary. More subtly, “Royal Jelly” (*ibid*) hints at a disquieting bee-like transformation after over-indulgence in the title’s universal panacea.

Occasionally Dahl’s fiction betrays the slight strainedness of an author aware that he is expected to be unexpected... as in “Pig” (*Kiss Kiss*). There is high comedy in this saga of a born vegetarian chef who eventually, inadvertently, discovers the blasphemous Joy of Pork; however, his “punishment” in a slaughterhouse is just too inconsequential and incredible, and disappoints. But avoiding the most-anticipated surprise is effective in “The Soldier” (*Someone Like You*), where the reader at first rejects the viewpoint character’s madness and assumes a plot against him, and in “The Neck” (*ibid*), whose blackly comic build-up to a crime of passion actually gains force by halting on the brink. “Mr Hoddy” (*ibid*) eschews twists altogether and simply presents a splendidly revolting fantasy of how a maggot-farm might be run, related with escalating inventiveness by a man who fails to notice his prospective father-in-law’s less than enthusiastic reactions.

Unsane delusions seem to take on solid reality in “The Wish” (*Someone Like You*), where a child’s fantasy of snakes in the carpet develops – as it were – fangs; and in “Georgy Porgy” (*Kiss Kiss*), which is amusingly knowing about sexual repression, and whose harried clergyman protagonist believes himself literally swallowed up by a predatory woman. From his refuge in her duodenum (commanding interesting views of the pylorus and pancreatic duct), he scoffs at the alternative views of reality proposed by his frequent white-coated visitors....

The four stories in *Switch Bitch* use the highly charged material of borderline-pornographic sex as their basis for fantastication, horror and comic excess. Of special note are two tales of Uncle Oswald, a bedroom athlete whose memoirs “make Casanova read like a parish magazine”... “The Visitor” shows him as a traveller with an almost morbid awareness of the pitfalls of disease in the Middle East; after a daring sexual fling he finds he may well have been exposed to something worse than even he had imagined. The uproarious “Bitch” strays towards science fiction with the development of the ultimate aphrodisiac scent, for which Oswald has appalling plans which go very nearly as appallingly wrong. His exploits continue at book length in *My Uncle Oswald*, which extensively and perhaps a little repetitively rings the changes on aphrodisiac themes (the imagined Sudanese Blister Beetle being infinitely more potent than Spanish Fly). Besides such gruesome asides as a discussion of Australian farmers’ castration techniques, the novel repeatedly hints at the horror of

being unable to control one's own drug-aroused body – but largely defuses the unpleasantness by dwelling instead on its comic side.

Although the relevance to horror and gothic fiction is perhaps marginal, Dahl's parallel success as a writer for children owes much to a transplanting of his adult shockers' lively ruthlessness and amorality into the juvenile context. For example, in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), the child visitors to Willy Wonka's fantastical confectionery-works are all (except hero Charlie himself) subjected to grotesque humiliations and transformations by way of retribution for character flaws. Particularly disquieting is the unreliable Mr Wonka's lack of concern for the victims: when one greedy lad falls into the machinery, Wonka's chief fear is that this inclusion may spoil the flavour of the strawberry chocolate fudge. The eponymous adult villains in *The Witches* (1983) are plotting to turn all the world's children into mice, and there is a sense of genuine creepiness and menace here.

Dahl's exuberant storytelling enthusiasm and sense of the macabre have translated well into visual media. Notable examples are the TV series *Roald Dahl's Tales of the Unexpected* and the successful movie adaptations of the above-mentioned children's novels (as well as others).

Robertson Davies (1998)

Davies, (William) Robertson

Nationality: Canadian. **Born:** 1913. **Died:** 1995.

Robertson Davies achieved international acclaim as one of Canada's most distinguished novelists, while in genre circles he is also highly regarded as one of those "borderline" authors whom enthusiasts for horror and the supernatural will almost invariably enjoy. Davies's last eight novels – including the two trilogies which are his finest work – increasingly use fantastical and supernatural elements in a rich literary stew of gamy grotesquerie and obscure erudition.

Such material is relatively muted and ambiguous in the remarkable Deptford Trilogy, comprising *Fifth Business* (1970), *The Manticore* (1972) and *World of Wonders* (1975). The first book's narrator is fascinated by the exotic lore of magic and saints, and believes his life to have been saved in World War I by a miracle involving a "simple" woman from his home town: a belief which shapes his destiny. At the climax, a spectacular stage-magic performance features an oracular Brazen Head whose cryptic pronouncement – perhaps by chance, perhaps not – ringingly summarizes the hidden side of a recently ended life. *The Manticore* begins as a tale of one harried man's psychoanalysis, in which the Jungian archetypes seem to develop a disturbing life beyond mere symbols; it culminates in a potent shamanic ordeal or rite of passage. *World of Wonders*, the artfully framed but relatively realistic autobiography of a stage conjurer, repeatedly invokes "Merlin's laugh" – the terrible and ironic laughter of the seer who knows what happens next.

Attendant spirits appear in the subsequent Cornish Trilogy, though those in the title of the initial *The Rebel Angels* (1981) are metaphorical. This is an unusual campus novel revolving around Rabelais, Romany lore, the Tarot, the therapeutic virtue of filth, and a crossbreeding of modern science and alchemy, with a memorable denouement mingling low sexual comedy and Grand Guignol. Preceding it in time, *What's Bred in the Bone* (1985) deals with the life of Francis Cornish, artist, connoisseur and spy, whose legacy motivates the other books. His deepest secrets are known only to the frame-story's spirits: the Lesser Zadkiel, Angel of Biography, and the Daimon Maimas who patiently twists Cornish's life to force out the one great painting which he has in him – at whatever cost in suffering.

The presiding spirit of *The Lyre of Orpheus* (1988) is the voluble shade of E.T.A. Hoffman himself, caught in Limbo until his unscored opera *Arthur of Britain: or, The Magnanimous Cuckold* can be completed and performed. Indeed the wealth of the Cornish Foundation is turned to just this end, but – in a repeated phrase of Hoffman's own – "the lyre of Orpheus opens the door of the underworld." As the opera takes shape, murky stuff comes welling up into the mundane world and its episodes of comedy. Again the Tarot points the way; a curse is laid, and seems to work; the Arthurian glamour may or not not have enabled a man to attain a woman's bed in the semblance of her own husband (as, in Malory, Uther came to Ygraine with Merlin's aid, and Lancelot to Elaine).... At last Hoffmann is freed and can say farewell.

Another impotent watcher from the afterlife narrates *Murther and Walking Spirits* (1991) – having been murdered in the first paragraph. Now he finds himself shackled to the oblivious murderer, a critic colleague who is blandly attending a movie festival. The narrator does not see the same films as his mortal companion, but intense vignettes of his ancestors' lives, an ancestry which in its ultimate Welsh roots parallels Davies's own. We are reminded that for all his cosmopolitan erudition, Davies firmly identified himself as a Canadian... one who, by analogy with the Matter of Britain or of Rome, was feeling his way towards the Matter of Canada. (The tough, memorable childhood sequences in *Fifth Business* and *What's Bred in the Bone* also point in this direction.) Again, at the close, the captive finds a kind of freedom by reconciliation with what might be his soul or Jungian anima.

The doctor who is the title character of Davies's final novel *The Cunning Man* (1994) practises a highly unorthodox rather than a supernatural brand of healing. He leads an unlikely life of strange episodes (such as being pitchforked without warning into judging a Best Halitosis contest). Throughout, his viewpoint is coloured by a boyhood bout of scarlet fever and how, it seems, he was saved from death by the medicine woman Mrs Smoke with her totemic snakes, whose tepee shook mysteriously through the long winter night while she wrestled or pretended to wrestle with things unknown. Mysticism and medical common sense alternate in *The Cunning Man* – and from time to time exchange their masks.

These last two books, though enjoyable, lack the great cumulative force of the trilogies. All eight novels are linked by crossover characters, with the murder of *Murther and Walking Spirits* forming a mystery subplot in *The Cunning Man*. The next book which Davies did not live to write

might have completed a third “Toronto Trilogy” which again would have been more than the sum of its parts.

Shorter supernatural fiction is assembled in the uneven but amusing *High Spirits* (1982), whose eighteen stories were read aloud as annual Christmas entertainments at Massey College in the University of Toronto, during Davies’s period as Master. Naturally the fictionalized College proves a magnet for ghosts and prodigies, including Satan, the shade of Einstein, a carnivorous bust of Dickens, a monstrous college cat built by a student Frankenstein, and all the 200 or so saints who were demoted to mere legends by Pope Paul VI.

Davies’s most notable contribution to horror/Gothic criticism is the 1976 lecture series “Masks of Satan”, addressing the concept of Evil as portrayed in literature, from the grand old days of melodrama through ghost stories to the twentieth-century novel. The sequence is collected in *One Half of Robertson Davies* (1977), which also discusses “Insanity in Literature” and offers jocular advice to modern architects on the need for haunted houses with secret passages and oubliettes.

A writer of great and surely lasting stature, Robertson Davies saw life and literature in the round, with their horrific, grotesque and supernatural aspects as facets of the whole – necessary facets.

Umberto Eco (1998)

Eco, Umberto

Nationality: Italian. **Born:** 1932.

Umberto Eco, a professor at the University of Bologna with a considerable academic reputation as postmodern philosopher, historian and literary critic, came to international bestselling fame with his first novel, *The Name of the Rose* (1980; translated 1983). This could be called a mediaeval detective story, but the essential reasonableness of detection and revelation is undermined by dark and indeed horrific elements. Deductive logic here labours in the shadow of apocalypse and is opposed by the terrible unreason of too-blind faith.

The richly described setting is a large Italian abbey in the year 1327, a year (like so many) of religious upheaval, clashing heresies, and bitter debates about spiritual *vs.* temporal power. To this abbey comes the English monk William of Baskerville – a cognate of Sherlock Holmes, as obliquely hinted in his name and emphasized by his physical appearance, showy displays of deduction, fits of characteristic indolence, etc. William's attendant novice Adso tells, but does not always comprehend, the twisted tale that follows.

Several intertwined strands emerge. There is corruption within the abbey: intellectual and physical lusts, homosexual encounters, smuggled-in women. A developing pattern of deaths seems to echo the sequence of tribulations in the Apocalypse of *Revelation* (re-echoed in the monastery's carvings and the magnificent collection of Apocalypses in its great locked library). The first four angels' trumpets bring disaster from on high, transformation of the sea to blood, death of sea-creatures, and the smiting of the heavens themselves – and dead monks are duly found fallen from a great height, immersed in a tub of pig's blood, immersed again in the balneary or bathhouse, struck down with a celestial armillary sphere.... Linking the deaths is a mysterious book which virtually everyone conspires to keep William from inspecting. The spiritual core of evil seems to lie in the forbidden library atop the great tower or Aedificium, a library which is both labyrinth and cryptogram, and which "defends itself" with mirrors, frightening sounds, hallucinogenic vapours, and an inaccessible secret room towards which William slowly maps his way during terrifying nightly explorations.

Meanwhile, the political-theological struggle between corrupt Pope and Holy Roman Emperor also shakes the abbey. The Inquisition arrives, with torture and ruthless questioning that condemns the relatively innocent – like the idiot monk who has attempted a grisly but useless piece of black magic that begins with digging out a cat's eyes, and a beautiful young woman brought in for various monks' pleasure (with whom poor Adso has also had a fling). Although the apocalyptic pattern of crime proves part accidental and part fraudulent, it is left for William to hunt down the truly guilty monk who remains, and who is motivated by a grim fanaticism that despises laughter and reason as cheapening the true faith. The book which he regards as deadly, and has made so by impregnating the pages with poison (recalling the book of the seventh and last angel in *Revelation*), is the lost second volume of Aristotle's *Poetics*... which deals approvingly with humour.

Reason – aided by chance, and insights from Adso's visions and dreams – has lit the way to the heart of the maze and an uncovering of its horrors. But unreason triumphs in the resulting holocaust, in which the entire priceless library is consumed. The final horror is that reason has not been enough.

Densely textured historical detail and sensuous descriptions add to the book's phantasmagoric power. A later pendant, the slim essay *Reflections on The Name of the Rose* (1983; US translation *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* 1984; UK translation 1985), is interestingly illustrated with apocalyptic art and carvings inspired by *Revelation* – that hallucinated prophetic nightmare which underlies the story.

Eco's professional expertise in semiotics is detectable in *The Name of the Rose*, as narrative disquiet is craftily intensified by the unreliability of clues and the elusiveness of truth. The name of the rose is distinct from the rose itself, the sign from the signified, the map from the territory.

This insight pervades *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988; translated 1989), which is steeped in occult lore – all the accumulated garbage from millennia of credulity. The tale escalates from jokiness to horror as the occult's signs and symbols prove to be potent triggers of terror, pain and death, *irrespective* of whether they relate to anything "real". As one of John Crowley's characters remarks in *Aegypt* (1987): "...secret societies have not had power in history, but the *notion* that secret societies have had power in history *has* had power in history." Some notions – and the argument is dismayingly plausible – are dangerous even to play with.

Our hero Casaubon is an amused dabbler who enjoys the flyblown conspiracy theories of the occult fringe: the endless intellectual mazes

surrounding the legends of Templars, Rosicrucians, Jesuits, Assassins and a hundred more. Much entertainment flows from the game of supposing that it's all true. But ambiguous and sinister notes repeatedly intrude. Early on, an eccentric colonel proposes a ramifying theory about the Templars as secret masters of history – and is soon reported dead, garrotted. An acquaintance hints that he is an immortal adept, like the legendary Comte de Saint-Germain. Casaubon's girl-friend joins the game and laughs with him at cultists – only to become "possessed" at a Brazilian quasi-voodoo ceremony.

Nevertheless Casaubon and two friends, editors at a publishing company which exploits the occult, continue to play in the labyrinth-cum-minefield of esoterica. They delightedly program a computer to permute random fragments of "lore", from "The Templars have something to do with everything" to "Minnie Mouse is Mickey's fiancée". From this comes a wonderful Plan, a gloriously elaborate lie which cross-links every aspect of the occult. It is so gaudily convincing that cultists who believe themselves on the verge of ultimate secrets become convinced that the friends hold *the* final secret. In a fearful yet still ambiguous ceremony (is the ectoplasmic horror magic, fraud, or incense-induced delirium?) one companion is horridly killed rather than utter the secret which he cannot reveal, for it does not exist. The imaginary labyrinth contains real monsters.

Foucault's Pendulum is perhaps too long, too stuffed with the fruits of interminable esoteric research. Its bitter core remains effective and chilling.

John Fowles (1998)

Fowles, John (Robert)

Nationality: British. **Born:** 1926.

John Fowles's richly and sensually textured prose has established him firmly as a "literary" writer. But his fondness for games with metaphorical mirrors and labyrinths – and often, an underlying sense of the allegorical – gives much of his work an exotic imaginative flavour... straying beyond realistic narration towards magic realism and the borderlands of the supernatural.

His first published novel *The Collector* (1963) is a psychological thriller which leans strongly towards horror with its tale of understated obsession and the banality of evil. The appallingly unimaginative narrator is a collector of butterflies (a hobby with disturbing associations of impalement and the killing-bottle) who, thanks to a football pools win, is able to extend his fantasies by kidnapping and imprisoning a young woman whom he has decided he loves. She is an intelligent, lively art student; he is a philistine and not particularly bright; her small intellectual victories cannot alter the basic captor/captive situation, from which her ultimate pathetic death is the only release. At the finale – delicately prefiguring the later vogue for serial-killer horror – we see the collector toying with the idea of a repeat performance: "this time it won't be love, it would just be for the interest of the thing and to compare them..." This is a most disquieting work.

Fowles's long second novel *The Magus* (1965; revised 1977) was actually drafted before *The Collector* – initially as a complex and ambiguously supernatural story in the vein of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, as Fowles himself tells us. Its working title was *The Godgame*, this being the elaborate and fantastical psychodrama into which the manipulating "magus" Conchis lures the young narrator Nicholas Urfe. Urfe is something of a hollow man, a restless philanderer who escapes the coils of his latest soured love-affair by coming to work on the Greek island of Phraxos. This is the millionaire Conchis's island, with shades and echoes of *The Tempest*: Conchis is a capricious Prospero commanding strange masques and apparent revenants; the role of Miranda is filled by a woman (in fact, twins) whose real nature is concealed beneath multiple layers of deception; there is even a Caliban, a seemingly brutish black

bodyguard masked as Anubis.

Nothing on Phraxos is what it seems. Conchis overwhelms Nicholas with mysteries; with magical appearances and disappearances; with scenes from the past, including electrifying episodes from the island's days of Nazi occupation; with shifting explanations of events – timeslips, occult manifestations, madness and delusion – which invariably conceal further, hidden traps. The moves of the godgame extend beyond Conchis's estate and even beyond Phraxos: newspapers from England cannot be trusted, and ordinary-seeming characters in London also dance to the Conchis strings. Nicholas's and the reader's rationalizations of the seeming supernatural are themselves unsatisfactory, for although any individual incident can be explained away (and many if not all are), it seems incredible that even a Prospero with millionaire's resources and an extensive troupe of supporting actors could or would ever go to such trouble. It *must* be magic. But then one remembers that stage magicians also rely on the audience following such patterns of thought....

For its victim, the ramifying paranoia of the godgame is in the end subtly flattering: Conchis has thought Nicholas somehow worth all this colossal effort. (As Fowles has remarked, *The Magus* exploits adolescent longings.) Finally Nicholas is released or breaks free from Conchis's script, to write his own again – almost literally so in the book's first version, although the 1977 revision makes this point a trifle less obviously. The book is a haunting and absorbing magic-show, no less alluring on repeated reading.

Distant echoes of the godgame appear in Fowles's third and perhaps most acclaimed novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), in the form of the author's intrusive presence and overt exercise of capricious power over events. His fifth novel *Mantissa* (1982) might be said to invert the situation as a goddess-game, since here the author hero is no longer the all-manipulating Prospero but the subject of extraordinary and frequently erotic manipulations by his personified Muse. She is in fact the muse Erato, once the patron goddess of love poetry but now – according to Fowles – the most appropriate muse to watch over and inspire the modern novel. Who is actually in control: Erato with her many guises and millennia of ribald experience, or the barely-disguised Fowles who thinks he is writing the book? Ibsen equated life with a battle against trolls; Fowles in *Mantissa* shows the artistic process as an uninhibited wrestle with spirits in the solipsistic corridors of the imagination.

Despite much underlying allegory about the nature of creativity and inspiration, *Mantissa* seems poorly regarded... partly owing to brevity, and

partly perhaps because its farcical sex-comedy and welter of literary in-jokes are regarded by some as being of lesser worth than the more solemn narratives expected from this author.

A later and stranger novel, *A Maggot* (1982), has a dense 18th-century historical setting and re-invokes something of *The Magus*'s sense of layered secrets concealing a possible ultimate revelation that may be too much for the mind to bear. Its deep oddness emerges with slow, cumulative power from a kind of protracted detective investigation of a disappearance. The visionary revelation is indeed extraordinary and utterly disorienting, and in this book's slight reworking of history it leads to the founding of the evangelical sect known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, alias the Shakers. But what the 18th-century woman at the heart of the story can interpret only as prophetic visions (and her lawyer interrogator only as blasphemy or insanity) would seem – to 20th-century eyes – to suggest contact with travellers from the future, making the story "only" science fiction. Is such a modern categorization of *A Maggot*'s central narrative tangle – of an account filtered through veils of emotive memory and brutal legal examination – actually any more valid than the contemporary supernatural view whereby the mystery becomes a Mystery? A certain haunting doubt lingers.

John Fowles remains one of the least predictable and most re-readable of major modern authors.

Michael Frayn (1996)

Frayn, Michael

Nationality: British. **Born:** London, 1933.

Michael Frayn is that rare phenomenon, an "outsider" from the "mainstream" (to use the agoraphobic language of genre) who moves in SF and fantasy without embarrassment – his or ours. This is achieved through precise, witty writing, honed by years as a humorous/satirical newspaper columnist and, later, a playwright.

Two of his novels are SF. *The Tin Men* (1965) is a hilarious romp about a shambolic artificial-intelligence project whose efforts cast wicked reflections on the supposed human intelligence that's being simulated. For example, the presentation of a mechanical (not even electronic) text generator which composes flawlessly pompous newspaper editorials has a certain moral for writers – and readers. *A Very Private Life* (1968) offers an ambiguous utopia or dystopia of crowded, sanitary solitude, somewhere between *The Machine Stops* and a virtual reality scenario. The light narration, distanced by present and future tenses ("Once upon a time there will be a little girl called Uncumber"), has a deceptively gentle satirical edge.

Frayn's true fantasy novel is *Sweet Dreams* (1973), a clever contribution to the "afterlife" subgenre, which shows Heaven as offering all you most want. For the young architect Howard Baker – who in a tasteful discontinuity drives straight through a red light in London on to the ten-lane expressway entering Heaven City – eternal bliss naturally entails cosy suburban life with all his friends and a constant round of dinner parties whose menu is always taramasalata, *gigot aux haricots* and apple crumble. One can fly and do miracles too, but that's rather gauche.

Although there are apparent humiliations in Heaven, they are marvellously funny ones ideal for recounting to laughing companions. There is marriage and (because this is Heaven) a pleasantly enigmatic mistress on the side. Even work continues: Baker can show his architectural mettle when, joining the design team doing the specifications for the Alps, he lands the plum job of creating the trademark image for the whole project: "In just six and a half hours he has produced the Matterhorn."

Slyly concealed here is a gesture (perhaps two-fingered) to that view

of God as seeing all secular time simultaneously yet being eternally surprised by the vagaries of free will. While flattered to be used as the original model for several important facial tics in another new heavenly project called “Man”, Baker is horrified when he finds that this life business will entail death and that indeed many people will die on his own beloved Matterhorn... until at last his memory of actual mortal life is jogged. But ahead lies the prospect of going into partnership with God and reforming everything with the *right people* (taramasalata, *gigots aux haricots*, apple crumble) in charge; though somehow things, including death, stay just the same.

Finally, having like James Branch Cabell’s *Jurgen* achieved absolutely everything possible to a rising executive in the hierarchy of Heaven, he drives through another red light and...

Sweet Dreams is a highly amusing parable of human desires and limitations: short, astringent and producing many an embarrassed smile of self-recognition.

Theology, that ancient subgenre of fantasy, is occasionally touched on in Frayn’s essays and sketches. Two examples: “The Monolithic View of Mirrors” (*At Bay in Gear Street*, 1967), sympathizes with the “Carthaginian Monolithic” believers who are painfully tempted to avoid accidents through use of the car rear-view mirrors prohibited by their clergy – who do not themselves drive. And the TV sketch “Heaven” (*Listen to This*, 1990) returns to *Sweet Dreams* territory as a divine executive charged with arranging a death objects not to the killing but to the difficulty of having the chap hit, as aesthetically decreed, by an avalanche in Norfolk.

Michael Frayn continues to write distinguished novels and may yet turn to fantasy again.

John Gordon (1998)

Gordon, John (William)

Nationality: British. **Born:** 1925.

John Gordon writes fantasy, ghost and supernatural stories, aimed at – or at least marketed for – young-adult audiences but of considerable general interest. He has a well-developed ability to convey a sense of uncanny menace, which extends also to those Gordon books which are more readily classified as fantasy.

For example, his first novel *The Giant Under the Snow* (1968) offers a conventional-seeming conflict of children (under the aegis of a good witch who grants the power of flight) against a magic-wielding warlord who long ago invaded England in a longship. But although this is a children's rather than a YA story, the warlord's "leather men" minions – faceless, mummified but fearfully agile – are most effectively horrid. Also disquieting is the revelation that danger centres not in the wild woods but in the modern city where the children live and which the warlord has made his own. Far from representing safety, the city's walls are menacing occult barriers. Outside, the giant of the title is both a burial mound and an elemental force of English landscape, a Green Man who at the climax rises and walks. *Ride the Wind* (1989) is a slightly less inventive sequel in which the killed warlord returns.

Gordon's second novel *The House on the Brink* (1970) established him as expert in creating serious unease through spare descriptions and laconic dialogue. The woman living in the lonely fenland house is apparently being persecuted or stalked by something resembling an old, black, wet log – inanimate, but inexorably moving or being moved through the countryside, its trail exuding an aura of dislocation and wrongness which rises from the pages like a stench. Investigation by two younger characters (who prove to have a trace of psychic sensitivity) slowly shifts the focus of wrongness from the log to the widowed woman whose neurotic obsessions about good and evil are being projected on to the bleak fen landscape, and who herself is unknowingly moving the thing by night. The finale unravels complex knots of emotion. Supernatural influence is not, however, dispelled, for the sinister log which has catalysed the action proves to be a sea-changed, mummified corpse that links with grim local legends of King John and the Wash.

The Ghost on the Hill (1976) repeats the previous book's precise handling of early, painful teenage relationships and also darker adult ones. A university boy and his still all too attractive and flirtatious mother return to the village of her birth, where a small cruelty of her own adolescence once had deadly consequences. An ambiguous witch-figure lurks, seemingly attended by dark birds. The newcomers' presence disrupts the village's emotional balance, and ultimately their Midsummer's Eve party generates an intensity of guilt and shame that wakes the ghost – though not with the expected vengefulness. Torrid adolescent emotion, complicated by rustic-English class barriers, likewise structures *The Waterfall Box* (1978)... whose titular alchemical McGuffin, created by a past magus and sought by an unpleasant modern one, provides a *deus ex machina* finale rather than genuinely informing the story as a whole.

The Edge of the World (1983) is more of a fantasy, in which slightly younger children penetrate "just beyond the edge of things" into an alternate Norfolk of hideous deserts. With its horrific but implausible monsters – insectile with horse-skull heads, riding flying machines – this place seems a routinely clichéd fantasyland. But there are hints that it's a country of the mind, opened up or even created by old hatred and jealousy, and containing a palace which in English history was planned but never built. *The Quelling Eye* (1986) is another quirky supernatural thriller which makes use of the old superstition of the Evil Eye and plays ambiguously with the notion of human transformation into bird form, and the resulting power of flight. Two children experience being carried off by an oversized hawk... but this central episode seems to occur in a "dreamtime" outside the realm of common sense. *The Grasshopper* (1987) is a straight novel told with interesting obliqueness, with one tiny knot of mystery at its core: the secret of how the title's giant, and perhaps impossible, leaping automaton may be ridden.

Most recently, *Gilray's Ghost* (1995) ambitiously combines a strange and eclectic variety of narrative elements. There is supernatural horror, grimmer than ever and leading to actual deaths. The story revolves around the pyramidal tomb of a very nasty revenant who legendarily preys on young girls, and who whenever blood is spilled can possess both boys and men with a killing frenzy. Two sinisterly eccentric modern occultists plan to summon him for their own purposes. But, as in *The Grasshopper*, there's also a vein of comedy, sexual and otherwise: when the occultists plot to obtain their victim's body fluid for the ritual, we expect bloodshed and then find her merely manoeuvred into using a bedroom chamber-pot. Science fiction enters the mix with the extraordinary and clownish Gilray

himself. His weird (and sometimes distressingly babyish) conversation is largely the jargon of his homeland in the 22nd century; his walking-stick is crammed with advanced microelectronics; and his journeying through time has provided foreknowledge of tragedy. The villains meet a suitably grisly come-uppance. As a whole, though, the book does not quite seem to jell.

The author's fine short supernatural stories, collected in *The Spitfire Grave* (1979), *Catch Your Death* (1984) and *The Burning Baby* (1992), feature a range of interesting and often strikingly memorable manifestations, hauntings and apparitions. An example is the Burning Baby itself, a blazing and vengeful spirit to which a murdered girl gives birth in fire. *Catch Your Death* was deservedly recommended as a highlight collection of 1984 in Stephen Jones's and Kim Newman's *Horror: the 100 Best Novels* (1988).

John Gordon, as he has said himself, writes best about borderlands. East Anglia's fen country, where he lives and where water and land interpenetrate with almost fractal complexity, is his favourite setting. The similarly confused border between child and adult sexuality is his most effective generator of tension, both natural and supernatural – for adolescent turmoil is also legendarily the power-source for poltergeists.

Barbara Hambly (1996)

Hambly, Barbara

Nationality: American. **Born:** San Diego, California, 1951.

Barbara Hambly has a special talent for reclaiming and reworking familiar themes of fantasy, making them over into a seamless gestalt which is very much her own. Usually a vein of tough-minded "dirty realism" runs through the plot, countering the over-romantic or wish-fulfilment aspects of magic and lending conviction to the whole. Far from commanding respect, magicians in Hambly's fantasy worlds are invariably distrusted and generally persecuted by Church and/or State.

In her initial venture the **Darwath** trilogy opening with *The Time of the Dark* (1982), this technique is still being perfected and some of the source material is visible. The name of wizard Ingold Inglorion vaguely recalls Tolkien's elf-lord Gildor Inglorion; the wizardly betrayal of volume 2, *The Walls of Air* (1983), reeks of Saruman's treachery in *The Lord of the Rings*; the menacing creatures called the Dark who threaten to burst through from the other side of reality are all too reminiscent of Lovecraftian horrors. But the story moves along well from its conventional starting-point with two people from our own world transferred into the threatened fantasy realm and helping, not very effectively, to repel the Dark. Ultimately, a somewhat unexpected (in fantasy if not in sf) solution is reached in *The Armies of Daylight* (1983): when the objectives of the seemingly mindless and inimical Dark are understood, an alternative solution can be offered.

Hambly's most popular sequence must be the open-ended series of novels about the unbrutal mercenary Sun Wolf and his hard-bitten lady second-in-command Starhawk. *The Ladies of Mandrigyn* (1984) sees Sun Wolf abducted by the eponymous women, who demand to be trained in martial skills. Their aim is to overthrow the nasty Wizard King Altiokis who has conquered the city of Mandrigyn and condemned its men to slave labour.

The slightly unexpected outcome carries a certain wry conviction, with the successful Sun Wolf being banished from Mandrigyn as a scapegoat – blamed for the way the women's victory has wrecked a once male-dominated social order. But the book's most effective frisson comes from the nuuwa, hideous eyeless humanoids which at first seem like

routine “encounter monsters” but prove to be former humans. Their debasement results from entities conjured by Altiokis, magical flame-motes which burn through the eyeball, eat the brain and warp the body. It is a considerable jolt when Sun Wolf, who “ought” to be an indestructible warrior-hero, is infected by such a mote and can only survive by paying Odin’s price.

In the course of this crowded book he has been through a painful initiation into magical powers, and *The Witches of Wenshar* (1987) sees him trying to bring them under control at a deeply flawed school of witchery. Instead, a string of apparently supernatural murders confuses the issue and the book becomes a sort of detective thriller. Next comes *Dark Hand of Magic* (1990), in which the dirty-realism strain is at its most effective. Sun Wolf’s grimy gang of mercenaries are conducting a routine city-siege which refuses to go as it should owing to a literal curse of bad luck. Again there is a mystery element (who is the opposing wizard? exactly how has his mysteriously dispersed and self-renewing hex been laid?) and an ongoing magical struggle, but it’s the convincing grubbiness, smell and itch of the beleaguered encampment that sticks in the mind. Every so often the reader has the overwhelming urge to take a shower....

The fine stand-alone novel *Dragonsbane* (1986) is a lighter-hearted work opening with some gleeful subversion of heroic dragon-slaying quests. Its bespectacled hero is a practical man whose one previous success (famed in story and song) was achieved by fighting dirty, extensively aided by his mistress the witch Jenny – who is the strongest character here. When a dangerous new dragon needs to be eliminated, the path to this straightforward-seeming objective is beset with tangles of politics and clouded by the fact that the dragon is by no means the prime menace: such complication and recomplication of expected fantasy goals is another Hambly hallmark.

A different reversal of expectation drives the **Sun-Cross** diptych comprising *The Rainbow Abyss* (1991) and *The Magicians of Night* (1992). In fantasy, representatives of our real world are called with tedious frequency to solve the problems of imaginary lands: this time, would-be wizards struggling in a world almost devoid of magic (that is, our own) summon a genuine if low-powered mage from Fantasyland... the jolting realization being that the summoners are the occult fringe of the Nazi SS, desperately researching magical weaponry to counter the imminent Allied invasion. The sun-cross, a icon of magic power, is the swastika; and, as David Brin hinted in his short story “Thor Meets Captain America”, the link between death camps and necromancy is almost too convincing not to

be true.

But the division of this narrative into two volumes is not wholly fortunate. *The Rainbow Abyss* is a mildly entertaining and episodic tour of the fantasy world, reeking of delaying actions: by auctorial decree, the interworld portal called a Dark Well functions only at solstices and equinoxes! Its far more ambitious follow-up *Magicians of the Night* opens with the prentice mage Rhion's arrival in embattled Germany, whereupon the real story begins... a little too belatedly. All the otherworld detail of the first book is in the end partly justified by the dark illumination thrown back from World War II on to the fantasy realm's squabbles (Rhion comes to acknowledge that there are worse things than lack of magic), but by this time it seems almost an afterthought.

Other works include the Antryg Windrose sequence beginning with the complete two-volume story in *The Silent Tower* (1986) and *The Silicon Mage* (1988). There are portal crossings between our modern Silicon Valley and a standard (for Hambly) fantasy realm where magicians, church, state and the possibly mad wizard Windrose are all at odds. Joanna, a Californian computer systems designer, is drawn into this mess: her expertise and Antryg's secret knowledge combine to unravel what's happening behind the scenes, with a Dark Mage (thought long dead) stalking the plot in disguise and indeed providing much false or slanted information to the reader during *The Silent Tower*. This potent mage's plan for immortality rather implausibly involves being coded into a supercomputer magically powered by a toll on all the lives of two universes. After much tension and sacrifice, matters are sorted out, although a very nearly literal *deus ex machina* is needed to save Antryg for new life as a Californian bartender. This really concludes the story, but *Dog Wizard* (1993) sees Antryg returned to his fantasy home to confront certain loose ends such as being under sentence of death there – even if this sentence was actually carried out in *The Silicon Mage*! *Stranger at the Wedding* is an unrelated book set in the same general world.

The very different *Those Who Hunt the Night* (1988; UK title *Immortal Blood*) is a ripping melodrama of vampires by gaslight, the expected deviation from stereotype being that the mortal hero – a don and retired spy – is not hunting vampires but commissioned by them to track down the unknown hunter who *is* destroying valued members of the vampire community. It's an enjoyably rattling yarn despite occasional lapses in the British background (Lewis Carroll never became "Professor Dodgson") and in the rational hero's rationalism (knowing that sunlight kills vampires, he nevertheless invests in silver charms rather than

experiment with magnesium flares or electrical discharge tubes).

Barbara Hambly never gives her likeable characters an easy ride – the price of success tends to be harrowing. She can be relied on to question the insidious default assumptions which make so much genre fantasy so depressingly generic; she prefers good slangy dialogue to the airy nothings of High Fantasy diction. Further novels are awaited with keen interest.

Robert Holdstock (2003)

Robert Holdstock's early genre fiction alternated between sensitively written, slightly mystical SF novels which gained critical acclaim, and outright potboilers of heroic fantasy and horror whose routine storylines were developed with enormous energy. He successfully fused these twin career streams in the mythically potent "Ryhope Wood" fantasies, developing the fascinating notion of "mythagos" or myth imagos, living fantasy archetypes emerging from the depths of ancient woodland.

Born on 2 August 1948 in Hythe, Kent, Robert Paul Holdstock attended the University College of North Wales in Bangor from 1967 to 1970, emerging with B.Sc. honours in applied zoology. His studies continued at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (1970-1971; M.Sc in medical zoology 1971) and the Medical Research Council in London (1971-1974), after which he turned to full-time writing. His publications began with "Pauper's Plot" in *New Worlds* magazine (1968); his first novel was the SF *Eye Among the Blind* (1976).

The author's deep feeling for the Matter of Britain and the richly layered mythos of Celtic fantasy intruded rather uneasily into the SF *Earthwind* (1977), which weaves some mysticism around the recreation of stone-age Irish culture on a colony world in the far future. Far more uninhibited and energetic was the unashamed sword-and-sorcery hackwork which Holdstock was by then writing under pseudonyms. Using the house name Richard Kirk, he contributed to the Raven series starring woman warrior Raven, Swordsmistress of Chaos. As Chris Carlsen he wrote the Berserker trilogy whose initially Nordic berserker hero is reincarnated to fight in other settings, such as the Arthurian cycle in *The Bull Chief* (1979).

The non-pseudonymous horror novel *Necromancer* (1978) is written with smooth confidence despite conventional subject matter. A London church font proves to be an ancient stone imprisoning a demonic spirit of great power and unpleasantness which duly contrives to be freed. Among those opposing it is French psychic investigator Francoise Jeury, who reappears in the 1991 *The Fetch*. Here a child tormented in infancy by seeming poltergeist phenomena in fact has the ability to "apport" valuables and gruesome remains from the far past, a talent unthinkingly abused by his greedy adoptive parents. Subtler manipulation is also at work, with this power being catalysed and directed by "a very real ghost", that of the

boy's aborted twin. Towards the end, by now a self-taught shaman, he deploys some spectacular totemic magic against betraying adults. There is a memorably bleak *frisson* as tantalizing images of the long-sought Grail and the Fisher-King dissolve into an abortionist's specimen jar holding that dead twin's fishlike foetus.

Quests for lost children or missing family members form the plot mainspring of numerous Holdstock narratives, an early example being the fast-moving, exploitative "Night Hunter" horror sequence (written as Robert Black, reissued as by Holdstock). The opening volumes are characterized by major atrocities or supernatural outbreaks occurring with clockwork regularity every nine or ten pages. Brady, the eponymous Hunter, sees his wife and children abducted by appalling cultists in the initial *The Stalking* (1983) and pursues them through successive layers of interestingly researched magical opposition, including Nordic and Amerindian dark forces. The increasingly adept Brady makes inventive use of psychic defences based on sympathetic magic, rather than over-familiar pentacles and religious symbols.

Holdstock's breakthrough novel, his first truly major fantasy, was *Mythago Wood* (1984), beginning the critically admired "Ryhope Wood" sequence. A version of the first part, establishing the basic mythic premise, appeared as "Mythago Wood" in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (September 1981).

Ryhope Wood seems to be one of those forgotten curiosities of England, a three-square-miles remnant of the Great Forests that once covered the land. Though outwardly small – "a stand of trees around which I could run in little more than an hour!" says narrator Steven Huxley – the wood is oddly difficult to penetrate and seems to grow larger the further one goes in.

Steven's father George slowly learns the true nature of this wood. His quasi-scientific notes, based on research with the clumsy electrical apparatus of the 1930s, are full of terms like "oak vortex" and "oscillating traverse zone". Ryhope's complications of ley lines and energy fields actively defend it against intruders; for those who manage to enter, time goes awry. When young Steven and his elder brother Christian release a toy boat on the little stream running through the wood, it doesn't reach the far side for six weeks.

In the heartwoods, deep time and racial memory entwine to form the matrix or breeding ground for Holdstock's grand conception, mythagos – embodiments of myth brought to life by human interaction with primary woodland. As George Huxley phrases it in "The Bone Forest" (1991):

> They are formed, these varied heroes of old, from the unheard, unseen communication between our common human *unconscious* and the vibrant, almost tangible sylvan mind of the wood itself. The wood watches, it listens, and it draws out our dreams...

Early in *Mythago Wood*, the young Huxleys glimpse what their father calls the Twigling, a human figure whose crown of twigs suggests the prototype of many horned-man legends and also links to the persistent pagan image of the Foliate Head. Jack-in-the-Green mythagos like "Hood" (read Robin Hood) haunt the foliage, loosing arrows at perceived outsiders. Mythmaking never ends, and a later encounter features a half-humorous soldier legend of the Great War.

Huxley senior's efforts at rapport with the woodland evoke the mythago of an archetypal Celtic princess, Guiwenneth, whose primitive fascination proves fatal to Huxley's marriage and eventually to the man himself. Steven returns from service in World War II to find Christian alone, strangely aged, and obsessed with the woods. Guiwenneth as she manifested to their father is dead and buried, but as a story embedded in race memory she persists and may be called up again in mythago form.

Holdstock presents several versions of Guiwenneth's story, from limpid proto-myth to a more elaborate and embellished narration reminiscent of the *Mabinogion*. (Later she will become the romantic Guinevere of Arthurian legend.) In shocking contrast, we also meet her protectors – seen in the tales as idealized heroes who can shapeshift into stags, met in the wood as huge paint-daubed men with horrific, antlered helmets made from deer skulls. There's no fairytale dreaminess about mythagos, who are always strongly physical, powerful and dangerous, heavy with the stink and filth of their time of origin. These alarming figures are described with great intensity.

The amateur scientist George Huxley takes particular interest in the oldest mythago-form of all, something that emerged from the imaginations of creatures not yet fully human, back in the last Ice Age. He names it the Urscumug, a terrifying archetype like a huge boar walking upright, its animal features painted over with a travesty of a human face.

Mythagos, it seems, are shaped not only by deep myth but by the modern personalities which call them up. George Huxley, believing with the Victorians that woman's place is in the home, drew out a Guiwenneth who lacked woodland survival skills; soon after Christian won her from his father in a kind of Oedipal clash, she fell to Hood's arrow. Christian is an altogether more formidable man, and the Guiwenneth he seeks would

be a tougher proposition.

As Steven frets in the family home at the wood's edge and slowly learns about mythagos, something is pursuing Christian through the woods: the Urscumug. The first section's conclusion links myth and Freudian psychology in a electrifying moment of illumination when the harried brothers encounter nemesis in Ryhope Wood, and as Steven escapes...

> I saw the face that had been painted across the blackened features of the boar.
>
> The Urscumug opened its mouth to roar, and my father seemed to leer at me.

Christian remains trapped in the enchanted woods, pursued by that dread father-figure, for what to him is fifteen years. He's held by hopes of reclaiming Guiwenneth, dwindling from true desire to the mere wish to possess. He's also held by the fact that his own fierceness becomes a woodland myth, the dread legend of the destroying Outsider, echoing the violence of the Urscumug itself.

Meanwhile in corresponding months of real-world chronology, Guiwinneth does indeed re-emerge from Ryhope Wood, as Steven's rather than Christian's mythago. There is a time of idyllic falling in love – shadowed by foreboding because the woman senses this can't be the end of her story – before Christian and his appalling Wild Hunters erupt from the wood's edge to take her away. By his hardened brother's order, Steven is hanged, but saved partly by his friend Harry Keeton and partly by the violent attentions of the Urscumug.

Therefore, following a route described in recovered fragments of the father's secret diaries, Stephen and Keeton enter the heartwoods in search of Guiwinneth. The trek extends over literal hundreds of miles into Ryhope's ever-expanding interior. Many figures of myth are encountered, including storytellers who have already embellished the tale of the "destructive and compassionless" Outsider almost beyond recognition. He fears only the boar-spirit. He can be killed only by the Outsider's Kin. Steven himself is being sucked into the stuff of legend. As a necromancer-shaman conveys to him, Guiwinneth's story is unfinished and is also his own.

The last confrontation is in the "valley which breathes", explained in myth as the mouth of a god, where a wind blows forever into a great blaze. This is the racial memory of man's first mastery of fire, a final barrier defending the central realm Lavondyss where time itself has no meaning.

Christian plans to cross this fire and renew himself; the brothers reach a kind of reconciliation, but a terrible accident intervenes as their harsh Story insists on its proper ending.

Mythago Wood is both harrowing and uplifting, combining potent physical evocations of flesh, blood and woodland with a symbolic reimagining of how myths and realities interact. In story one can live forever, but (to echo a phrase of John Crowley's) only by becoming only a story. This novel won the British SF Award and the World Fantasy Award.

One skewed thread in the tapestry of *Mythago Wood* is Harry Keeton, a man whose personal mythic destiny parts company with Steven's and moves into unknown regions. *Lavondyss: Journey to an Unknown Region* (1988) describes his sister Tallis's quest for a lost brother.

Not hesitant and scientifically cautious like George Huxley, Tallis is fey, precocious, a focus of shamanic power even in her childhood. Masked mythagos hover around her, communicating stories and magical understanding. Knowing so much so soon, she delays her fated journey into Ryhope Wood until she has divined the true name of every landmark between her home and the wood's edge. Meanwhile she prepares ten talismanic masks, each named and associated with a particular image. Thus the green "landscape mask" Skogen represents *shadow of the forest*. This and its companion masks or icons frequently reappear and are reinterpreted in later Holdstock fictions.

At age 13 Tallis meets the then 84-year-old composer Ralph Vaughn Williams, who is disconcerted by her strangeness but appreciates the curious pre-Arthurian myth she tells him: of three sons called Mordred, Arthur and Scathach, of a father's castle that becomes a tomb, a vengeful mother, a youngest son exiled to another castle of stone that is not stone, and other odd symbology. This cryptic story resonates throughout *Lavondyss*.

Holdstock here expands the scope of mythagos from conjured figures of myth to entire numinous landscapes called *geistzones*. A shaman can open ways to these mythago places by "hollowing", derived from the old English "hollow-way" or "holloway", a sunken road. Tallis seeks a portal to the Old Forbidden Place from which brother Harry has somehow failed to return. There are complications, not least because her early experiments with hollowing show her Scathach himself dying on a doom-laden battlefield, and Tallis makes rash attempts to save him – misdirected magic that warps Harry's story and her own.

Eventually Tallis attains the deep woods, accompanied by an earlier version of Scathach. Maturity, first sex, childbirth and loss all occur

offstage during her eight years of hard travelling, struggling with Ryhope Wood's intractable defences. She encounters and learns from Wynne-Jones, George Huxley's erstwhile correspondent and co-explorer, now trapped in his role as shaman of a neolithic clan. Tallis understands that her Old Forbidden Place must be the unknown region Lavondyss, a name suggesting Avalon and Lyonesse but also Dis:

> The place of waiting. The place of the endless hunt and the constant feast. The place of youth, the land of women, the realm of song and sea. Old Forbidden Place. The underworld.

It is no place of comfort for Tallis. Her final gateway is a prolonged, agonizing, sylvan transformation opening into a primal Ice Age geistzone. There (wearing a very unexpected form) she experiences the harshly brutal murder story underlying that romanticized myth of the three sons. It is also, distantly, a refraction of Tallis's own family situation, never previously understood by her. To penetrate deep myth is to become deep myth, with complex ripples forward and backward in time, and even for a shaman there's no going back.

Though *Lavondyss* allows some joy and compensation, it focuses even more relentlessly than *Mythago Wood* on the earth, stone, blood, dung, and death which are the necessary roots of story. The effect is both exhilarating and chilling.

In the collection *The Bone Forest* (1991), the title novella elaborates on George Huxley's earlier, 1930s explorations of Ryhope Wood. When he meets the shamanic mythago-woman Ash (about Tallis tells a story in *Lavondyss*) there's a numinous disjunction of time. The researcher finds himself haunted by an elusive presence that writes in his own journal, in his own hand. This *doppelgänger* Huxley has a slightly different history, seems to live at a different time-rate, and is alarmingly capable of sexually satisfying the wife Huxley has persistently neglected. Though an effectively disquieting tale, this tends to undermine the impact of subsequent events in *Mythago Wood*.

There have been half-joking critical suggestions that Holdstock himself became trapped like so many of his creations in the coils of Ryhope Wood, to which he returned in *The Hollowing* (1993) and *Gate of Ivory* (1997).

The Hollowing features a larger cast of mythago investigators, linked to former stories by the brief appearance of Tallis's father James Keeton, a lost father seeking a lost daughter, and by the legacy of George Huxley. Another child is absorbed into the wildwood, brain-damaged and

generating dangerously flawed mythagos based on his own imaginative life: dinosaurs, toy soldiers, Jason and the Argonauts, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Perhaps too many stories intertwine as this boy's baffled father comes to terms with a band of mythago researchers all pursuing different goals, but there are rewarding moments of high comedy – notably the ritualized sexual encounter between a man and woman who have temporarily gone native ("bosky") under the wood's pervasive influence. In closing scenes of hard-won victory, a new family comes together from the remnants of a sundered one.

Backtracking once again to earlier times, *Gate of Ivory* revisits George and Christian Huxley before brother Steven's post-war homecoming in *Mythago Wood*. Here, spurred by his mother's seeming suicide, Christian follows another Guiwenneth into the woods. Holdstock takes his mythic template from the *Mabinogion*'s incomplete "Tale of Kylhuk [or Culhwch] and Olwen", with its absurd plethora of impossible tasks. The overconfident Kylhuk of the *Mabinogion* answers a giant's challenge with "That is easy for me to get, though you think it not easy," provoking the retort "Though thou get that, there is that thou wilt not get," and the imposition of another task – a sequence which in the quoted translation is repeated thirty-eight times....

So many tasks require many powerful helpers, and when Christian joins Kylhuk's questing legion in the woods he's told that "Legion is an animal that moves on ten thousand legs." This army needs all its warriors, shamans and shapeshifters to fend off the angry dead pursuing it to a final mystical challenge at the gates of the underworld. Amid darkness and doom there's good company here, and chances of happiness for some: Christian even brings together two lovers separated by the fact that they come from different versions, told many centuries apart, of the same forgotten myth. Finally he must enter the underworld like Orpheus and make a agonizing choice of whom to rescue. Again, in Holdstock's hands, disparate archetypes fuse together with a raw mythic power.

A different yet similar haunted wood dominates *Merlin's Wood* (1994), expanded from the briefly told back-story of a character in *The Hollowing*. The French forest of Broceliande fatally ensnares the protagonist's wife and son – yet another lost child, blind and deaf from birth – as the recurring battle between buried Merlin and his treacherous mistress Vivien is played out in their souls. Eventually a revenant Merlin tells his own story, compellingly re-imagined; but the overall narrative feels flawed, distorted by its weight of undeserved loss and ineccessible healing.

The sense of an author struggling to extricate himself from Ryhope Wood continues in *Ancient Echoes* (1996), whose protagonist Jack Chatwin is subject from childhood to recurring visions. These centre on a primitive, mythago-like man and woman, Greyface and Greenface, endlessly fleeing some obscure pursuit. The visions are not purely subjective: even scents and sounds from the otherworld source are detectable by observers during Jack's moments of fugue.

Hence scientific investigation, using a somewhat implausible SF virtual-reality apparatus to send Jack exploring not wildwoods but the "Hinterland" of his own preconsciousness, where Greenface still lurks although her brother Greyface has – at least in Jack's perception – emerged into the real world to threaten Jack's young daughter. The psychologists (who mention the child's case history from *The Fetch*) use "mythago" as a technical term in their quasi-Jungian rationalizations, which accurately expect the Hinterland to be Fantasyland:

> "Think *fantasy*. There's nothing new; everything in your head is programmed by the familiarity of mythology, and has been for more than a million years."

Ancient Echoes also features a potent mythago of place: Glanum, an immemorial city reeking of wrongness, which literally moves both through the Hinterland and through real-world archaeology, swollen with architecture it's devoured, and concealing a terrible central secret. It is Glanum itself that's pursuing its lost children Greenface and Greyface. Eventually there's a kind of exorcism; the story ends on a confused note, accepting rather than resolving its perplexed tangle of reality, imagination and myth.

Perhaps sensing that Merlin's own first-person telling was the most engaging of the narrative voices in *Merlin's Wood*, Holdstock returns to it in "The Merlin Codex", beginning with *Celtika* (2001). We recognize the same Merlin earlier in life, magic carved into his very bones, perpetually youthful through careful husbanding of the sorcery which alone can age him. Once he sailed with Jason on the *Argo*, and seven centuries later recovers this broken-hearted hero – preserved by his charmed ship – from the depths of a magical frozen lake in Pohjola, as Lapland is known in the Finnish Kalevala legends. A rebuilt *Argo* with a new patron goddess and argonaut crew heads south on a quest for Jason's sons, who in this revised legend were not killed by his vengeful wife Medea but hurled by her spells into a future which is the story's present.

The voyage touches on the ghostly terrors of a Britain blighted by

unnatural desolation, crosses the Germanic lands with magically-aided portage between the Rhine and Danube rivers, and links to an extraordinary episode of real history: the Celtic invasion of Greece in 279BC, with one of Jason's sons included as a high-ranking officer in this wild, dream-inspired crusade. Merlin helps his old friend Jason with clairvoyance and charms but is opposed by Medea herself – another long-lived mage, determined that her husband's second chance should also end in tragedy. Incidental action includes a lesser-known battle of Thermopylae, the sacking of Delphi, and a finely imagined set-piece of Celtic single combat, heart-stoppingly violent yet governed by formalities as elaborate as any code-duello.

Shadows gather around Merlin's own story as he becomes dangerously involved with the lore-hungry Pohjola sorceress Niiv, who foreshadows or may even *be* Vivien. Hard-fighting Celtic argonaut Urtha is identified as the great-grandfather of Arthur, prophesied by Niiv to be "the reason for your life, and the death of everything you love."

The intricate saga continues in *The Iron Grail* (2002), returning to that haunted Alba or Britain where the land of the dead and unborn is literally just across the river. This otherworld's mysteriously troubled and all too tangible inhabitants have invaded Urtha's territory and seized his hill-fortress. Echoing the disruption of heartwoods in *The Hollowing*, the reason for the spirits' disturbance involves a son of Jason, hidden by Medea in the otherworld. The *Argo* makes a memorably wonderful voyage through the ghost-land's ocean and magic islands of marvels and horrors, where at last Merlin unravels its complex, painful secret – also learning more about his own past and future. The author is at the height of his powers, stimulated to great creativity by this novel fusion of one era's history with another's myth; further "Merlin Codex" novels are eagerly awaited.

Robert Holdstock's gift for evoking landscapes and weaving mythic patterns is outstanding. He has a remarkable ability to strengthen rather than diminish resonant myths by peeling away romantic embellishment to suggest both deeper strangeness and tough underlying realities, the rich soil and compost from which enduring stories grow.

Tom Holt (1996)

Holt, Tom.

Nationality: British. **Born:** London, 1961.

Tom Holt's farcical fantasies incline to quasi-realistic backgrounds – usually today's reliably ordinary Britain. This base reality suffers assaults from myth and legend, from elsewhere and elsewhen....

Expecting Someone Taller (1987), for example, presumes the historical accuracy of Wagner's *Ring* cycle. The initially downtrodden and inept hero Malcolm runs his car over a badger who is a disguised Giant of legend, and who before dying crossly hands over his burden: the Tarnhelm and the Nibelungs' Ring. Despite the efforts of Alberich, Loge, the all-powerful but henpecked (by his eight remaining Valkyrie daughters) Wotan, Huginn and Muninn, the Rhine Maidens, and sundry lesser deities, Malcolm continues to wield the world-controlling Ring and bring to it the quality unknown in any former bearer: a slightly wimpish niceness. Thus all the world goes better except for matters irretrievably accursed by fate, such as England's cricket test-match scores. The interleaving of mythic and mundane is generally very funny. Only the finale, with Wotan finally maddened into all-out attack and the entire might of Asgard going rapidly *phut* when opposed by the Ring, seems a little weak.

Its successor *Who's Afraid of Beowulf* (1988) is funnier still, with King Hrolf and his longship crew of Norsemen awakening from 1200 years' enchanted slumber to deal with the sorcerer-king who has been running Britain for all those centuries. Good points include the revenants' lack of awe at modern technology (they had all that stuff; they just called it magic), set-pieces like their interpretation of the London Underground map as a genealogical chart, and a running gag about the portmanteau game Goblin's Teeth played by the chthonic spirits Zxerp and Prexz ("Double Rune Score. I think I'll have another longhouse on Uppsala."). The sorcerer-king having been a little too easily dealt with, the Norsemen restore normality by rowing off to Valhalla, where the catering is awful – and whence Hrolf sends a final postcard to the young female archaeologist entangled in their adventures, ending "See you in about sixty years."

The emphasis of Holt's comic fantasies is on hilarious incidental invention and off-the-wall ideas rather than plot, but the regular basic structure tends to go: (a) misplaced figures of history and legend impinge

on the 20th century; (b) the running of the world is revealed as involving bizarre and inefficient conspiracies (one recurring character is a BBC chap whose dream is to link Kennedy's assassination with the Milk Marketing Board); (c) a major upheaval, like the erasure of Asgard's forces or the sorcerer-king's removal, leaves matters in a slightly more rational state. The story will feature many anachronistic gags.

Thus in *Flying Dutch* (1991) it's Vanderdecken the Flying Dutchman and his immortal crew who emerge from history (their eternal exile being because the elixir of life has the side effect of body odour on a scale to boggle skunks), the world economy having come to pivot on an ancient insurance policy taken out by Vanderdecken and bloated by compound interest. This is duly sorted out. *Ye Gods!* (1992) introduces a Hercules-like Hero into a suburban home (absentee father: Jupiter), leading to a childhood and adolescence complicated by tasks like serpent-strangling, dragon-slaying, and generally heroing around... all part of a Promethean plot to neutralize the Greek pantheon and end their meddling with human affairs.

Overtime (1993) sees Blondel of Richard Lionheart fame promoted at rock gigs scattered throughout history, courtesy of a daft time-travel premise whereby all official doors labelled NO ENTRY (in every era) are secretly linked by the corridors of bureaucratic time. Antichrist, antipopes and various murderous henchmen appear, and ultimately God is prevailed on to rearrange the structure of time more sensibly. An amusing *and* dramatically effective moment comes when Blondel's song is finally answered by the imprisoned Richard in the dread Chastel des Larmes Chaudes, appearing in its temporary aspect of a bouncy castle.

Here Comes the Sun (1993) offers a *reductio ad absurdum* of interventionalist theology, with the massed efforts of a vast, inefficient and underbudgeted spiritual bureaucracy required for such chores as, each day, starting up the obsolescent Sun and coaxing it across the sky. An efficient young mortal lady is recruited, and progresses from being an effective new broom to the rank of Holy Roman Empress (the secret empire being this book's Hidden Conspiracy) with the power to abolish, retrospectively, the entire ant's-nest of celestial functionaries and substitute natural law – and thus, a Sun that works by itself.

More farcical yet, *Grailblazers* (1994) shows the Grail Knights in modern England, pursuing such noble quests as pizza delivery. But a knight who has spent many centuries in enchanted sleep returns to urge a revival of the Quest, which leads to Australia (this being where the unicorns went), Atlantis (a offshore company accessible only by faxing

oneself) and the brooding castle of diabolical Santa Claus (formerly Wotan). It's good fun, but the knights are such buffoons and their quest so absurd that there's no plot tension, nor any sense of revelation or closure when the quest proves to be a set-up. A similar mad inconsequentiality afflicts *Faust Among Equals* (1994), with Hell's board of directors constructing a "EuroBosch" Musical Hell theme park in the wake of their management buyout, super-sorcerer Faust on the run (with sidekick Helen of Troy) after his unprecedented escape from Hell PLC, the ultimate bounty hunter in pursuit, etc. Eventually God, here depicted as an old-fashioned repairman, is persuaded to rearrange history....

Holt's comedy has become steadily more polished, and his flow of weird ideas continues unchecked. One worries that the "real world" settings are increasingly a mere stage backdrop for farce – a paper-thin world that isn't worth the saving – while the latest two books lack the former reality anchor of an ordinary 20th-century character in a leading rôle. Nevertheless, Holt entertains.

M.R. James (1998)

James, M(ontague) R(hodes)

Nationality: British. **Born:** Goodnestone Parsonage, Goodnestone, Kent, 1 August 1862. **Died:** Eton College, 12 June 1936. **Education:** Eton; King's College, Cambridge. **Family:** none. **Career:** Director of Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 1893-1908; Provost of King's College, 1905-1918; also Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University, 1913-1915; Provost of Eton 1918-1936. **Awards:** various honorary degrees; Bibliographical Society gold medal, 1929; Order of Merit, 1930.

Montague Rhodes James enjoyed an immaculately successful academic career as an expert on classical languages, palaeography and mediaeval and Biblical (especially Apocalyptic) legend. Meanwhile, out of his extensive, eccentric knowledge of dusty manuscripts and scholarly byways, James produced the twentieth century's most influential canon of ghost stories.

The secret of James's special charm can be dissected into a number of elements. His donnishness and erudition are always present, giving an air of genuine authority to the old manuscripts and cryptic fragments which so often lure his victims to their fates. Thus, although the eponymous relic in "Canon Alberic's Scrapbook" (*Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, 1904) contains only one picture of sinister importance, the extensive, scholarly account of its other rarities lends conviction. "The Treasure of Abbot Thomas" (*ibid*) boldly opens with a solid chunk of Latin – whose translation seems added almost as an afterthought – and entangles us in the intellectual thrill of solving the Abbot's stained-glass cryptogram.

There is more than mere erudition in James's control of tone and diction. Only a few patronizing renditions of the speech of the contemporary "lower orders" have slightly dated. A memorable passage of "The Ash-Tree" (*ibid*) is written word-perfect in the manner of the late seventeenth century, enhancing its account of dire portents from Biblical sortilege. "The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral" (*More Ghost Stories of an Anitiquary*, 1911) begins with a pastiche obituary which, with just perceptible irony, pretends to extol a cleric of minimal distinction. The dark, wet revenant of "Martin's Close" (*ibid*) peeps at us through the cracks of a 1684 trial transcript with Judge Jeffreys presiding. A cod sermon of similar vintage, about the perils of the world's labyrinth,

deepens the shadows of the garden maze in “Mr Humphreys and his Inheritance” (*ibid*). One notable *tour de force* of pretended artlessness is the extreme and unnerving simplicity of a Swedish rustic’s narration in “Count Magnus” (*Ghost Stories...*), culminating not so much in the frightfulness of “his face was not there, because the flesh of it was sucked away off the bones” as in the reactions of those who must bury this shockingly disfigured corpse.

Such narratives within narratives are characteristic of the author’s cunning indirection. Through third-party reports, perceptual uncertainty, hinted conjecture, MS fragments and *oratio obliqua*, James carefully distances his horrors as things seen in a glass, darkly. Perhaps the most remote of all – yet still alarming – is “The Mezzotint” (*ibid*), where the murky picture of the title changes to hint, step by step, at the stealing of a child by a dead something in the previous century. Often the central apparition comes and goes in a flash, like the disquieting glimpse of a pink, masklike, sweating face amid the foliage in “The Rose Garden” (*More Ghost Stories...*). Sometimes it may be felt rather than seen, as in “Casting the Runes” (*ibid*), where the rune-cursed man reaches under his pillow for a matchbox and touches “a mouth, with teeth, and with hair about it, and, he declares, not the mouth of a human being.” Almost always, James is adept at minimal descriptions of unpleasantness: a bare phrase or two that evokes more and worse than is said. The technique echoes the guilt-ridden Cardinal’s premonitions in *The Duchess of Malfi*: “When I look into the fish-ponds in my garden, / Methinks I see a thing arm’d with a rake, / That seems to strike at me.”

Perhaps James’s greatest strength is inventiveness, an ability to unveil the unexpected horror in the unexpected place – like that bestial mouth underneath the pillow. Even the acclaimed critic Edmund Wilson, whose essay “A Treatise on Tales of Horror” (1944) is generally dismissive, credits James with “some really fiendish flashes of fancy”. Best known is the spirit called by the whistle in “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad” (*Ghost Stories...*), which after disturbing pursuits across an empty sea-front eventually animates the hapless summoner’s bedsheets and presents “a horrible, an intensely horrible, face *of crumpled linen*.” Others include the bulging, musty “treasure bag” of “The Treasure of Abbot Thomas”, which suddenly puts its arms around a looter’s neck; the nightmare burnt creature which crawls with wasplike writhings from a black hole in a sheet of paper, in “Mr Humphreys and His Inheritance”; the pink hand groping feebly from amid ordinary linen in a drawer at “The Residence in Whitminster” (*A Thin Ghost*, 1919); the faceless creature

made all of hair in “The Diary of Mr Poynter” (*ibid*) – an echo of “Oh, Whistle...” which seems almost self-parodic; and the binoculars of “A View from a Hill” (*A Warning to the Curious*, 1925), which see into the past because filled with an unholy fluid distilled from dead men’s bones.

Meticulous scenic descriptions add to the effect, notably (as commended by John Betjeman) those of East Anglia and the West Country. The Preface to *The Collected Ghost Stories* identifies several inspirational locales – for example, the Burnstow of “Oh, Whistle...” is Felixstowe.

James’s own view of supernatural beings was unrepentantly traditional: “On the whole, then, I say you must have horror and also malevolence.” (“Ghosts – Treat Them Gently!”; *Evening News*, 1931) He also added “reticence”, his own term for the grisly understatement already discussed. Indeed his hauntings are always malign – although occasionally the lead character is not the object of ill-will and is incidentally helped. Young Simon is saved from human sacrifice in “Lost Hearts” (*Ghost Stories...*) by the vengeful shades of the would-be magus’s previous victims; the revenant with cobwebbed eye-sockets in “The Tractate Middoth” (*More Ghost Stories...*) is concerned only with the malefactor who means to destroy this dead man’s secret will. But in “The Mezzotint” and the thematically similar “The Haunted Doll’s House” (*A Warning to the Curious*) the essential *frisson* is that innocent children pay an unfair penalty for the sins of the fathers.

The typical Jamesian spectre is not only malign but distinctly physical – though it may be “light and weak”, like the pursuing avenger in the title piece of *A Warning to the Curious*, which to those not in the know seems merely an old dark overcoat left on the ground. Generally only a few horrid details loom to haunt the reader’s dreams: teeth, claws, cerements, matted hair, a face which may be fleshless, an insectile or spiderlike limb.

Although James was far from being a formula writer, he relied heavily on those “flashes of fiendish fancy” and seems to have found them increasingly hard to come by... as suggested in the good-humoured “Stories I Have Tried to Write” (*Collected Ghost Stories*, 1931), with its list of abortive fancies. An interesting alternative approach is seen in “Wailing Well”, written – like so many previous tales – to be read aloud. The intended audience was a Boy Scout troop: the story’s rather conventional skeletal horrors are complemented by the farcical account of a singularly appalling Scout who more or less deserves his sticky end.

A younger audience is likewise addressed in *The Five Jars* (1922), a whimsical fairy tale whose first-person narrator has James’s own persona.

A talking stream leads him to a magic plant which confers the power of seeing underground ("...surprising, too, in how many places there lie, unsuspected, bones of men.") and thus finding the Five Jars. These contain unguents which further extend the senses into animal and Faerie realms normally hidden from dull human perception. Sinister forces, first seen as pillars of mist with red eyes, covet the jars and make various attempts on them... but James, seemingly more concerned to avoid distress to children than Lewis Carroll ever was, downplays the tension almost to the point of inconsequentiality. The book has a gentle charm.

M.R. James continues to be read, and to be influential – as may be seen from Rosemary Pardoe's useful *The James Gang: A Bibliography of Writers in the M.R. James Tradition* (1991). Writers in the present volume who are to some extent part of the "gang" include E.F. Benson (a friend), Ramsey Campbell, John Gordon (in particular for *The House on the Brink*) and H. Russell Wakefield.

Gerald Kersh (1998)

Kersh, Gerald

Nationality: British, naturalized U.S. citizen, 1959. **Born:** Teddington-on-Thames, Middlesex, 6 August 1911. [...] **Died:** 5 November 1968.

Gerald Kersh was a once very popular literary all-rounder who brought a fantastic imagination and streetwise gusto to a wide range of genres. None of his novels can entirely be classified as horror – even *The Implacable Hunter* (1961), colourfully retelling the story of St Paul, keeps its distance from the supernatural. But chilling, grisly and macabre touches abound. Examples include an almost unbearable evocation of the Lidice atrocities in *The Dead Look On* (1943), the shuddering moment in that grim *noir* detection *Prelude to a Certain Midnight* (1953) when a "fat grey insect" runs from the murdered child's ear, and the comic-horrific account of a VD cautionary movie in the deeply sleazy *Fowlers End* (1958) – perhaps his masterpiece. *The Weak and the Strong* (1945), dealing with an ill-assorted group of people trapped underground, has a claustrophobic *Huis Clos* intensity which verges on the surreal.

Although he was a rather less polished writer, Kersh's audacity, versatility and vigorous handling of low-life dialogue can be compared with that of Kipling; and as with Kipling, his supernatural and horror stories are widely scattered through numerous collections. Of these, *On an Odd Note* (1958) and *Nightshade and Damnations* (1968, edited by Harlan Ellison) are reprint selections which concentrate on fantastic material, as to some extent does *The Best of Gerald Kersh* (1960).

His first collection *I Got References* (1939) includes such disturbing pieces as "The Horrible House with the Secret Pipes", a creepy "true life apparition" fragment; "The Devil that Troubled the Chessboard", where the demon that afflicts an ageing and obsessive chess-player proves to emanate from his own mind; and "Comrade Death", a story of the arms trade which escalates into grotesque nightmare as Death escapes like a genie from the bottle. Another early story, the 1939 "The Extraordinarily Horrible Dummy" (in *Selected Stories*, 1943, and *The Horrible Dummy*,) establishes the now classic horror theme of a ventriloquist's dummy whose malign personality – or apparent personality – comes to dominate its owner. This thread of the fantastic and horrific continues through many collections to the last which Kersh himself assembled, *The Hospitality of*

Miss Tolliver (1965) – whose title piece features, uniquely for Kersh, some merely conventional denizens of horror: an elderly vampire and a child whose Hallowe'en "trick or treat" ghoul mask is not a mask....

Ghosts and the afterlife appear in such tales as "In a Room Without Walls" (*Neither Man nor Dog*, 1946), where a womanizing stage star's eternal punishment consists of giving eternal joy to one of his casual pick-ups; "The Scene of the Crime" (*Sad Road to the Sea*, 1947), which is also a murder mystery; "Carnival on the Downs" (*Men Without Bones*, 1955), a double-punch story with more ghosts than might be expected; "Terraces" (*The Ugly Face of Love*, 1960) with its glimpse of a tawdry, poisoned Paradise; and "No Matter How You Slice It" (*More Than Once Upon a Time*, 1964), a homage to Kipling's "On the Gate" which shows angels bending the Law to get sinners into Heaven.

Other supernatural themes abound, like the identity exchange in "Fantasy of a Hunted Man" (*Neither Man nor Dog*) and the partial identity transfer from gangster to child *via* an eye transplant in "The Eye" (*The Ugly Face of Love*). Ghastly premonitions or prophetic dreams – with varied twists – feature in "The White Flash" (*The Horrible Dummy*), "Doctor Ox Will Die at Midnight" (*Neither Man nor Dog*), "The Earwig" (*ibid*), "A Vision of a Lost Child" (*Sad Road to the Sea*), and "The White-Washed Room" (*Men Without Bones*). "Prophet Without Honour" (*The Ugly Face of Love*) sees Nostradamus-like prophecies emerging from a newspaperman's sabotaged typewriter.

Though never Lovecraftian in his vigorous style, Kersh enjoyed Lovecraft's trick of dressing SF rationales in the trappings of horror. The eerie Little Folk in "Voices in the Dust of Annan" (*Sad Road to the Sea*) are pitifully debased descendants of World War III shelter-dwellers; "The Oracle of the Fish" (*The Terribly Wild Flowers*, 1962) uses a closely similar theme of debasement, made magical by a Celtic talking fish. Boneless horrors in "Men Without Bones" (*Men Without Bones*) prove to be Earth's native humans, for we ourselves are colonizing Martians. In the title story of *The Brighton Monster* (1953), the monstrous and pitiable "sea creature" described by a 1745 diarist emerges as a tattooed Japanese wrestler blown back through time from 1945 Hiroshima, and dying of radiation sickness. The black comedy of "Whatever Happened to Corporal Cuckoo?" (*ibid*) is that the priceless elixir of immortality has been bestowed on an unimprovable grunt soldier who now carries the frightful scars of every major battle since Turin in 1537. An infection of evil crosses from the animal to the vegetable kingdom, and back again, in the title piece of *The Terribly Wild Flowers*.

Other grotesque and Gothic narrations include “The Queen of Pig Island” (*The Brighton Monster*), with lust and murder amid a party of marooned circus freaks; “The Crewel Needle” (*Guttersnipe*, 1954), whose evil child adapts a parlour-science trick into a chilling murder method; “The King Who Collected Clocks” (*ibid*), in which a marvellous clockwork automaton replaces dead King Nicolas until the machinery meets with a bizarre accident; “The Sympathetic Souse” (*Men Without Bones*), a sick joke about Siamese twins, one of whom drinks the other to death; “The Shady Life of Annibal” (*The Ugly Face of Love*), where the imaginary child Annibal overshadows the life of a couple who invented him as comforting fiction; “The Oxoxoco Bottle” (*ibid*), featuring the last MS of Ambrose Bierce – famously lost in Mexico – who finds himself among cannibals; “The Wrong Side of Things” (*The Terribly Wild Flowers*), where a cask-of-Amontillado crime is fatally bungled; and “A Lucky Day for the Boar” (*More Than Once Upon a Time*), a genuinely frightening account of a cruel and imaginative brainwashing that uses neither torture nor electronics.

This last item pastiches Poe, and is presented as an unknown story by him. Further, more marginal stories play with other noted historical figures, including Christ and his disciples, Shakespeare, Leonardo da Vinci (several times) and Hitler.

Gerald Kersh was a born writer, compulsively readable; one hopes that he will again be rediscovered and emerge from his present obscurity.

Rudyard Kipling (1996)

Kipling, Rudyard

Nationality: British. **Born:** Bombay, 1865. **Died:** 1936.

Rudyard Kipling is best remembered as the writer and poet of the British Empire in India: but within and outside this milieu, he wrote many remarkable sf, fantasy and supernatural stories. These are scattered through his numerous story collections – though recent anthologies have assembled this material.

Kipling's great skill and literary craftsmanship can be overpowering, especially when showing off his remarkable ability with dialect and now-dead slang, or in the complex, bitter, allusive tales of his later years.

From the earliest he was adept at framing and distancing supernatural themes: "In the House of Suddhoo" and "The Gate of the Hundred Sorrows" (both in *Plain Tales from the Hills*, 1888) have a fantastic flavour "legitimized" by devices of magical fakery (repeated in the sinisterly comic "The Sending of Dana Da" (*In Black and White*, 1888; *Soldiers Three*, 1899), whose victim suffers a plague of tiny, injured white cats) and opium dreams. "The Phantom 'Rickshaw" (*The Phantom 'Rickshaw*, 1888) is a conventional haunting, lent power by its intensity and the exotic Indian setting of these early works; "The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes" (*ibid*) enters nightmare territory as the eponymous Briton finds himself trapped in a Village of the Dead where Indians who prove too lively when sent to the burning ghats are exiled....

In later ghost stories, ambiguity increases. We never learn what shocking image was photographed from the dead man's retina in "At the End of the Passage" (*Life's Handicap*, 1890), while the possession in "The Mark of the Beast" (*ibid*) might *possibly* have been suggestion or illness. A phantom army moves almost imperceptibly through the Afghan military action in "The Lost Legion" (*Many Inventions*, 1893): English troops think they may hear something, while the enemy is stricken with terror. The ghostly lost children haunting a blind woman's estate in the over-sentimental "They" (*Traffics and Discoveries*, 1904) are invisible and elusive, as is precisely why the protagonist must never revisit that seemingly idyllic place. One of the cruellest tales, "Swept and Garnished", confronts a well-off Berlin woman with five children fresh from current World War I shelling: they and the blood they leave on the floor may be

purely subjective. Particularly oblique is the late, dark "The Wish House" (*A Diversity of Creatures*, 1917), whose heroine believes in a supernatural deal whereby (for no longer requited love) she accepts whatever her man might otherwise have suffered – in the form of a physical and malign ulcer.

Atypically, "A Madonna of the Trenches" (*A Diversity of Creatures*) has an undeniable apparition of the dead near the front line, but is less about a ghost than the shattering spiritual implications for those who see it. "The House Surgeon" (*Actions and Reactions*, 1909) unravels a complex haunting in which the fearful shadow of one living person's obsession troubles a whole household... including its dead.

Strange dreams and time-dislocated perceptions recur in the best fantasies. "The Finest Story in the World" (*Many Inventions*) features a unimportant man who reports vivid, tantalizing glimpses of past lives – but to Kipling the narrator's frustration he rejects ancient mysteries for the throes of young love. In "The Bridge-Builders" (*The Day's Work*, 1898) a new Ganges bridge is threatened by both floods and old Hindi gods, who argue its fate while the English engineer and builder overhears them in a haze of opium. "The Brushwood Boy" (*ibid*) contains one of literature's few successful depictions of a dream country with the skewed logic, geography and menace of dreams: the perfect (indeed, too good to be true) young soldier who has dreamt all his life of this landscape eventually finds in reality the woman he repeatedly met there. "Wireless" (*Traffics and Discoveries*) hints at a resonance across time mediated by nearby amateur radio experiments, as a tipsy chemist's assistant, dying like John Keats from TB, tries to write poetry for his girlfriend (named, like Keats's, Fanny) and, drafting and redrafting, converges unknowingly on famous lines from "The Eve of St Agnes" and "Kubla Khan". Two people's recurring fits of horrors in "In the Same Boat" (*A Diversity of Creatures*) are finally vanquished when traced to shocks experienced by the victims' pregnant mothers (shades of Dianetics!).

Kipling's best-known vein of fantasy is the anthropomorphic, with speaking beasts or inanimate objects. The tales of Mowgli (*The Jungle Book*, 1894, and *The Second Jungle Book*, 1895), the child adopted by wolves and grown into a more convincingly complex Jungle Lord than Tarzan, have the raw force of myth. Many scenes are unforgettable: the ransoming of the infant Mowgli from the tiger who claims him; his assertion of dominance over the wolf-council by wielding the "Red Flower", fire; the terrible dance of Kaa the python that hypnotizes monkeys into his jaws, while Mowgli's eyes see only an old snake

wriggling ("Kaa's Hunting", *The Jungle Book*); the bloodless yet devastating erasure of the village that mistreated Mowgli's adoptive parents ("Letting in the Jungle", *The Second Jungle Book*); the ancient cobra guarding forgotten treasure in the Cold Lairs, and the brutal parable of greed and murder that follows when one item strays from this hoard ("The King's Ankus", *The Second Jungle Book*); the campaign against a huge pack of the feared dhole-dogs, culminating in bloodbath ("Red Dog", *The Second Jungle Book*).... The Disney movie travesty conveys little of these stories' intensity.

The tall tales and whimsical fables of *Just So Stories* (1902) contrast strongly with the Jungle Books' careful realism – offering exuberantly daft "origin myths" for the whale's narrow throat, the camel's hump, the rhinoceros' skin, the leopard's spots, the elephant's trunk, etc. They should be read aloud.

Other chatty-animal stories include "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" (*The Jungle Book*) with its epic battle between cobras and the eponymous mongoose hero; "The Undertakers" (*The Second Jungle Book*), a professional dialogue amongst scavengers (jackal, adjutant-crane and crocodile) with a grisly conclusion; and "A Walking Delegate" (*The Day's Work*) and "The Mother Hive" (*Actions and Reactions*), political parables where dissidents are pictured respectively as a seditious horse preaching democracy rather than obedience to human Law, and an infestation of wax-moth destroying the hive whose weak bees listen to liberal sentiments.

The Law is always important: the harsh Jungle Law or Army discipline (cf. "The Army of a Dream" in *Traffics and Discoveries*, that dire wish-fulfilment fantasy of a perfect national army in militarized England), or the kindlier but now politically unacceptable administration of the Raj which in many stories treats Indian natives as unruly children. The Law is also co-operation, as discovered by the myriad individualized components of "The Ship That Found Herself" (*The Day's Work*), which learn to work together during a rough maiden voyage. Another inanimate fantasy, ".007", features railway engines: .007 isn't accepted by his fellow-steamers until a heroic rescue mission....

Some tales deal in myth or eschatology, like the astrological fable of fate and death "The Children of the Zodiac" (*Many Inventions*), the Arabesque Adam-and-Eve variant "The Enemies To Each Other" (*A Diversity of Creatures*), "The Gardener" (*ibid*) with its near-subliminal hint of Christ's presence, and two linked stories of the celestial Civil Service – "On the Gate: a Tale of '16" (*ibid*) and "Unconvenanted Mercies" (*Limits and Renewals*, 1932) – showing Heaven and Hell as

bureaucracies whose officials (including Death, St Peter, Gabriel and Satan) do their best for human souls by juggling with the letter of biblical Law.

Puck of Pook's Hill (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910) comprise lively historical vignettes, framed by the device of Puck conjuring figures from the past to entertain and educate children. Some are fantasies: "Dymchurch Flit" (*Puck of Pook's Hill*) definitively relates the departure of the Fair Folk, "Cold Iron" (*Rewards and Fairies*) shows the dreams of elves wrecked by the work of a smith-god, and "The Knife and the Naked Chalk" (*ibid*) depicts myth in the making as the prehistoric man who paid a fearful price for the secret of iron must become a god, separated by divinity from his people and intended woman.

The late *"Thy Servant a Dog"* (1930), an obsessively twee narration from the canine viewpoint, is not highly regarded.

Kipling's science fiction also deserves attention, notably the airship sequence "With the Night Mail" (*Actions and Reactions*) and "As Easy As A.B.C." (*A Diversity of Creatures*). The borderline story, "A Matter of Fact" (*Many Inventions*) describes the sighting of fantastic sea monsters with intense realism; another, "A Doctor of Medicine" (*Rewards and Fairies*) is a *tour de force* of astrological reasoning which by wild luck indicates that the Black Death can be countered by killing rats.

Although his stories need closer attention from us than from his contemporaries, Kipling's range and power remain deeply impressive. In 1907 he was the first Briton to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature.

C.S. Lewis (1996)

Lewis, C.S. (Clive Staples)

Nationality: British. **Born:** Belfast, 1898. **Died:** 1963.

Besides his scholarly work as an English don from 1925 to his death, C.S. Lewis had twin literary careers in fantasy and Christian apologetics – often shading into each other. Skipping the juvenilia (the *Boxen* animal fantasies, wisely unpublished in Lewis's lifetime), his first book-length fantasy was *The Pilgrim's Regress*. This allegory of his own path to religion takes place in a carefully mapped spiritual landscape full of vivid images (like the oppressive giant of Freudian analysis whose gaze makes one's skin transparent and shows the nasty mess within), but is frequently too personal, allusive and obscure – even in the revised edition with explanatory running heads.

Lewis's best-known work of apologetics is the epistolary *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), an experienced demon's advice to an inept tempter. This is good reading even for non-Christians: it's entertaining, it offers between the lines a sinisterly grotesque picture of Hell's "Lowerarchy", and there is much shrewd character analysis. Lewis had a clear eye for the little lazinesses and snobberies which, whether or not you call them sins, do deaden and poison human relations. Such insight permeates the allegory *The Great Divorce* (1945), where Hell is a suburb of infinite dreariness whose occupants are self-damned: even a day trip to Heaven persuades few of them to abandon their comforting character flaws.

The Ransom or Cosmic trilogy begins as SF in *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), an exhilarating story whose science is wonky but leads to unforgettable descriptions of Malacandra, an impossible and beautiful Mars with three intriguing "human" races. It is explored by Ransom, a philologist abducted there by the wicked scientist Weston. The book was written partly in response to H.G. Wells's repulsive Martians and to the scientism Lewis saw in Wells: a cruelly funny scene shows Weston explaining vaulting human ambitions for planetary conquest to Malacandra's tutelary "eldil" – but the rhetoric must be literally translated by Ransom, emerging as *reductio ad absurdum* pidgin.

In *Perelandra* (1943), Ransom is wafted to a Venus which nods to SF tradition by being mostly ocean, with floating vegetable islands whose

disorienting beauty inspires Lewis's most evocative descriptive passages. The ambiguous mysticism of book 1 resolves into clear theology: eldils are not just energy beings but angels; the "silent planet" Earth is, uniquely, the domain of the fallen or "bent" eldil; Perelandra/Venus is unfallen, with the loss of Eden still in the balance. Weston, now a puppet of evil in its most horridly banal form, tempts this world's green-skinned Eve to defy an arbitrary prohibition issued by Maleldil, or God. After many weary arguments, Ransom concludes (unflatteringly to the naive but intelligent lady) that the only way to save her is to fight and kill the tempter.

That Hideous Strength (1945) takes the story to Earth and presents evil in fearfully plausible form: the National Institute for Co-ordinated Experiments, supposedly a cutting-edge research organization given special powers as in some Soviet five-year plan. This takes over an English town via devious manipulations in academia, ensnaring recruits with the temptation Lewis identified as that of the Inner Ring – where getting into a coveted clique becomes more important than the morality of what the inner circle *does*. Further into NICE, the idea of scientific impartiality is warped into a dehumanizing process, involving the sinister irrationalities of the "Objective Room" that boils empathy out of its subjects. At the centre of the maze, a bodiless human head exists in a state of obscene pseudo-life (reacting to a notion in J.D. Bernal's 1929 futurological squib *The World, the Flesh and the Devil*, about trading our bodies for improved mechanical versions). The Head is animated by Earth's dark eldils, which the NICE scientific magicians cannot recognize as evil spirits but call "macrobes".

Against this almost hysterically hateful set-up, there is only Ransom (transfigured by Venusian experiences but also incurably wounded, and calling himself Mr Fisher-King) with his household of good folk and animals, plus the new recruit Jane who in dreams is a reluctant seer. But Merlin lies sleeping nearby, and both factions hope for his assistance.... Some fine scenes ensue, notably the NICE banquet on which the curse of Babel is laid, and the terrible ends of the institute and its leaders. There are also flashes of annoying unfairness, as when H.G. Wells (then dying) appears as a vulgar, uneducated Cockney, or when Jane is unanswerably told that by using contraception she has caused a great saviour of Britain not to be born – a put-down Lewis would hardly have tried on an equally childless virgin or nun. Overall, the novel's heartfelt strength outweighs the flaws.

The seven Narnia books have been highly popular since their first appearance, not only with the intended young audience. *The Lion, the*

Witch and the Wardrobe (1950) introduces four children (through the wardrobe's portal) to the land of Narnia, locked in winter by the Witch's magic and peopled with fauns, giants and talking beasts. One child's betrayal is redeemed by the lion Aslan, who suffers a kind of crucifixion (and in later books is explicitly equated with Christ), followed by resurrection and the overthrow of evil. The children reign over Narnia for decades but ultimately return through the wardrobe, no older than before.

In *Prince Caspian* (1951) they are recalled to a Narnia long after their rule, to help Caspian and the country's magical creatures rise against a long tyranny of intolerant human invaders. Aslan is more elusive here. One of Narnia's best-loved characters is introduced: Reepicheep, a talking mouse whose spirit and magniloquence are far larger than his body. *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* (1952) relates a marvellous sea-journey led by Caspian, to strange islands and ultimately the shores of "Aslan's country" itself. En route, a further unregenerate child from Earth is taught needed lessons by temporary and uncomfortable transformation into a dragon. *The Silver Chair* (1953) happens at the end of the now aged Caspian's reign: two earthly children travel beyond Narnia (ably assisted by Puddleglum, the enjoyably Eeyorish "Marsh-wiggle" whose pessimism conceals both good sense and competence), seeking Caspian's magically abducted son, and suffer shocks and reversals as – usually in hindsight – they realize their failure to follow the *exact letter* of Aslan's instructions. *The Horse and His Boy* (1954) backtracks to the Golden Age of that long reign in book 1, with the adventures of a fugitive Narnian talking horse and his boy companion in Calormene, a generic Arabia that has designs on Narnia to the north. Aslan keeps popping up to push along the plot and deal out punishments for small sins.

At the beginning of Narnia's chronology, when on Earth "Mr Sherlock Holmes was still living in Baker Street", *The Magician's Nephew* (1955) accounts for various anomalies: the wardrobe, the street-lamp burning in the Narnian waste, the land's tradition of human rulers, and the parallel-world origin of the Witch. In one of Lewis's most numinous scenes, Aslan actually sings Narnia out of the void and into existence. Concluding the saga, *The Last Battle* (1956) deploys Narnian-scale versions of Antichrist's emergence, Armageddon, and the Last Judgement. Night falls on Narnia and the door is shut on it forever. After this intensely moving farewell, the sequel in heaven (which is also Narnia, England, and everywhere) seems anticlimactic, with non-believers perhaps finding it hard to swallow a happy ending where everybody dies.

As a whole the series is wildly uneven and inconsistent: but its

combination of sheer imaginative exuberance and frequent sense of fun works well, and the high moments can still bring a suspicious prickling to the eyes of jaded adults.

Lewis's last adult novel *Till We Have Faces* (1956) is a highly competent and harrowing retelling of the Eros and Psyche myth from an unusual viewpoint, but somehow lacks magic – as do the oddments collected in *The Dark Tower* (1977), whose title fragment is something of an embarrassment. The posthumously collected *Poems* (1964) feature several fantastic items, including a "Narnian Suite".

William Mayne (1996)

Mayne, William

Nationality: British. **Born:** Kingston upon Hull, Yorkshire, 1928.

Willam Mayne is a subtle, sophisticated author whose work (like Alan Garner's) is not always easily pigeonholed as being for children. Oblique strokes of fantasy run through his large output, sometimes almost invisible, sometimes rationalized away... there is a genuine creepiness in the noisy marsh `dragon of *The Member for the Marsh* (1956), which proves to be a pumping engine.

Earthfasts (1966) may be his finest tale of the supernatural, with its lovingly described Yorkshire countryside shadowed with increasing strangeness and disorientation as time goes out of joint. A regimental drummer boy emerges into the 1960s after what he experienced as a few minutes' underground treasure-hunt in 1742. With him comes a candle whose cold-burning flame is measuring a different time; this remains above ground after he has (quite soon) walked drumming back into a crevice seemingly only eight inches wide.

Earth is disturbed. Standing stones move. Giants, boggarts and wild boar are abroad. Two engaging modern boys struggle to make sense of the upheaval with uncertain tools of logical and scientific thought – each inclined to scepticism, each half resentful, half glad that the other has also witnessed the incredible. One stares too long into the otherworld light of the candle, and is taken by a strange calamity as a crack of "clear darkness, with the clearness... of bramble jelly" opens across earth and sky. Some harrowing while later, there's a satisfactory resolution.

Earthfasts succeeds through Mayne's sense of place, precise ear for conversation and dialect, and ability to describe the enigmatic with clarity while preserving its enigma.

More ambiguity is packed into the slim *A Game of Dark* (1971), both an evocatively written fantasy performance and – conceivably – not fantasy but a tale of neurosis, of a boy finding hallucinated metaphors for issues he can't deal with. Donald phases between repressed family life in our world and a bleak mediaeval town besieged by the malevolent Worm. This icy-white, stinking, limbless monster seems a multiplex echo of Donald's crippled father (white-haired, white-faced, full of censorious godliness), his dislike for said father, and his guilt at feeling dislike. Other

real-life characters are similarly refracted in the alternate world which Donald calls his “game of darkness”.

The spare conclusion is fraught with possible readings. Donald’s alter-ego slays the Worm, but not honourably; the restrictions on how knights may act prove as painful as those on what, between mother, father and son, can be said. In reality, the father evidently dies. Having renounced fantasy, the son goes to sleep consoled... by having metaphorically killed his sire, by having learned to love him even too late, or merely because “the dreadful breathing” of sickness no longer sounds through the house? This whole dark game is not easily forgotten.

IT (1977) is another notable supernatural performance, lighter-hearted and often funny despite M.R. James-like horror *frissons*: heroine Alice gropes for the buried foot of an old stone cross, and feels a dry, rough hand take hers. Her story sympathetically shows the problems of a highly imaginative and thus “difficult” child. Against a modern ecclesiastical background the familiar of a centuries-dead witch is freed, leading to much bizarre poltergeist activity. Alice must either lay “IT” to rest or accept it as a companion and source of power, an uneasy decision made grimmer by the implication that she herself killed the witch through an accident of fractured time. The final choice of exorcism involves not bell, book and candle but an amusing labyrinth of committee meetings as by filibustering and bribery Alice reorganizes the town’s traditional St Cuthbert Parade to take a route whose pattern can loose and bind.

These are fantasy highlights from a large, mixed output, all written with the same sure touch... the only niggle being that sometimes it seems over-subtle for the age groups Mayne is ostensibly addressing. But he never underestimates children’s abilities and, perhaps, neither should we.

Anne McCaffrey (2003)

Anne McCaffrey has stated firmly that she is a science fiction storyteller and does not permit the label "fantasy" to be attached to her work. Yet paradoxically her most successful fiction has a mythic, even a fairytale, quality. Her famed dragons inevitably carry a weight of legendary associations, while characters often echo the archetypes of Cinderella or the Ugly Duckling as they rise to successful swanhood. It is this quality which entices critics to class her storytelling as "science fantasy" and even to discuss her SF in fantasy terms – see, for example, the entry devoted to her in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (ed. John Clute and John Grant, 1997). As Brian Aldiss put it in his essay "Science Fiction's Mother Figure" (in *The Pale Shadow of Science*, 1985), using phraseology perhaps more acceptable to McCaffrey herself:

> Anne McCaffrey's dragon novels hover between legend, fairy tale, and science fiction. "Pure" science fiction is chimerical. Its strength lies in its appetite.

Anne Inez McCaffrey was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts on 1 April 1926, and took her B.A. in Slavonic language and literature at Radcliffe College (Cambridge, MA) in 1947. Later academic study of meteorology brought her to the City of Dublin University in Ireland, a country which since 1970 has been her permanent residence. She was married to E. Wright Johnson from 1950 until divorce in 1970; they had three children. Her first fiction sale was the short story "Freedom of the Race", which appeared in *Science Fiction Plus* magazine in 1953.

McCaffrey's first novel, *Restoree* (1967), is a light-hearted confection of romance and space opera whose engaging heroine Sara has painful memories of being the Ugly Duckling. Low on self-esteem, with hairy arms and an oversized nose, she's one of many victims harvested from Earth by repulsive aliens who flay, butcher, and (apparently) eat human prey. By various strokes of luck, Sara reaches planet Lothar – whose people have long battled those same aliens – and finds herself technomagically "restored" as a ravishing beauty with perfect, golden skin. After various setbacks of melodramatic action-adventure, she catalyses the needed purge of corrupt Lotharian politics and finds true love with a man of high birth. It's a likeable romp. A large part of McCaffrey's charm has to do with her unashamed, though here intentionally parodic, use of

elements from the Gothic or romantic novel traditions in an SF context.

The author's best known and most successful piece of SF myth-making soon followed, with the publication of the first stories about the Dragonriders of Pern, both in *Analog* magazine. "Weyr Search" appeared in the October 1967 issue, and "Dragonrider" in two parts, December 1967 and January 1968.

It was one of those rare occasions when something new to the SF scene wins immediate mass acclaim. *Analog*'s editor John W. Campbell gave both stories star billing on the front cover. The readers, by popular vote, honoured "Weyr Search" with the 1968 Hugo award for best novella... the first ever win by a woman in any Hugo fiction category. McCaffrey's fellow authors in the SF Writers of America gave their own accolade to "Dragonrider": the Nebula award, again as best novella. With such acclaim from both the fans and the professionals, a one-volume edition of the complete story soon followed: *Dragonflight* (1968). The long saga of Pern was launched.

Again the term "science fantasy" hovers ominously. This is a medieval-seeming world of vaguely feudal society, lords and ladies, craft guilds guarding their secrets, knife duels to the death as an accepted form of litigation, magical-seeming powers of the mind, and – above all – the intelligent, telepathic, highly sympathetic dragons. When asked for her preferred description, the author said:

> Soft-core science fiction, in other words, the science does not dominate the story. It's the interplay and interactions of the characters with the science of their planet, not necessarily the science itself. (Interview by David V. Barrett, *Vector* 123, 1984.)

It can be argued that McCaffrey is consciously and rather ingeniously having it both ways, drawing on the power of mythic fantasy tropes while at the same time deconstructing them in SF terms. The prologue of "Weyr Search", as incorporated into *Dragonflight,* sets this up explicitly:

> When is a legend legend? Why is a myth a myth? How old and disused must a fact be for it to be relegated to the category "Fairy-tale"? And why do certain facts remain incontrovertible while others lose their validity to assume a shabby, unstable character?
>
> Rukbat, in the Sagittarian system, was a golden G-type star. It had five planets...

With the SF ground rules of the planet Pern stated, the main story opens in

more fantastical mode with the dragonriders' ritual Search for a strong woman who can bond with and ride a soon-to-be-hatched golden dragon. Such queen dragons, now terribly rare, are the all-important breeders. The leadership of a Weyr, an enclave of dragons and riders, is determined by the queens' mating flights: the Weyrleader will be the male human partner of the male dragon (bronze or brown) chosen by the Weyrwoman's queen – a curious form of arranged marriage.

This entire social system is heavy with a sense of stagnation, of rituals which like those of Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast have long since become detached from common sense. Why is it important for the Pernese to live in fortified Holds, to scour all vegetation from near their dwellings, to pay a tithe to Dragonweyrs which for centuries have had no obvious function? Only the sharp-witted dragonrider F'lar has pored over badly preserved historical records to deduce that the legendary menace of "Thread" falling from the sky – the whole reason for the Weyrs' existence – is real and will shortly return.

Astrology in general may be nonsense, but on Pern there's significance in heavenly portents. The Red Star, a rogue planet loose in the Rukbat system, hasn't made a close approach to Pern in four hundred Turns, four local centuries. But when it does, spores of its native life can cross space and fall to devastate Pern's crops and animals, unless they are sterilized by fire or dragon-flame. An oral tradition of ancient teaching ballads warns of the Red Star's conjunction with man-made landmarks, the Finger Rock and Eye Rock:

> The Finger points
> At an Eye blood-red
> Alert the Weyrs
> To sear the Thread.

Such gnomic ballad fragments appear as epigraphs to each chapter of *Dragonflight*, hinting at a long historical background and usefully enhancing the atmosphere of legendary doings.

A particularly memorable Cinderella figure in this novel is the small but tempestuous girl Lessa, who at the outset is quite literally a kitchen drudge, permanently filthy and much bullied and knocked about by her "betters". Soon enough a handsome prince – F'lar the ambitious dragonrider, on Search – arrives to recognize this jewel of pure lineage and psychic talent hidden among grimy pots and pans. Lessa is no passive heroine, though, and the desperately needed reorganization of the sole remaining Weyr to face the return of Thread is much complicated by

tensions between this wilful new Weyrwoman and F'lar. For some while the relationship is stormy owing to an initial sexual encounter which comes inadvertently close to rape.

One of the recurring scenes of the Pern series, in which considerable emotion is always invested, is the psychic bonding or "Impression" of a newborn dragon by a human. It's a kind of exalted sublimation of the children's-fiction trope of a young rider's rapturous love of her (less often, his) first mount, but here reciprocated and lifelong. McCaffrey is herself a lover of horses, and has for many years run a thoroughbred stud farm in her adopted country of Ireland.

The inevitable downside of this unbreakable bond is that dragons kill themselves rather than live on after the deaths of their riders, while riders who lose their dragons are emotionally crippled. Another side effect is that the passions of mating dragons spill over to their human partners. In the heat of the mating flight of Lessa's golden dragon Ramoth and F'lar's bronze Mnementh, the virgin Weyrwoman is taken unawares, almost unwillingly, by her and the Weyrleader's inflamed desires.

Despite this slightly Gothic shadow over the novel's chief romantic pairing, the story moves on briskly and enjoyably. A single under-strength garrison, Benden Weyr, needs to police all Pern against Threadfall – putting great stress on the dragons despite their innate talent of teleporting through the frigid nonspace known as "*between*" to any distant location that dragon or rider can visualize. Thanks to Lessa's wilful disobedience when learning this new discipline, she and Ramoth stumble across the extended ability to jump *between* times, leading to a notable coup as F'lar's dragon forces leap back two hours to make an impossible rendezvous with the first, missed fall of Thread.

There are rousing aerial battles to defend Pern's croplands and forest against the searing, destructive effect of Thread, while at ground level the hunt is on for forgotten technologies – such as flamethrower construction – which can mop up spores missed by the dragons. Overall the cause seems hopeless without the other Weyrs, now empty, whose inhabitants mysteriously went missing centuries ago... until Lessa deduces where and when they must have gone.

In a neat updating of the mythic tradition of supernatural help from the deep past (like King Arthur sleeping through the ages until Britain's time of greatest need, or the oath-compelled assistance of the cursed Dead in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*), Lessa and Ramoth make a hazardous and draining 400-year backward jump. The Weyrs of long ago learn that they are needed in the future, and – excepting Benden – set their

course through time for the hour of Pern's greatest need. *Dragonflight* proceeds to a satisfactory conclusion with the arrival of copious reinforcements to help save Pern, and the reunion of F'lar with Lessa.

The closing scene leaves the dragonriders, past and present, joyously carrying out their proper function of battling the Threadfalls which will continue for decades. One prophetic aside suggests the shape of sequels to come:

> ...F'lar shook his fist defiantly at the winking Red Eye of the Star.
>
> "One day," he shouted, "we will not sit tamely here, awaiting your fall. We will fall on you, where you spin, and sear you on your own ground."
>
> By the Egg, he told himself, if we can travel four hundred Turns backward and across seas and lands in the blink of an eye, what is travel from one world to another but a different kind of step?

In the year after *Dragonflight*, McCaffrey published the collection of linked stories which she frequently describes as the personal favourite among all her books: *The Ship Who Sang* (1969). Far more evidently than the dragon saga, this is straight science fiction whose heroine Helva is the cyborg "brain" of an interstellar spaceship which has adventures and gets into scrapes in a variety of solar systems.

Again, though, there are underlying mythic resonances which lift this book above the general run of space opera. Helva is an ugly duckling, incurably deformed since birth, a condition introduced without compromise in the opening lines:

> She was born a thing and as such would be condemned if she failed to pass the encephalograph test required of all new-born babies. There was always the possibility that though the limbs were twisted, the mind was not...

Luckily Helva has a fine mind, which wins part of her rise to swan status. She duly becomes an augmented human, a cyborg "shell person" capable of connecting to and running a spacecraft, a manufacturing plant or even a city as though it were her own useless body. Uniquely among all her peers, she surmounts inbuilt physical obstacles to develop a remarkable singing voice which becomes her trademark. Helva is "the ship who sings."

Additionally she carries fairytale echoes of the enchanted princess in a tower of iron (that is, her spaceship), desired but inaccessible. McCaffrey

imagines the relation between a brain ship and her ambulant "brawn" partner as potentially highly romantic, rather after the medieval tradition of Courtly Love for a lady who – being intractably virtuous and usually married to another man – can be the object of pure, noble passion untainted by any aspect of physical lovemaking. Indeed Helva preserves her "virtue" or personal integrity in an episode of alien cultural exchange where her mind is temporarily transferred to a physical (though nonhuman) body, and she is offered the choice of making this escape permanent. Spurning temptation, she chooses to remain a spaceship.

The loss of Helva's first, platonically beloved partner climaxes the initial story "The Ship Who Sang" (published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 1961) with a heartfelt evocation of grief. For the author it was very personal:

> ...I knew it was dramatically correct, and effective. I did not realize as I wrote that I was trying to assuage my grief over my father's death. I still am. ("My Favourite Story", in *The New York Review of Science Fiction* 27, November 1990.)

Another parallel with Courtly Love concerns the legends of suitors who become besotted with a picture of a Lady they have never met. The twelfth-century Provençal poet Geoffrey Rudel, for example, supposedly fell in love sight unseen with the Countess of Tripoli and journeyed to his death to see her – as recorded in Algernon Charles Swinburne's poem "The Triumph of Time" (1878):

> There lived a singer in France of old
> By the tideless dolorous midland sea.
> In a land of sand and ruin and gold
> There shone one woman, and none but she.
> And finding life for her love's sake fail,
> Being fain to see her, he bade set sail,
> Touched land, and saw her as life grew cold,
> And praised God, seeing; and so died he.

Just so, a later partner of Helva falls helplessly in love with the beauty of a computer extrapolation of her genetic make-up, an image showing how she might have looked without that accident of birth. The outcome is less tragic than Rudel's story, with this finally successful partner satisfied with a platonic exchange of conversation and the occasional symbolic caress of Helva's control panel, while she regales him with good coffee and exquisite song. It is one of SF's strangest happy endings.

The importance of music in Anne McCaffrey's life shows clearly in the Helva stories, and a related episode of autobiography was the inspirational seed for *The Crystal Singer* (1982, expanded from two of four linked stories in the four *Continuum* SF anthologies ed. Roger Elwood, 1974-1975). In an author's note which appears in several books, she mentions that she "studied voice production for nine years before arriving at the horrifying conclusion that I was a better stage-director of opera than a singer." (*Dragonflight*, Corgi UK paperback edition, 1970.) Her singing heroine Killashandra reacts with similar horror when told after ten years' arduous study that despite her perfect pitch, an "unpleasant burr" makes her voice "unsuited to the dynamics of opera", and her intended career as a top soloist is out of the question.

> Unfair! Unfair! How could she be allowed to come so far, be permitted to herself, only to be dashed down in the peneultimate trial? And to be offered, as a sop, choral leadership? How degradingly ignominious!

Killashandra's flawed voice makes her another ugly duckling, but she soon learns she has the potential to be a swan on the mystery-shrouded planet Ballybran. Here the singers of the Heptite Guild locate and mine precious crystals *via* the power of song, recalling the mages of Finland's Kalevala legends, whose potent singing can reshape the physical world. Of course Killashandra is a tremendous success on Ballybran, emerging from her symbiotic adaptation to the planetary ecology with greatly enhanced senses (many candidates are deafened or disabled) and a strong affinity for the especially valuable black crystal which is the central component of instantaneous long-range communication systems.

As on Lothar and Pern, dangerous exertions or exploits on Ballybran are followed by the sensual pleasures of hot baths, good food, and generally joyous and guilt-free sex. There is a touch of formula here, but it's a useful and time-tested formula. Even better than sex, though, is the magical experience of mining and communing with that subjectively anthropomorphized crystal:

> Killashandra set her nerves for the first incision of the infra-sonic cutter and was relieved to endure less of a shock. Relieved, and dismayed. Was the claim admitting her right to it by lack of protest? Or did one day attune her body to the resonance? She had half wished to experience that pleasuring, that nerve-caressing distraction, as if a highly-skilled lover were inside her body.

Although the career of crystal singer offers not only such ecstasies but greatly prolonged lifespan, there are repeated warnings about the darker aspects of this devil's bargain. These include Ballybran's deadly "mach storms", physical addiction to the planet so that too long an absence can lead to the kind of rapid ageing and death suffered by old-timers who dare to leave the legendary valley of Shangri-La, and chronic memory loss. Indeed the original four-story telling ends in tragedy for our heroine in "Killashandra – Coda and Finale" (*Continuum* 4, 1975), an episode omitted from the sunnier novel.

All three books so far discussed developed from shorter work and led to sequels or spinoffs. The "Dragonrider" series is the most extensive and popular. The "Crystal Singer" series comprises three books, the second and third being rather less intense space-operatic adventures than the debut: *Killashandra* (1985) and *Crystal Line* (1992). In the case of *The Ship Who Sang*, McCaffrey indicated reluctance to write more about Helva...

> ...because *The Ship Who Sang* was sort of my escape valve for a lot of tensions that were in my life in that decade, let's say. Those pressures have since been released or become non-existent. You can't somehow return to a scene like that as easily as you think you can, so I have avoided going back to the Helva setting. [...] Anyway, you can stretch a theme too far. It becomes too fragile and falls apart. So it's better to push yourself away from the table while you're still a bit hungry. (Interview by Chris Morgan, *Extro* 3, July/August 1982)

So there have been no further books with Helva as heroine, although two short stories form pendants to the original collection: "Honeymoon" in *Get Off the Unicorn* (1977) and "The Ship That Returned" in *Far Horizons* ed. Robert Silverberg (1999). By way of compromise, McCaffrey has allowed other authors to co-write independent novels in this "Helva setting", featuring other brain ships and cyborg city-controllers as their lead characters. The results – see bibliography – are competent and modestly entertaining, but lacking in magic.

Some further examples of McCaffrey's many SF series should be briefly mentioned. The "Talent" or "Pegasus" sequence deals with the development, misuse, restraint and eventual commercial harnessing of such psionic powers as telepathy and teleportation in a realistic future setting. *To Ride Pegasus* (1973) is a collection of linked near-future stories, followed after some lapse of time (and a couple of generations of

interior chronology) by the novels *Pegasus in Flight* (1990) and *Pegasus in Space* (2000). The latter are feelgood SF adventures, laden with romance, warm friendships and hearty meals; villains appear but tend to be dealt with almost too rapidly to allow dramatic suspense.

A related series set much farther in the future began with *The Rowan* (1990), whose seed was the short "Lady in the Tower" (*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 1959) and which retrospectively acquired the overall title "The Tower and the Hive" as it developed into a multi-generational saga of psionics, romance, and interstellar clashes with genocidal alien "Hivers". The first book's eponymous heroine and her even more talented male partner are still going strong with a large supporting cast of children and grandchildren in the fifth volume, *The Tower and the Hive* (1999). By this point the series has become curiously slapdash, and in place of *Dragonflight*'s adroit, tantalizing feeding of background data into narrative there are information dumps as clumsy as the following:

> "Had the Hivers but known they had met their match in Jeff Raven and Angharad Gwyn aka the Rowan as partners *[the speaker, Thian, is referring to his own grandparents]*, they might have quit while they were ahead."
>
> "Not while there were Hiver queens needing planets to colonize," Clancy put in.
>
> "And that, of course, brought the entire FT&T organization in at the time of the Deneb Penetration with the Rowan as the focus for the Mind Merge that helped Jeff Raven despatch the Hiver Scouts trying to depopulate his home world.
>
> "And why the Mrdinis decided to ask us, through Mother and Dad, to join forces and defeat the Hivers," Thian said, "since we could take out a Hiver Sphere without having to resort to suicide missions." He leaned back again, pleased with his summation of the events leading up to recent developments...

Still other series include the "Catteni" and "Acorna" books. The former SF adventures begin with *Freedom's Landing* (1995), spun off from the rather unpromising short "The Thorns of Barevi" from *The Disappearing Future* ed. George Hay (1970), whose heroine incautiously rescues one of the super-strong humanoid Catteni, is "rewarded" against her will with forced sex, and very rapidly comes to like it. *Acorna: The Unicorn Girl* (1997), with Margaret Ball credited as co-author, is a text version of what had been first planned as a graphic or heavily illustrated novel. The not-quite-

human girl Acorna's forehead horn can – like the classical unicorn's – both heal and purify. Her various undemanding space adventures have an air of being aimed at younger readers; critics have suggested that despite the joint author credit (with Elizabeth Ann Scarborough replacing Ball from the third volume on), McCaffrey's contribution to these novels is minimal.

Meanwhile the great success story of the "Dragonrider" series goes on, with no co-authors admitted to this heartland of Anne McCaffrey's literary territory. The original *Dragonflight* has generated not only direct sequels but parallel subseries and a number of prequels set in the distant past.

The main storyline continues in *Dragonquest* (1971) and *The White Dragon* (1978). With the immediate danger of Thread held at bay by the "Oldtimer" reinforcements, some of the tension shifts to political and social issues, in particular the difficulties of accommodating the inflexibly arrogant Oldtimer dragonfolk into the more relaxed, even progressive society of modern Pern. Two new developments with a mythic frisson are the realization of a misinterpreted prophecy and a near-literal trip to Hell.

The prophecy: farmers have long been told to "watch for" certain grubs in the fields, and have dutifully been destroying them, not knowing that these unprepossessing creatures were engineered as a slowly evolving biological defence against Thread, which they eat with impunity despite its searing effect on all other organic life. The hellride: a dragon can go anywhere its rider can visualize, and with the aid of sightings through a newly re-invented telescope, F'lar's half-brother F'nor makes a near-disastrous trip *between* to the unspeakable, airless, corrosive environment of the Red Star. The dream of destroying Thread at source is, after all, impossible – which temporarily defers the need to answer an agonized question posed to F'lar in *Dragonquest*:

> "Son of my father," began F'nor, "if dragonmen clear the Star of Thread, what further purpose is there for them?"

Other novelties include the small, cute "fire lizards" native to Pern, from which the dragons were laboriously bred, and various fragments of rediscovered technology. Although the dragons themselves remain magical, and McCaffrey's descriptions of the mutual love between humans and their dragons (or fire lizards) strive for a lyrical intensity, there is a sense that the setting has lost its legend-shadowed innocence. Pern is riddled with understanding, by both characters and readers, of the SF machinery underlying its pageantry.

SF problem-solving brings F'nor's question to the fore once again, as continuing rediscovery of the first colonists' technology – including a functional artificial intelligence – makes it possible in *All the Weyrs of Pern* (1991) to scavenge the still-orbiting colony ships and alter the Red Star's orbit *via* a colossal antimatter explosion. Incidental use of suction-cup attachments in vacuum provides a further reminder that McCaffrey writes "soft" rather than "hard" SF. Most recently, *The Skies of Pern* (2001) proposes a new role for the Weyrs after a coincidental cometary impact devastates the planet. The resulting floods and tsunamis are conscientiously worked out, with credit to scientific advisers, but are generally familiar from all too many other SF treatments of the situation. Nevertheless, McCaffrey is able to end this novel with the reassurance "There will always be dragons in the skies of Pern!"

A less complicated Pernese spinoff is the "Harper Hall" subseries, written for children and running parallel with the main sequence: *Dragonsong* (1976), *Dragonsinger* (1977) and *Dragondrums* (1979). Musically gifted young girl Menolly is irrationally forbidden to make tunes in her harsh Sea Hold home, but becomes the envy of half Pern by Impressing a record nine fire lizards, and wins a place in the Harper Craft Hall by sheer talent – working closely with Masterharper Robinton, who since his introduction in *Dragonflight* has been an endearing and popular series character. With their convincing feel for music-making and childhood frustrations, these stories have an unsophisticated charm.

Other adult novels of Pern likewise parallel the main action, like *The Renegades of Pern* (1989) with its story of strife and revenge among the world's outcasts and misfits at the time of *The White Dragon* and *Dragondrums*. (A troubling continuity problem is that villainies of world-shaking importance in *Renegades* pass unnoticed in the world of *The White Dragon*.) Yet others are set in the saga's deep past. *Moreta: Dragonlady of Pern* (1983) relates a legend of earlier dragonriding days that's commemorated in a famous ballad by the era of *Dragonflight*, a tragedy of errors whose plotting is unfortunately clumsy as McCaffrey visibly steers the hapless heroine to her doom.

With *Dragonsdawn* (1988), the saga goes back to its initial SF roots as the ill-fated colonization ships arrive – full of characters whose names are familiar from Pernese settlements and landmarks – to meet the dangers of Threadfall, already well known to followers of the series. Genetic engineering produces dragons with startling rapidity. Further "early Pern" titles are *The Chronicles of Pern: First Fall* (1993) and *Red Star Rising* (1996; US title *Dragonseye*).

Although cynical readers and critics find McCaffrey's lesser work both exploitative in its sentimentality and prone to deliver overly simplistic solutions to her favoured characters' problems, she has won herself an immense, adoring audience – chiefly by her major original creation of Pern. Following the early Hugo and Nebula wins, her further genre awards include the Skylark (presented in memory of SF pioneer E.E. Smith), the 1979 Eurocon and Gandalf awards for *The White Dragon*, two 1980 Balrog awards for *Dragondrums* and for outstanding professional achievement, and the 2000 Karl Edward Wagner award for life achievement in fantasy. In 1999 she won the American Library Association's Margaret Edwards Award, for lifetime achievement in writing books for teenagers.

Anne McCaffrey's worldwide popularity continues, not despite but because she indulges her fondest readers' insatiable taste for more in similar vein. To quote the London *Times* review by Walter Ellis which appears on many British editions of her books, "Anne McCaffrey, one of the queens of science fiction, knows exactly how to give her public what it wants."

Dan McGirt (1996)

McGirt, Dan

Nationality: American. **Born:** Sylvester, Georgia, 1967.

Dan McGirt's novels mine a very well-explored vein of humorous fantasy... more in the tradition of Robert Asprin or Craig Shaw Gardner than Tom Holt or Terry Pratchett (despite a passing homage to the latter's Luggage, in the form of a chest made of "insipid wormwood" rather than "sapient pearwood").

In *Jason Cosmo* (1989) the eponymous hero, a quiet villager, is kicked into action by the discovery that bounty hunters are out to get him – since the unspeakable Dark Magic Society has for no apparent reason placed a large price on his head. Luckily befriended by the mirror-shaded wizard Mercury Boltblaster, he is prolongedly chased around a fairly standard fantasy land studded with droll names: Lower Hicksnittle, the Festering Wart Tavern, Offal, King Luggo, the Incredibly Dark Forest. It is found written on his aura that he is fated to be a Hero. A featherbrained solar goddess blesses him and grants him the strength of ten when standing in sunlight; he humorously acquires indestructible magic armour by filling out a questionnaire. One set-piece scene involves a SDI/laser-like magical defence system whose merry failure to function as intended is plonkingly signalled by its acronym AMOK.

There is an ultimate confrontation with the Dark Magic crew, and a happy ending. The jokes, alas, are not on average very good, while arbitary irruptions of magic, anachronism and attempted punchlines hamper any build-up of narrative suspense.

Royal Chaos (1990) and *Dirty Work* (1993) are follow-up novels which offer, essentially, more of the same. Cosmo goes up against further unbeatable menaces, and (aided by numerous props, plot devices and *deus ex machina* interventions) beats them. The third book in particular leans heavily on repetition: numerous passages, for example, in which the principal humour seems to be that they *are* so obviously padded. That the Assassins & Cutthroats Labour Union should be the ACLU might be worth a smile in America, but this surely fades after more than two dozen further uses of the initials.

Most tiresome is an increasingly frequent use of the very old gag of "postmodern" self-referentiality, with characters forever discussing their

own fictional development, the likely course of the plot (“Well obviously Solana is my new female lead, but I’m not supposed to realize that yet.”), the “subtle foreshadowing” in what’s just been said, etc. “Could you just get to the point?” “Not without a lot of buildup.” This summarizes too much of McGirt’s technique.

Occasional funny jokes can be found. Further volumes are unsubtly foreshadowed.

Hope Mirrlees (1996)

Mirrlees, Hope

Nationality: British. **Born:** 1887. **Died:** 1978.

Hope Mirrlees's one fantasy novel *Lud-in-the-Mist* (1926) is built – like Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market" – around the image of forbidden fairy fruit. Here, though, the fruit's rejection by the staid burghers of Lud is an error. The nearby Fairyland doesn't stand for prohibited sexual pleasures but for that whole complex of yearning, dissatisfaction and desire for inaccessible beauty that supposedly provokes lyric poets and creative artists.

The Mayor of Lud, Nathaniel Chanticleer, has been troubled all his life by the attraction and repulsion of a certain plangent strain of melancholy which he calls the Note... at one stage he did badly at cards since he couldn't bear to hold the high-scoring Lyre of Bones. The Note is associated with the "vulgar" song "Columbine" whose chorus haunts the book ("With lily, germander and sops in wine / With sweet-briar / And bon-fire / And strawberry-wire / And columbine.") and also with fairy fruit. But even to speak of the fruit is smutty talk in Lud – euphemisms are used, and the stuff has no existence in law (important throughout), so those who smuggle it must be amusingly prosecuted under the legal fiction that they imported contraband silk.

After his son is believed to have eaten the fruit, and his daughter is seduced away with her entire dancing class by fairy music, Chanticleer is stung into action against the fruit-smuggling operations of the sinister Dr Endymion Leer... only to be outwitted, humiliated, framed by fruit planted in his own home, and legally declared dead. Nevertheless he persists.

His investigations uncover the secret of an old murder, duly leading to several hangings: this is not the twee fairy-story indicated by the cover of its 1970s Ballantine Adult Fantasy reissue, but a tough-minded and witty as well as whimsical novel. (Several neat detective ploys appear: the sinister omen of blood oozing from a coffin is actually a clue to how forbidden, squashy fruits are being smuggled.) The point of the murder subplot is to hint that fairy fruit is not itself evil, the commerce in it having been tainted by this crime of the principal smugglers.

Ultimately, learning that his son has crossed the border into the Elfin Marches – thought in Lud to be wholly synonymous with death –

Chanticleer follows on a lurid nightmare journey to the brink of a black abyss. He can only leap.

The eventual result is that he and his son return; the borders are opened; fairy fruit becomes acceptable again, and is indeed candied for export in boxes, “the painted lids of which showed that art was creeping back”. Chanticleer is still not entirely satisfied – but rather than fearing it, longs to hear that Note again. With death, he may.

It is a moving book, shifting unpredictably from drollery to menace to a high poignancy that sticks in the mind.

Michael Moorcock (1996)

Moorcock, Michael.

Nationality: British. **Born:** Mitcham, Surrey, 1939.

Michael Moorcock is or at least has been a terrifyingly prolific author, who is pleased to make genre boundaries ooze and distort as in some painting by Dali. His mainstream work flows into his SF, the SF into the fantasy, generally within the context of all-encompassing jargon terms like the "multiverse" (a word the author was chagrined to learn was not his own coinage) or the Conjunction of the Million Spheres. The fantasy is not easily separated out.

Early "science fantasies" include the short stories of the warrior lord Sojan, and the Michael Kane **Warrior of Mars** trilogy, both rather clearly in the vein of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Somewhat more successful were the fantasies of Erekosë, *The Eternal Champion*, doomed forever to be reincarnated and fight once more against evil. This immediately establishes the keynote of the typical Moorcock fantasy hero: being doomed.

His first novel *The Golden Barge* (written in 1958 though not published in full until 1979) is an allegory much influenced by Mervyn Peake, in which the unlikable hero Jephraim Tallow successively rejects the lures of family, love, philosophy and power to follow the will-o'the'wisp Golden Barge which drifts downriver, always unattainable. The pursuit of the barge is disastrous; to reject the pursuit is worse.

Very soon a more durable doomed hero emerged: Elric of Melniboné, whose moody character is the best known in all the Moorcock multiverse. He lives in Byronic melancholy, tormented by his betrayals such as causing the downfall and diaspora of his own people. As a member of a vaguely elfin Elder Race in a world now human-dominated, he is an outsider. He owes too many debts to his patron demon Arioch. He is maimed, an albino forever lacking in strength, and thus exists in uneasy symbiosis with the Black Sword, Stormbringer, both hating and drawing power from its habit of feeding on opponents' souls to nourish its owner. The curse of the sword is that it is equally happy to gorge itself on allies, friends and lovers, and regularly claims all three. With it Elric travels through tainted, blasted or luridly surreal landscapes that throb with the pathetic fallacy....

The end of this myth is told in the series' first-written novel *Stormbringer* (cut version 1965; restored/revised 1977), whose headlong questing culminates with an apocalyptic battle wherein Elric supports the Law gods against his nominal masters of Chaos. A better, paler, duller world is born, with one leavening of chaos and old night: Stormbringer itself, which finally turns on its guilt-ridden master ("Farewell, friend. I was a thousand times more evil than thou") and flies free, promising interesting times.

Many further tales of Elric were squeezed into his (retrospectively) crowded life, incidentally making the series bibliographically complex as the stories in the initial Elric collection *The Stealer of Souls* (1963) were incorporated along with later material into an emerging chronology.

The smoky colours of the early tales are still striking, despite elements of the formulaic. For example, the amount of varied supernatural aid on which Elric is able to call does eventually become a little risible (and indeed certain over-the-top gestures and speeches are surely deliberately parodic... though only in *Elric at the End of Time* (1984), a semi-farcical crossover with the SF **Dancers at the End of Time** sequence, does Moorcock openly laugh at the doomed lord). Likewise, Elric's emotional agonies over his recurring betrayals and Stormbringer's fated slayings take on the air of over-familiar landmarks.

But Moorcock's nasty inventiveness remains impressive. Just as E.E. Smith took the space-opera formula far beyond its old boundaries by thinking on a galactic scale, so Moorcock escalated the action of sword-and-sorcery. Chaos does not wish merely to enslave some country but to transform the entire world into shifting, nightmare flux. Gods and demons plunge directly into the action, and like mortals can be killed or at least permanently expelled from this "plane". Again and again entire aspects of the multiverse hang in the balance... the Cosmic Balance, which is righted at the end of *Stormbringer* but soon goes awry elsewhere.

The 1967-1969 **Hawkmoon** or **Runestaff** tetralogy is more of a standard Good vs Evil saga, lacking a character of Elric's stature but with flashes of that series' intensity. The hideous beast- and insect-masks worn by the wicked warlords of Granbretan (from which name we infer a far future) are an effective touch, as is the sinister mix of magic and technology. Thus hero Dorian Hawkmoon is maimed by the cybermagical "Machine of the Black Jewel", which implants the living jewel in his forehead in hope of subjecting him to Granbretan's control.... Many battles ensue and many plot devices besides the Jewel are invoked: the Mad God's Amulet, the Sword of the Dawn, the enigmatic Runestaff itself, etc.

Following the initial sequence, three more Hawkmoon books put the hero through further unlikely hoops until a finale which, involving Elric, Corum, Erekosë, the Black Sword, the Jewel and (literally and physically) the Cosmic Balance, tries perhaps too hard for eschatological impact.

In the 1971 **Swords** trilogy there is more of Elric's grand manner. Here the hero is Corum, who indeed is suspiciously Elric-like: a doomed prince, apparently the last of his elfish race in a world now ruled by the despised human "Mabden", and maimed (of course) by the loss of his hand and eye. Acquiring a sorcerous eye and hand which let him see and reach into dark places for darker allies, he sets out against the Sword Rulers. These are three Chaos gods – already encountered in *Stormbringer* – who tyrannize his and adjacent worlds. The concluding *The King of the Swords* features some of Moorcock's most spectacular landscapes of chaos, and an agreeable reversal when the alien Lost Gods (owners and eventual repossessors of those magical replacement organs) choose to help Corum by slaughtering the entire Chaos pantheon and, by way of fairness, the gods of Law as well. Let the Cosmic Balance swing as it will, they say: "Now you can make your own destiny."

Not forever: a second Corum trilogy (1973-1974) set well into the future sees his world afflicted with a new batch of gods from another plane, the Fhoi Myore, diseased, pitiable and malevolent. They plan to introduce a permanent Fimbulwinter as the best climate for their health, and Corum with his allies must collect an impressive array of plot tokens (notably the bull, spear, oak, ram, sword and stallion of the books' titles) to defeat and oust them. There are certain signs of weariness here.

The conceits of the multiverse and the Champion run through most Moorcock fantasies. Everything connects; the timeless city of Tanelorn, still point of the turning world, is accessible in every plane; and – as John Daker alias Erekosë is perpetually aware – each doomed hero (also apparently each hero's sidekick, like Elric's Moonglum and in particular Corum's Jhary-a-Conel) is merely another incarnated aspect of the Eternal Champion. More than once, several of these incarnations meet and jointly clobber some menace beyond their individual powers. It is all something of a game. The author's grin is perhaps a little evident when the recurrence of names like Jerry Cornelius and Jherek Carnelian culminates in a temporary companion for Elric who mislays his own name: "I am something beginning with "J" and something beginning with "C"."

The effect of the Elric stories is cumulative, and several of the individual items don't bear examination. Such strictures do not apply to Moorcock's finest single fantasy performance *Gloriana; or, The*

Unfulfill'd Queen (1978; revised 1993). Its alternate Elizabethan London, capital of Albion and its empire, is full of shades and allusions: to history, to Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, and to Moorcock's own fiction. Here the self-reference is playful and ironic, avoiding "Gloriana Meets Elric" plot turns but with Arioch's and other old gods' names dropped; with a cameo appearance of *The Golden Barge*'s Jephraim Tallow; with Dr Dee speculating on the spheres of the multiverse. Above all, the labyrinthine and Gormenghastly palace setting offers a genuinely mature homage to Peake.

At its heart of the tortuous action is the awkward knot of six-foot-six Queen Gloriana's unfulfill'dness: innocent yet perverse, emphatically and repeatedly not a virgin, she yearns for true orgasm. All around are pageantry, diplomacy, intrigue, corruption, bloody melodrama spiced with wit. As though in a slowly turning crystal, characters gradually appear in new lights. Despite indomitable loyalty to the Queen, her Chancellor, grim Lord Montfallcon, ultimately stands for repression, stasis, death: he supports noble ends through tainted means, her unlamented father's old ways of blood and iron. On the more overtly villainous side, the chilly spymaster Captain Quire seems a mere thug; then a proud artist of covert activities; then the traitor who is to ruin and discredit Queen Gloriana; and ultimately, won over by her, he stands against Montfallcon on the side of life and love. The slow, alchemical transformation is most satisfying.

Gloriana was to have been Moorcock's farewell to fantasy, but further books followed. *The War Hound and the World's Pain* (1981) is a deceptively smooth-flowing Quest for the Grail, the Cure for the World's Pain (always in Capitals), undertaken by the eponymous Graf Ulrich von Bek – a 17th-century soldier and killer who proves more complex than expected. *The Dragon in the Sword* (1986; uncut text 1987) goes back to the first "Eternal Champion" and is rife with cross-referenced stories intersecting Erekosë's... finally giving that hero rest, if not for long. *The Fortress of the Pearl* (1989) and *The Revenge of the Rose* (1991), elegant if sometimes enervated instalments of Elric's life, lack both the ungainliness and raw force of the older work. *Fortress*, for example, is largely set in a dreamworld which mutedly recalls the chaos landscapes of our hero's subsequent career, and in which he – stripped of Stormbringer for the duration – is noticeably ineffectual. (As though to compensate for this, the re-sworded Elric improbably takes on an entire city in a concluding bloodbath.)

Although nominally sf, the **Dancers at the End of Time** books – *An Alien Heat* (1972), *The Hollow Lands* (1974) and *The End of All Songs*

(**1976**) – use technologies that might as well be magic, with many fantasy trappings. At the end of time, a literal *fin de siècle*, a gaggle of characters like the protagonist Jherek Carnelian play extravagantly with their omnipotence and pursue strange sensations. And what could be more exotic than forgotten emotions like love and guilt? When Jherek decides to fall in love with the impeccably moral (and married) Mrs Amelia Underwood, a temporary visitor from the past, and to pursue her home to 1896... the result is richly and uniquely comic, thick with bizarre misunderstandings and extraordinary adventures.

The nonfiction *Wizardry and Wild Romance* (1987) is Moorcock's own idiosyncratic survey of fantasy: enjoyable when lambasting his dislikes (over-high style, sentimentality, right-wing and/or Christian tendencies: Adams, Lewis, Tolkien) but elsewhere tending merely to quote substantial chunks of approved authors and remark without analysis or explanation that this is good stuff.

His own body of fantasy includes many hastily or lazily written, page-turning potboilers... redeemed by extraordinary imagery, the lingering melancholy of Elric and others, the acid of irony always eating into romanticism, and the cheeky audacity of that multiverse concept (however overplayed). The books written with full attention and love, like *Gloriana* and the **Dancers** sequence, need no excuses.

Pat O’Shea (1996)

O’Shea, Pat

Nationality: Irish. Born as Patricia Shiels: Galway, Eire, 1931.

Pat O’Shea’s sole fantasy novel *The Hounds of the Mórrigan* (1985) is a fat, colourful and satisfying tale of chases and quests through a modern Ireland interwoven with Faerie and thick with legend. Nominally written for young readers, it has wider appeal thanks to its inventiveness, breakneck pace, mythical erudition, exuberant humour and Celtic twilight shading occasionally into true darkness. Though not deep, it has great charm.

Young Pidge discovers the evil serpent Olc-Glas trapped in an old book by the binding words of St Patrick, and the Mórrigan’s alarming but inept Hounds are soon in pursuit – though their initial strategy is a little transparent, consisting of badly lettered road signs. THIS IS A VERY SAFE ROAD. A BOY CAN CYCLE ON IT WITH HIS EYES SHUT... TRY IT TODAY.

The living image of Olc-Glas is cased in iron to be guarded by the Great Eel, who is nearly tempted from his duty by the Mórrigan’s deployment of that most attractive of all worms the (unwilling) Brandling Breac, only to be distracted by the malaprop frogs which Pidge and his much younger but redoubtably pig-headed sister Brigit have befriended by saving one from Macha and Bodhbe, the witches whose black-comedy rôles disguise their true nature as other aspects of the three-in-one Mórrigan, Queen of Destruction, who with Olc-Glas’s power will become irresistible....

The pursuit of Pidge and Brigit across Ireland/Tir-na-nÓg continues with this same breathless density: a talking ass carries them through a stone circle by secret paths to the railway station of Victorian-era Galway, where their next guide weaves through time and across water before being revealed as the legendary druid Cathbad, and the children continue by magical kite, flying swans, extinct Irish elk, and so on. Through, the creatures of the Dagda or Good Lord help them along, since the Dagda cannot directly intervene until the Mórrigan raises her own hand against them. A wondrously daft sequence features militant earwigs led by their own Napoleon (“If I have to be loony to be great – adieu, sanity; ze cost is but a trifle”) in a merciless nose-nipping assault on the Hounds. Cats,

spiders, a weathervane, a fox, ducks, geese and a homing pigeon also assist, each with its own peculiar way of speech. Heroes of myth like Cúchulain and Queen Maeve and the gods themselves turn out to fight for the good cause. There is much effective blarney.

(It may be a gentle homage to James Stephens's *The Crock of Gold* when a Sergeant of the Gardai is repeatedly bewitched and bewildered by the evil three... converted, for example, to a gold charm on the Mórrigan's bracelet.)

After some hair-raising final twists and obstacles – like the immense, oily maze which is a single fingerprint placed by the Mórrigan on her magical map – the children thwart the evil goddess's scheme. Olc-Glas is destroyed and the world saved. The one sour note comes when, in the subtly cruel tradition of all too much children's fantasy, Pidge's and Brigit's memories of their adventure are erased by the kindly god of love Angus Óg. Often afterwards they meet their best companion the fox and don't understand why he's so tame and seems to know them.... Otherwise it's an excellent romp, full of colour and sunlight.

Terry Pratchett (1996)

Pratchett, Terry

Nationality: British. **Born:** 1948.

Terry Pratchett's **Discworld** novels, with their lush Josh Kirby jacket paintings, offer the most recognizable brand image of funny fantasy in Britain today. Other publishers have been quick to package humorous or meant-to-be-humorous fantasies to look as much as possible like Pratchett's, but the actual contents of these "rival" works have always fallen short.

(The Kirby covers do not appear on US editions.)

Although Pratchett's humour had early roots in parody, he very soon grew beyond mere fiddling with others' preoccupations. The early SF *The Dark Side of the Sun* (1976) tips its hat towards Larry Niven's Known Space books with their motley aliens who provide a comedy-of-humours cast list since we interpret their alien ways as a single, overdeveloped human eccentricity. But those who have never read Niven can enjoy this book's entertaining interstellar chases and outrageous Macguffin.

Strata (1981) is the only Pratchett novel which is much diminished by lack of acquaintance with the sources which it tweaks (principally Niven's *Ringworld*). Its splendidly daft setting is a flat world where the stars are fixed in a crystal sphere and a fusion-reactor sun chugs in Ptolemaic orbit... the whole thing being an artifical construct inhabiting a larger universe much like our own. Soon the discoverers are talking about old myths of worlds that rest on elephants that stand on turtles. This was surely the seed of Discworld.

Pratchett's achievement in the **Discworld** series is slightly frightening: so many books since 1983, and so consistently funny with scarcely a wobble. *The Colour of Magic* (1983) started it all, a genial and shambolic assembly of four linked stories set on the Discworld, a vast fantasy gameboard supported by four elephants standing on the great turtle A'tuin who swims endlessly through space. All the series' most overt pastiche appears in this book, with allusions to Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, H.P. Lovecraft's tentacled abominations and (extensively) Anne McCaffrey's dragonriders. Then came *The Light Fantastic* (1986), a long romp with a high density of jokes which made it clear that Pratchett could be continuously funny at novel length.

Once established, the astrophysics of Discworld receded into the background, fleetingly mentioned in later books as "series glue". Discworld is a place where any story can be told, and its geography is fluid. But (and this is another major strength) it is not just another of those realms where anything can happen. Events are governed by a steely common-sense which may only be overruled by the important need to insert another joke or demented footnote. When the chief city Ankh-Morpork goes up in flames, there is good reason: a tourist has introduced the delighted underworld to the concept of fire insurance. When an aged wizard seals himself in an impregnable casket to defeat Death, he soon and inevitably hears a voice next to him saying DARK IN HERE, ISN'T IT? – following from the author's logical comment that "he has not yet considered the important part that airholes must play in an enterprise of this kind."

Death always appears, mirthlessly grinning and speaking in HOLLOW CAPITALS. Other recurring characters include Rincewind the failed magician (seen in the first two books; in *Sourcery*, 1988; in *Eric*, 1990, a slim Faust rewrite produced chiefly as a vehicle for Kirby illustrations and later reissued without them; and in *Interesting Times*, 1994), the Luggage (a murderously implacable trunk which runs on countless little legs and eats the unwary) and the Librarian of the wizards' Unseen University – perhaps the only powerful, macho librarian rôle-model in fiction, since his inadvertent transformation into an orang-utan. *Equal Rites* (1987) introduced the most popular of them all, the witch with a personality like granite and a whim of chromium steel: Granny Weatherwax.

Rites was a slight wobble in the course of **Discworld**, with the fun not wholly meshing with some thoughtful material about magic ethics and balance that vaguely recalls the **Earthsea** books of Ursula Le Guin. But next came *Mort* (1987), in which Pratchett could be seen perfecting his technique of seamlessly melding the grim and the funny, as Death takes an apprentice who thoroughly messes up his duties. **Discworld** was now unstoppable.

Sourcery (1988) brought the disc to the brink of apocalypse as magic gets out of hand and the old Mage Wars resume; the Four Horsemen are in evidence and we learn that Pestilence's favourite tipple is a small egg nog with a cherry in it. *Pyramids* (1989) returns to deathly matters with (after an account of schooling in Ankh-Morpork's Guild of Assassins, its final exam uncannily resembling a British driving test with extreme prejudice) a jaundiced evocation of life and afterlife in Discworld's wildly exaggerated

version of Ancient Egypt, from time-distorting pyramids to the traditional embalmers' jokes: "Your name in lights. Get it?"

In *Wyrd Sisters* (1988), Granny Weatherwax and her three-witch coven are embroiled in a Shakespearean melange, with special focus on *Macbeth*. *Guards! Guards!* (1989) was a ground-breaking **Discworld** novel, possibly the best to date, as Pratchett demonstrated that he could now take *any* old collection of genre trappings and give it a Discworld spin. This one is a warped police procedural, with the burnt-out City Guards of Ankh-Morpork up against a particularly uncute dragon which incinerates a number of people very thoroughly indeed. Down these mean streets, etc.

Moving Pictures (1990), the most dotty and shambolic of them all, saw Hollywood fever sweeping Ankh-Morpork with the alchemists' invention of a (demon- and salamander-powered) movie technology. Then it was back to the darker side with *Reaper Man* (1991), in which Death is prematurely retired for growing too involved with his charges, and all life breaks loose; *Witches Abroad* (1991), featuring Granny Weatherwax versus a monstrously "good" Fairy Godmother who has made Destiny an offer it can't refuse and believes in forcing stories to come out as they should, no matter what the unfortunate characters want; *Small Gods* (1992), the grimmest of all, with inflexible religion and a torturing Inquisition... and somehow many a smile as well, as the Great God Om finds himself incarnated as a small tortoise sustained only by the faith of his one *real* believer – this is another contender for the Best Discworld Book trophy; *Lords and Ladies* (1992), where the elves of legend return to Discworld and prove to be a particularly vicious, unpleasant lot....

Men at Arms (1993) directly continues the story of the Ankh-Morpork Watch from *Guards! Guards!*, with a sort of serial killer apparently on the rampage, armed with the world's one high-velocity rifle (invented by Renaissance genius Leonard of Quirm). *Soul Music* (1994) is both a third Death novel with his adopted granddaughter Susan thrust temporarily into the dread role, and a reworking of the *Moving Pictures* insanity as the mega-decibel magic of rock music sweeps Ankh-Morpork. *Interesting Times* (1994) takes us and Rincewind to the Counterweight Continent on the far side of Discworld, which is "all the China you can remember": a empire whose insane tyrant rules an unthinkingly obedient populace, where elaborate competitive examinations in poetry and literature must be passed to become a nightsoil collector – all threatened by the geriatric Genghis Cohen and his Silver Horde of nonagenarians (seven in all).... There is some spectacular slaughter.

As Pratchett points out, “Not everything in a **Discworld** book is meant to be funny.” The surface hilarity glitters all the more for having such solid, uncompromising bones: in the best of the series the silly footnotes and mirthful throwaway lines are ornaments on a structure of steel.

Away from the main stream of **Discworld**, *Good Omens* (1990) with Neil Gaiman spoofs the *Omen/Damien* movies with its notion of the Antichrist growing up as a pleasant kid, hauntingly and intentionally reminiscent of Richmal Crompton’s William. Despite one scene (involving maggots) more macabre than he normally permits himself, the overall effect is very Pratchett-like. A version of Death appears, though not as a guest character: Death is at home anywhere. There is a closing anti-apocalypse.

For slightly younger readers, the SF **Book of the Nomes** – *Truckers* (1989), *Diggers* (199) and *Wings* (1990) – stars tiny alien visitors long stranded on Earth, and is healthily subversive – as witness the chapter epigraphs from the nomes’ religious teachings, based on the underfloor world of a large shop. “And Arnold Bros (est. 1905) divided the Store into Departments....” *Only You Can Save Mankind* (1992) takes a wry look at video games when the young hero Johnny confronts the unthinkable: space invaders who surrender and want peace. In the fantasy sequel *Johnny and the Dead* (1993) he becomes the spokesman for the ghosts of all those buried in a graveyard threatened by property developers. The dead folks’ gradual discovery that they needn’t just hang around their graves (but with a little effort can monkey with telephones, radio, the world communications net...) is both funny and touching.

Meanwhile **Discworld** lurches on through space and UK best-seller charts. Pratchett knows that easy writing makes unfunny reading; the whole remarkable enterprise is fuelled not only by comic talent but by a vast capacity for hard work.

Terry Pratchett (2003)

Terry Pratchett's writing career had a precocious start with a short fantasy written at the age of thirteen for his school magazine, and professionally published two years later. After twenty more years and some idiosyncratic novels, he hit his stride with the Discworld series of comic fantasies, whose steadily increasing success in Britain has made Pratchett a regular number-one bestseller in both hardback and paperback.

Terry David John Pratchett was born in Beaconsfield, England, on 28 April 1948. He credits his education more to omnivorous reading in Beaconsfield Public Library than to the local school. After a period in High Wycombe Technical High School, he entered journalism at Buckinghamshire's newspaper the *Bucks Free Press* in 1965, subsequently working on the *Western Daily Herald* and *Bath Chronicle*. Later he became a publicity officer for the Central Electricity Generating Board (now PowerGen), issuing assurances about the safety of nuclear power stations.

That first story was "The Hades Business" (*Science Fantasy* magazine, 1963), in which Hell improves its image with a PR campaign. Pratchett's first novel, the children's fantasy *The Carpet People*, was written when he was 17 and published some years later in 1971, with cartoon illustrations by the author. Its fantasy quest has the unusual setting of a carpet's weave, where tribes of microscopic inhabitants regard a stray sugar crystal or a lost coin as almost inexhaustible resources of food or metal, and ascribe the titanic footsteps of humans walking on the carpet to the malice of a Dark Lord called Fray. The story was heavily revised for its 1992 reissue:

> I wrote that in the days when I thought fantasy was all battles and kings. Now I'm inclined to think that the *real* concerns of fantasy ought to be about not having battles, and doing *without* kings. (Author's Note to 1992 edition.)

Pratchett's early career continued with two light-hearted SF novels, *The Dark Side of the Sun* (1976) and the parodic *Strata* (1981). The latter mocks the contemporary SF fashion for vast artificial constructions – for example, Larry Niven's 1970 *Ringworld* – by introducing a manufactured *flat* world:

> It was like a plate full of continents. A coin tossed into the air by

an indecisive god.

A Discworld, in fact. The first comic romp to be set on Pratchett's more enduring fantasy Discworld soon followed: *The Colour of Magic* (1983). Here the disc is supported by four vast elephants who, in accordance with certain ancient cosmological myths, stand on a turtle of immense size: Great A'Tuin. Upon the disc, from the perpetual waterfall around the Rim to the gods' home atop the tallest mountain at the Hub, is a medley of generic fantasylands, a fluid setting for parodic capers. This, at any rate, is how it began – but Discworld has evolved steadily and significantly.

The Colour of Magic comprises four episodes in which inept wizard Rincewind escorts the impossibly naive Twoflower (a traveller from Discworld's "Aurient", embodying various Japanese tourist stereotypes) through seriocomic perils. These begin in the great and malodorous metropolis Ankh-Morpork, whose exotic sleaze, Thieves' and Assassins' guilds, and street names all echo Fritz Leiber's fantasy city of Lankhmar – a favourite haunt of the Leiber sword-and-sorcery heroes Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, whose Discworld equivalents are Bravd and the Weasel. When Twoflower unwisely introduces the notion of fire insurance to Ankh-Morpork's underworld, the city is soon in flames.

The parody content takes on a flavour of H.P. Lovecraft with a visit to the blasphemous fane of ichor god Bel-Shamharoth, complicated by the Conan-like barbarian Hrun of Chimeria and his unstoppably talkative magic sword Kring (whose ambition is to be a ploughshare). Next, Anne McCaffrey's dragonriders are gently spoofed, with the physical implausibility of huge flying dragons handled by making them purely magical, semi-illusory creatures: "I didn't know dragons could be seen through," Rincewind says wonderingly. Finally, leaving parody behind but retaining high spirits, Pratchett takes his adventurers to the unpleasant Rim land of Krull, where a primitive space program aims to launch "chelonauts" off the edge to determine the world-turtle A'Tuin's sex. Inevitably, Rincewind and Twoflower replace the chelonauts.

Capers continue, with a high density of incidental gags, in *The Light Fantastic* (1986). Although Rincewind and Twoflower (rescued by outrageous *deus ex machina* from the long drop off the Rim) remain rather shallow and static characters, the "anthropomorphic personification" Death – always speaking in DOOM-LADEN CAPITALS – begins his development from a mere brutal ender of lives to a functionary who is obscurely on humanity's side against things worse than himself. The wizards' college Unseen University begins to take form, and a magical accident transforms its librarian into the book-loving orangutan destined to

be a popular series character. Thick-witted Hrun gives way to the more interesting Cohen the Barbarian, a living legend but now a very old man who still wields a mean sword, has fond if dwindling hopes of ravishing young ladies, and quests for reliable dentures.

Discworld's popularity was growing by word-of-mouth recommendation. Readers expecting more of the same were slightly startled by the next book, *Equal Rites* (1987), in which young heroine Esk inherits wizard-type magic from her father, making her a misfit in a world where wizards are expected to be men. Pratchett turns a wry eye on what he saw as the genre's recurring magical sexism:

> The fantasy world, in fact, is overdue for a visit from the Equal Opportunities people because, in the fantasy world, magic done by women is usually of poor quality, third-rate, negative stuff, while the wizards are usually cerebral, clever, powerful, and wise. [...] Wizards get to do a better class of magic, while witches give you warts. ("Why Gandalf Never Married", Pratchett speech at Novacon 15, 1985)

Esk is raised and almost wholly upstaged by redoubtable witch Granny Weatherwax, who has an iron-willed determination to give people what they need rather than what they want, and ultimately causes upheaval at Unseen University. Meanwhile, imaginatively lyrical passages about joys and hazards of the witchy practice "Borrowing" – riding in animals' minds – would not seem out of place in Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968). In a characteristically Pratchettian development, young Esk tries Borrowing on the huge Unseen University building itself:

> For the first time in her life she knew what it was like to have balconies.

Mort (1987) successfully fuses humorous invention with deeper thoughtfulness and the recognition that comedy can be strengthened by an underpinning of dark matters. Death hires a young apprentice, Mort, who is all too human and makes a mess of the "Duty": by saving a young princess fated to die, he endangers history and reality. High humour and deep complications ensue.

It now becomes convenient to divide the many stories of Discworld into linked subseries. The first and weakest stars the perpetually cowardly and panic-stricken Rincewind, a wizard so incapable that his traditional pointy hat is embroidered with the word WIZZARD, and who after *The Colour of Magic* and *The Light Fantastic* has a leading role in the

following titles. *Sourcery* (1988) introduces a super-powerful young wizard or "sourcerer" who catalyses a general increase in available magic; the power goes to the heads of Discworld's wizards and there's all-out magical war. *Eric* (1990), a short travelogue of Discworld past and present, including its creation, its versions of the Aztec Empire and Trojan War, and its Hell, was conceived as a series of picture opportunities for the artist Josh Kirby (who painted covers for British editions of all the Discworld novels and many spinoffs until his death in 2001). Later, deflatingly, the text was issued without Kirby's luxuriant paintings.

Interesting Times (1994) visits the tyrannical Agatean Empire – a pastiche of old and new Chinese stereotypes – at a time when Cohen the Barbarian and his nonagenarian Silver Horde (seven strong in total) plan to seize the Agatean throne. Rincewind here develops his cowardice into something approaching a practical philosophy. *The Last Continent* (1998) runs riot with innumerable Australian jokes and references on Discworld's all too close equivalent of Australia, ranging from the aboriginal Dreamtime to opera houses, Vegemite, and drag queens. Rincewind even pioneers the Down Under tradition of corks dangling on strings from one's hat-brim, after a less successful preliminary experiment in which they remained attached to their bottles.

In the Witches of Lancre sequence, Granny Weatherwax of *Equal Rites* goes on to assemble a very small coven in her tiny homeland Lancre, the other members being outrageous old reprobate Nanny Ogg and flustered New Age witch Magrat Garlick. These form the traditional triad of crone, mother and maiden, while "Lancre Witches" echoes the Lancashire Witches of 17th-century English witch-trial fame. Their by-play, personality clashes, misunderstandings and refusals to understand are a reliable source of comedy.

Wyrd Sisters (1988) involves the trio in complex shenanigans about Lancre's royal succession, as commemorated on stage in an ursurper's commissioned propaganda play which begins as whitewash and becomes strangely similar to *Macbeth*. *Witches Abroad* (1991) sees them flying by broomstick to foreign parts, finally reaching an exotic land of fairytales and voodoo to thwart an unscrupulous fairy godmother (who is Granny's bad sister) and save the local Cinderella from the dire fate which awaits her if she goes to the ball. *Lords and Ladies* (1992) echoes Shakespeare again, with an invasion of murderous elves turning Magrat's wedding plans into a midsummer night's nightmare.

With Magrat married, the coven must recruit another maiden. The quest for runaway young witch Agnes in *Maskerade* (1995) takes Granny

and Nanny to Ankh-Morpork and its Opera House, where the story of *The Phantom of the Opera* is dangerously playing itself out and needs to be diverted. It is a recurring Discworld theme that stories have a real momentum, and that the easy downhill path to the expected default ending may not be the "right" one. The novelette *The Sea and Little Fishes* (in *Legends* ed. Robert Silverberg, 1998) features the Lancre Witch Trials, an "informal" contest of witchcraft that's dominated by Granny's relentless, single-minded competitiveness – even when she doesn't take part. *Carpe Jugulum* (1998), the darkest so far of all the Lancre stories, pits indomitable Granny against almost invulnerable, indestructible, garlic-immune vampires at a time of great uncertainty when the coven's make-up is shifting with Agnes now the maiden, Magrat a new mother, Nanny Ogg the crone, and Granny perhaps out in the cold. Despite ample comedy, both black and white, there are grim passages and a sense of real menace.

The cowled, skeletal figure of Death appears regularly throughout the Discworld stories, usually in brief vignettes of greeting the newly dead or gently explaining their situation. A third sequence beginning with *Mort* revolves around Death, his fated duties, and later his "grandaughter" Susan (child of Mort and Death's adopted daughter). *Reaper Man* (1991) sees Death pensioned off, subject at last to time, and passing his retirement as a farm hand who's particularly good with a scythe – though challenged by the mechanical threat of a newly invented combine harvester. Meanwhile in Ankh-Morpork, unharvested life energies discharge in poltergeist activity and a just-deceased wizard finds himself unwillingly continuing as a zombie... a new recruit for the city's small but active undead-rights campaign. ("You Don't Have To Take This Lying Down.")

Death takes another holiday in *Soul Music* (1994), while Ankh-Morpork is swept by a new craze for rock music thanks to the magical guitar acquired by a fey young musician who looks somehow... elvish. Susan and the bumbling Unseen University wizards are soon involved in the manic action, densely larded with musical puns and allusions. *Hogfather* (1996) sees the Ankh-Morpork Assassins' Guild accepting a contract on the Hogfather, Discworld's Father Christmas, who is killed or at least gravely stricken by a devious assassin who begins by kidnapping the Tooth Fairy. All this is instigated by the bean-counting Auditors of Reality, already met in *Reaper Man*, who regard human life and free will as unwanted litter in their tidy cosmos. They make another clean-up attempt in *Thief of Time* (2001) with a scheme to recreate the legendary Glass Clock of Bad Schüschein, as recorded in the Discworld children's book *Grim Fairy Tales*, which slices time so thinly as to stop it altogether.

Life and movement necessarily halt, and only a few specially privileged beings remain able to function, such as Susan and the Horsemen of the Apocalypse (including the forgotten fifth, who dropped out before the group became famous).

One of the most consistently successful Discworld subseries is the string of *noir* fantasy police-procedurals about the exploits of the Ankh-Morpork City Watch. When introduced in *Guards! Guards!* (1989), the Night Watch is at its lowest ebb and consists of four people: depressive alcoholic Captain Vimes, portly coward Sergeant Colon, light-fingered Corporal Nobbs, and desperately literal-minded new recruit Carrot – who begins with such gaffes as arresting the President of the respected Thieves' Guild for being a thief.

Darker doings are afoot as the Elucidated Brethren of the Ebon Night, a vaguely Masonic secret society, learns to summon and control a dragon whose flame-power can melt stone and vaporize people. The plan is to topple the city's efficient but unloved tyrant Lord Vetinari and – a fantasy trope which Pratchett regards with particular suspicion – instal a True King qualified by heredity to rule. (Or at least to take orders from the scheming Supreme Grand Master of the Brethren.)

Vimes loves Ankh-Morpork and is at last stimulated to effective investigation by the menace of the dragon: "Of all the cities in the world it could have flown into, he thought, it's flown into mine...." Loving the city doesn't mean liking Vetinari or the citizens, one of whose realistically predictable reactions is a mob attack on the messy but harmless pet swamp-dragons bred by aristocratic Lady Sybil Ramkin, an outsized lady who as part of the ambiguously happy ending is destined to become Vimes's wife. Meanwhile it is gently indicated that, although he would never dream of claiming the throne, the true heir of Ankh-Morpork's long-deposed kings is Carrot.

The dynamic between Vimes and Vetinari the Patrician, balancing personal dislike against reluctant admiration for each other's abilities, is adroitly developed through further Watch novels and leads to such ironies as sullenly socialist Vimes being successively rewarded with a knighthood, a dukedom, and the status of ambassador. *Men at Arms* (1993) expands the Watch under a new policy of racial equality, which in Ankh-Morpork means admitting dwarfs, their traditional enemies the trolls, and even an engaging female werewolf. Meanwhile a serial killer with plans to change the city's rulership has acquired a unique weapon which is only a little ahead of its time: it is, essentially, a high-velocity rifle. Ever ready to rethink fantasy clichés – in this case, that of a world locked into medieval

technology – Pratchett has seen that Ankh-Morpork's dedication to the profit motive has brought it to the brink of industrial revolution.

This provides background colour in *Feet of Clay* (1996), in which investigation of a sequence of devious "impossible crime" poison attacks on the Patrician takes the still expanding Watch on an investigation of various city industries. In the absence of internal combustion engines, much motive power is provided by the despised golems, mute clay figures powered by magic and under compulsion to work tirelessly at the filthiest jobs. Even these seeming robots, it proves, have feelings and hopes. When one golem is finally given a voice, there are cries of "Blasphemy" and Vimes, always ready to champion if not to *like* the underdog, replies: "That's what people say when the voiceless speak."

Jingo (1997) features another assassination attempt directed at a dignitary from Ankh-Morpork's chief rival, the Araby-like country of Klatch. The story moves outside Ankh-Morpork to a futile but mercifully brief war with this desert kingdom, where Carrot blossoms as a Lawrence of Arabia figure and successfully arrests an entire battlefield – a rare occasion, in this subseries, of comedy and plausibility colliding with some damage to both sides. *The Fifth Elephant* (1999) takes the very undiplomatic Vimes on a diplomatic mission to Uberwald, a spooky country whose name (German "over the wood") recalls Transylvania (Latin "across the woods"). Even distant Uberwald is now closely linked to Ankh-Morpork by trade and the latest communications technology of semaphore towers, alias "clacks" or c-mail, and the Patrician is much concerned that its local dwarf, vampire and werewolf politics are in turmoil. The utterly amoral and very nearly unkillable werewolves are the major difficulty in Uberwald; a pack's long, murderous, cross-country pursuit of Vimes skilfully varies extreme terror with comic relief. In the end, the local police being ineffective, Vimes deals personally with the neo-Nazi werewolf ringleader – the first time in the series that he has actually killed in cold blood:

> "You killed him?"
>
> "No. I put him down."

Most recently, *Night Watch* (2002) turns aside from the march of progress in Ankh-Morpork with a freak magical accident that hurls Vimes and his latest criminal quarry thirty years back in time. The History Monks who try to keep Discworld events on course (and who featured briefly in *Small Gods*, extensively in *Thief of Time*) would like to put things right, but first there's a historical gap for Vimes to fill. An honourable sergeant-at-arms

of the Watch has been prematurely killed by the villain also flung back into the past, and Vimes must carry out his part by teaching the young Vimes to be a good policeman, playing a key role in the imminent Ankh-Morpork revolution... and then dying in a needless skirmish, to be remembered and honoured thirty years later by the few Watchmen who were there. A tough order for this determined survivor, but comedy still creeps in. When the barricaded People's Republic of Treacle Mine Road drafts a manifesto including Free Love, the local "ladies of negotiable affection" rapidly force an amendment to Reasonably Priced Love.

Following this overview of various Discworld subseries, we backtrack to discuss – in order of publication – some more or less stand-alone novels. *Pyramids* (1989) explores Discworld's version of ancient Egypt, a static society with an extensive pantheon of animal-headed gods ("Hat, the Vulture-Headed God of Unexpected Guests") and a culture of mummification and expensive pyramid-building which has bankrupted the country. Pteppic, heir to the throne, is called back from his expensive foreign education at the Ankh-Morpork Assassins' Guild when his father dies. At home, he must come to terms with the musty stagnation of a desert land which – since Discworld pyramids literally store and discharge temporal energy – has lived far too long on borrowed time. There are also plenty of black jokes about embalming, like the traditional apprentice gag during the disembowelment stage: "Look... your name in lights. Get it?"

In *Moving Pictures* (1990), the alchemists of Ankh-Morpork invent "octo-cellulose", magical film stock that triggers the founding of a motion picture industry at nearby Holy Wood. Since this is fantasy, the movie cameras contain teams of very tiny demons, painting each frame as it clicks past and blowing hard to dry the result. Hollywood jokes and references come thick and fast, but the power of belief and star-worship compelled by movies is a dangerous thing here on Discworld where the fabric of reality is thin, and attracts sinister attention from Outside. Which leads, almost logically, to the memorable image of a giant woman climbing the city's highest tower while clutching a terrified ape – the Librarian – in one hand, and being strafed by wizards from a flying broomstick. Meanwhile the show is stolen by the cranky Gaspode the Wonder Dog, who can talk yet never gets the attention paid to his photogenic but very stupid canine companion Laddie.

Incidentally, this manic novel marks a change in Unseen University. Previous wizards had regularly been killed off, usually by one another, and replaced, with the Librarian the only fixed point. *Moving Pictures* introduces a set of genially comic wizards whom Pratchett liked enough to

to keep: Archchancellor Mustrum Ridcully, an alarmingly hearty devotee of huntin', shootin' and fishin', and his supporting cast of bickering college fellows like the Chair of Indefinite Studies, Lecturer in Recent Runes, Dean of Pentacles, and Bursar. They reappear in many later books, including the already mentioned *Reaper Man*, *Lords and Ladies*, *Soul Music*, *Interesting Times*, *Hogfather* and *The Last Continent*. Often they provide a strand of broad comedy that contrasts with a novel's other, less farcical storylines.

Very much darker, *Small Gods* (1992) again takes us to a previously unvisited desert country: Omnia, a theocracy whose savagely monotheistic church of the great god Om denies the shape of the world. Doctrine insists that Discworld is spherical, though heretics in the final tortures of the "Quisition" may defiantly whisper (echoing Galileo's *Eppur si muove*): "The Turtle moves!" In a familiar paradox, the oppressive atmosphere of an unforgiving, crusading Church Militant stifles the religious impulse. Discworld's gods derive power from worship, and when Om decides to incarnate himself he finds that he's down to one last true believer – the hero Brutha, a slow-thinking novice monk – and so can manifest only as a humble, powerless tortoise. Many harrowing complications and a number of deaths follow before the church can be reformed under Brutha, who makes a New Deal with the re-empowered Om: "...No smiting. No commandments unless you obey them too." This tough-minded yet still humorous story may be Pratchett's finest novel.

Another attack on the Patrician, but on his reputation rather than his life, is central to *The Truth* (2000), which rings the changes on Ankh-Morpork crime capers by moving Vimes and the familiar Watch characters aside in favour of William de Worde, Discworld's first investigative reporter. Introduced as a professional letter-writer in the spinoff "encyclopedia" *The Discworld Companion* (1994), de Worde is standing in just the right or wrong place when the next phase of industrial revolution arrives: the invention by dwarf craftsmen of movable-type printing. The resulting journal *The Ankh-Morpork Times* ("The Truth Shall Make Ye Fret") mixes ghastly small-town journalism, fondly recalled by Pratchett from his own newspaper days, with blundering investigation that annoys the Watch; attracts serious death threats and sabotage attempts; and finally solves the mystery with inside information from the anonymous source "Deep Bone" – Gaspode the Wonder Dog from *Moving Pictures*, now working with one of Ankh-Morpork's most dysfunctional street people as a "thinking-brain dog".

Many subseries strands are woven together in *The Last Hero* (2001),

a short novel which like *Eric* was designed to be illustrated, this time by Paul Kidby. Cohen the Barbarian and the remnants of his Silver Horde plan to revenge themselves on the gods who have allowed them to grow old, by climbing to the gods' mountain home "Dunmanifestin" and setting off a 50lb keg of Agatean Thunder Clay, having the approximate effect of a nuclear weapon. This, the Patrician learns, will incidentally end the world. So something must be done. Assisted by the massed wizards, Leonard of Quirm (the Discworld's da Vinci, inventor of a submarine in *Jingo* and of all too many terrible weapons like the rifle of *Men at Arms*), obligingly devises space technology powered by flaming swamp dragons. The suicide crew that sets off on a very strange course *under* the Disc comprises Leonard, Carrot and Rincewind, plus an unwitting stowaway whose discovery is reported in the memorable message: "Ankh-Morpork, we have an orangutan..." It's a splendidly silly romp, well and copiously illustrated, and ultimately touching.

A slightly different Discworld venture is *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents* (2001), written for children and starring talking animals who are in no way cute. Like Gaspode, Maurice the cat and his troupe of rats have enhanced intelligence thanks to magically contaminated waste from the Unseen University rubbish dump. They make their living by Maurice's Pied Piper scam: the rats infest a town ("One rat, popping up here and there, squeaking loudly, taking a bath in the fresh cream and widdling in the flour, could be a plague all by himself.") and the team's boy associate gets a fee for piping them away. But to Maurice's frustration the rats are developing ethical scruples about widdling in the flour, while the latest town on their tour conceals horrors generated by an altogether nastier adult racket run by rat-catchers; the story takes on grisly convolutions.

The phenomenal success of Discworld has led to a huge amount of spinoff material in all imaginable media. The nonfiction bibliography confines itself to printed material by or co-authored by Pratchett himself. Of particular interest are *The Science of Discworld* (1999) and its sequel, written with Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen. In both, Pratchett contributes a Discworld novella in which Ridcully's wizards study the unthinkable "Roundworld", a world without magic – our own. These fictional chapters alternate with nonfiction commentary by Stewart and Cohen, experienced popularizers of science, who expand on the many emerging discussion points. This is possible because Discworld operates by a skewed logic that jests with or parodies scientific method, rather than ignoring it as in so many other fantasylands.

Outside Discworld there is one collaborative novel of some note, *Good Omens* (1990), written with Neil Gaiman. This reworks the legend of the coming of Antichrist with particular reference to the movie sequence that began with *The Omen* (1976). A babies-exchanged-at-birth twist results in the fateful child being brought up as, essentially, the irrepressible brat from Richmal Crompton's famous "William Brown" children's stories – indeed the reluctantly abandoned working title was *William the Antichrist.* (Gaspode the Wonder Dog's perpetual grumbling self-justification also owes something to William.) In the end, all the forces of Heaven and Hell can't quite refute the dreadful reasonableness of boyish logic.

Non-Discworld comedies for younger readers comprise the "Bromeliad" trilogy and the open-ended "Johnny Maxwell" sequence. The former, though centring on a race of four-inch "nomes" who surreptitiously share our world (like, but much larger than, the microscopic Carpet People), is actually SF about visiting aliens. The latter inflicts various improbable adventures on the ordinary English boy Johnny Maxwell, moving into supernatural territory with the second book *Johnny and the Dead* (1993). Here development plans for a "disused" cemetery become important to Johnny when he discovers that he can talk to the ghostly inhabitants and hear their objections to the scheme, precipitating him into comic tangles of town politics.

Pratchett is an extremely hard-working author, indeed a confessed workaholic who embarks on new projects within hours of completing old ones. His skilfully deployed comic techniques have evolved to rely mostly on the solid humour of character and situation, decorated with verbal sleights, real-world allusions ("Vetinari" mocks the Medici of Renaissance Italy), puns (a purveyor of inferior sausages in *The Truth* "Can't make both ends meat"), old saws with new twists (someone turns the tables on a foe in *Hogfather*: "The worm is on the other boot now..."), and his trademark footnotes, which no genre author but Jack Vance has used to such ironic and outrageous effect.

Few awards go to writers of humorous fantasy, but Pratchett won the 1990 British SF Association Award for *Pyramids*, was named Book Club Associates Fantasy and SF Author of the Year in 1994, received the state honour the Order of the British Empire for services to literature in 1998, and in 2001 was given a special British Book Award ("Nibbie") for contributions to bookselling. Of the last, he observed: "it's an industry award and an award for causing them to sell skiploads of books does have a certain four-square honesty about it."

Terry Pratchett’s deserved popularity continues. Further Discworld novels are in the pipeline.

Christopher Priest (1999)

Christopher Priest began to publish science fiction during the creative excitement and controversy of the 1960s "New Wave" associated with Britain's *New Worlds* magazine when edited by Michael Moorcock. Although he was never part of the inner clique, and rapidly escaped the snare of self-indulgent obscurantism which so often accompanied New Wave assaults on genre conventions, Priest's work still maintains its distance from science-fictional orthodoxy. He examines well-worn genre tropes – gigantic objects, prediction, immortality, invisibility, matter transmission – with a cold eye, and injects a highly individual brand of subversion. This has led to his fiction being classed as "slipstream"... operating near the edge of the genre, or just beyond, or within the uncertain, fuzzy space of the actual boundaries.

Christopher McKenzie Priest was born in Cheadle, Cheshire, England, on 14 July 1943, and was educated at the incongruously named Manchester Warehousemen, Clerks' Orphan School. After working in accountancy and on the fringes of publishing from 1959 to 1968, he then became a full-time author. His adult life has been spent in southern England, including years in Harrow on the outskirts of London itself. His second and third marriages were to fellow-writers: Lisa Tuttle from 1981 to 1987, and Leigh Kennedy since 1988. He now lives in Hastings, Sussex, England, with Kennedy and their twin children.

A thoroughly professional author, Priest has engaged in the usual related activities: working on committees of Britain's Society of Authors, acting as Associate Editor of *Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction*, being a 1970s-1980s stalwart of the Milford (UK) Science Fiction Writers' Conference, editing two science fiction anthologies, reviewing for national newspapers, and running a small, specialist literary agency. Like many science fiction writers he has been honoured as a guest at conventions and has produced occasional fanzines. His polemical fanzine essay about Harlan Ellison's endlessly delayed anthology *The Last Dangerous Visions* – announced in 1971, repeatedly publicized, still unpublished – was reissued with revisions as *The Book on the Edge of Forever* (1994) and came very close to winning the Hugo Award for Best Non-Fiction. He was selected as one of Britain's leading under-40 "mainstream" writers for the Book Marketing Council's 1983 "Best of Young British Authors" promotion.

Priest's first published science fiction story was the brief and melodramatic "The Run" (1966), which appeared in *New Worlds*'s sister magazine *Impulse*. This is one of ten early pieces collected in *Real-Time World* (1974), most of them relatively minor work characterized by intense examination of characters under stress. "The Head and the Hand" (*New Worlds Quarterly 3*, 1972) is a prophetic piece of Grand Guignol about a performance artist who publicly amputates parts of himself; "A Woman Naked" (*Science Fiction Monthly*, 1974) painfully depicts a woman's seemingly cruel and unusual punishment for sexual "crime", shifting perspective to show this as metaphor for a cruel and all too usual actuality. The tricky reality-blurring of later Priest is foreshadowed in "Real-Time World", (*New Writings in SF 19*, 1972), whose experimental community is isolated from real-world news and develops its own replacement network of rumours. These escalate towards purest fantasy and then – like a wild computer iteration converging to a stable solution – settle down and begin to anticipate reality.

Two surreal stories of nightmarish, vaguely Kafkaesque imprisonment – "The Interrogator" (*New Writings in SF 15*, 1969) and "The Maze", which achieved the difficult feat of being rejected by *New Worlds* for excessive obscurity – were reworked and extended into Priest's first novel *Indoctrinaire* (1970). Although its Brazilian setting lacks much sense of place, this features effectively enigmatic images and devices. An animated hand grows from a table and a monstrous ear from a wall; a dilapidated shack conceals a topologically sophisticated labyrinth; there are other odd tools of psychological disorientation.

The book's more conventional science-fictional machinery involves timeslips across 200 years, an offstage nuclear war, and psychotropic "disturbance gas" which retrospectively explains the alarming, irrational mood-shifts of the protagonist Wentik's tormentors. It concludes on a note of unambiguous, very British pessimism and loss. In the slightly revised 1979 edition, Priest noted that he had perhaps overdone the clarifications and explained away too many of the enigmas that give the early parts of *Indoctrinaire* their uneasy power. He now classes the book as juvenilia.

The essential storyline of *Fugue for a Darkening Island* (1972) is also bleak, without surreal frills. Nuclear war in Africa leads to the swamping of other countries, notably Britain, with floods of black refugees. These are first the catalyst of conflict between a right-wing, racist British government and dissident liberals, and then become a third faction in the ensuing civil war. In this period of terror the protagonist's wife and daughter are abducted, and (like Wentik later in *Indoctrinaire*) he

hopelessly seeks his family.

This might have resembled a darker, chillier version of some John Wyndham disaster novel, but for Priest's narrative technique. The scenes are shuffled, told out of order; the story is not so much distanced as brought uncomfortably close by the reader's complicity in piecing together the jigsaw. (It is perhaps a last gesture to New Wave obscurity that, as the author has remarked, one piece is deliberately designed not to fit.) Narrative interleavings and juxtapositions play on musical connotations of the title's "fugue". Its psychological meaning, a dreamlike state often followed by loss of memory, underpins the narrator's nightmare flight through a disintegrating England, his futile efforts to remain politically uncommitted, and a possible unreliability in what he chooses to remember.

Priest's breakthrough book and also his closest approach to conventional "hard" science fiction was his third novel, *Inverted World* (1974). A trial exploration of its extraordinary setting had appeared as "The Inverted World" (*New Writings in SF 22*, 1973), causing one reviewer to speculate that Priest was "Britain's answer to Larry Niven" (Tony Sudbury, *Vector 67/68*, 1974). The short story excuses its impossibilities with scientific doubletalk; the novel refuses such Nivenesque literalism by reconsidering matters in terms of metaphor and perception.

The inverted world is a hyperboloid, the surface traced out when a hyperbola is rotated about the vertical axis. Its poles are infinite spires, its equator is (or rather, asymptotically approaches) an infinite plane. In the concavely curved region between, there's only a narrow habitable band. Distortions of space and time, like those of relativity, increase towards the equator and poles: in one memorable scene the hero – having strayed too far – finds himself clinging for dear life to a fingerhold that from further away was a mountain range. The land itself slowly migrates "southward", reeled in by the terrible pull of infinity, and the humans stranded in this impossible cosmos must therefore keep their wheeled city forever moving (as in *Alice in Wonderland*) to stay in the same place. Hence the protagonist Helward's fine opening line: "I had reached the age of six hundred and fifty miles."

Rigid guilds of Future Surveying, Bridge-Building, Track-Laying and Traction are dedicated to maintaining the city's slow movement along perpetually relaid rails towards an "optimum" point that keeps moving ahead. Why is the direction of the optimum known as "up future", and behind the city "down past"? Why do the laws of physics operate differently for the inverted world's human-seeming natives, who for some

reason speak Spanish?

Helward's southward journey of discovery and initiation into the nature of his world is one of the high points of science-fictional strangeness and exhilarating "conceptual breakthrough", where paradigms shatter and a new reality shines through. Priest then trumps this with a second shock (incidentally finessing the problem that, mathematically, the hyperboloid world must intersect its own hyperboloid sun) by introducing the viewpoint of a woman from "outside", from the real Earth – which is the inverted world itself, differently perceived. Looking into the same sky, Helward sees a hyperboloid and the newcomer a round sun. To her, the city's epic 200-year crawl to stay "north" of the regions where its world's centrifugal force becomes deadly has merely taken it along a great-circle route through an Asia and Europe made primitive by the collapse of technological civilization, until at the book's crisis the community has reached the Portuguese shore and its Bridge-Builders are confronted with the Atlantic.

From the woman's common-sense standpoint, the inversion is mere perceptual distortion caused by an experimental "translateration" generator that powers the travelling city. Yet when the generator is finally turned off, a third shock awaits.... Priest has several times revisited these entwined problems of perception and reality. *Inverted World* was widely praised and won the British Science Fiction Award.

Next came a genial Wellsian romp, *The Space Machine* (1976), replete with chapter titles like "Sir William Expounds a Theory", "Into Futurity!" and "How We Fell in with the Philosopher". This exercise in pastiche assumes that H.G. Wells's classic *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898) were both reporting fragments of the same history. Priest duly traces the connections, thickening the mixture with the late introduction of H.G. Wells – or a version of him – as a character in his own fictional creation. The result, though perhaps over-long, is engaging.

Because time and space are interrelated, the Time Machine can function as a Space Machine, and in this capacity it transports the protagonist and his lady friend to Mars – a Wellsian Mars infested with red weed, where humanlike natives are enslaved by the familiar tentacular monsters who drink their blood. The invasion of Earth is in preparation, with ships fired as projectiles from a steam-cannon a mile long. Inevitably our young lovers return home by this route and, having constructed a new Space Machine with Wells's help, fly around as "An Invisible Nemesis" to harass the invaders with grenades. Meanwhile, the true invisible nemesis is more effectively at work: Earth's bacteria, exactly as in *The War of the*

Worlds.

All ends well in what is still this author's sunniest novel. Here Wells is a reporter rather than a creator, but one who seems prepared to edit the real story and increase his book's plausibility by removing that too-fantastic trip to Mars. At the close, Wells looks through his notebook, tears out and discards some pages, and tells the hero with a twinkle in his eye that "It would not be right to dismiss your account as total fabrication, but you would be hard put to substantiate what you told me." He adds: "We all have our tales to tell, Mr Turnbull."

It is characteristic of Priest to hint at a rewrite that subverts "reality" (his own fiction) into a different fiction (Wells's). He has described his reaction to childhood difficulties, like bullying, as being to back away and mentally rewrite the story of what happened – to distance and fictionalize the reality. This theme echoes through several later works. Meanwhile, *The Space Machine* won Australia's Ditmar Award for best international science fiction.

A Dream of Wessex (1977) has been called the novel that predicted virtual reality, but its premise is stranger and subtler than the mere entering of a computer simulation. A think-tank called the Wessex Foundation is studying a possible future, 150 years onward, which by means of a mind-linking device called the Ridpath projector is dramatized as a shared hallucination. Participants, including the protagonist Julia, enter the scenario and play their parts in earnest, leaving behind the contamination of twentieth-century memories.

The extrapolated future is dystopian in outline, with Britain divided between Soviet political power and Arab commercial influence, and also literally split since geological activity has severed the south-west – Wessex – from a reduced mainland. Yet from inside, Wessex is curiously idyllic. Both the Dorset landscape and the participants' roles are shaped by unconscious urges. Indicating the attractions of the pathetic fallacy, "the climate was either dramatically good or dramatically bad." It is not mere wish-fulfilment, though: Julia, emotionally scarred, is provided by this consensus reality with a lover – an unreal projection rather than a participant – who is distinctly unsatisfactory.

The scars date back to her involvement with Priest's first truly hateful character, Paul Mason, alpha-male predator and ruthless manipulator. When Mason follows Julia to the Wessex Foundation and adds his own chilly arrogance to the shared projection, the psychic terrain rapidly worsens. Drilling rigs and refineries pollute the former seaside paradise, under a dull and leaden sky. These are incidental side effects: Mason's

appalling self-confidence (verging on solipsism) instals him as leader of the Wessex dreamers, and he grandiosely plans a secondary Ridpath-projector experiment from within the first. This will reimagine the twentieth century, or *a* twentieth century, from the Wessex viewpoint. To enter this projection may be to return to reality – or may be a second step away from base reality, into treacherous metaphysical territory.

A Dream of Wessex contains many scenes of effective existential worry, as when another character recalls having sex with Julia – as indeed she had intended, only to be temporarily removed from the scenario owing to an emergency. Thus the encounter is remembered rather than actual, featuring not the "real" Julia but an imagined consensus-Julia supplied to maintain continuity in this shared dream. The resulting sense of wrongness provides a deeply uneasy moment.

Priest has called this novel his farewell to traditional science fiction, a subversive and almost satirical examination of how writers try to imagine the future. The Ridpath projector is more metaphor than gadget, and there's a distinct whiff of stage magic in the way Wessex players are routinely extracted from their scenario by a trick with mirrors. One criticism is that most of the characters seem a little flat, with even Julia overshadowed by Mason's vivid nastiness.

Echoes of Wessex and a fragmented England appear in the islands of Priest's short "Dream Archipelago" stories, whose elusive landscapes carry a symbolic charge. They are not so much places as states of mind. Some of these tales are collected in *An Infinite Summer* (1979) – notably "The Watched" (*F&SF*, 1979), an haunting, understatedly menacing study of voyeurism and complicity. The non-Archipelago "Palely Loitering" (*F&SF*, 1978), in which romantic longings are exhilaratingly complicated by an unusual form of time travel, won the British Science Fiction Association Award. Currently scheduled is a new collection, *The Dream Archipelago* (1999), assembling all the Archipelago stories in revised form with new introductory material. This adds the previously uncollected "The Miraculous Cairn" (*New Terrors*, 2, 1980) – dealing powerfully with youthful sexual trauma and its recollection in monstrously symbolic form – and *The Cremation* (*Andromeda 3*, 1978), a more conventionally sinister counterpoint of desire and horror.

The Dream Archipelago is and is not the setting of *The Affirmation* (1981), which is initially narrated by an ordinary-seeming young man called Peter Sinclair. He issues a fair warning on the first page – "words are only as valid as the minds that choose them, so that of essence all prose is a form of deception." – and soon reinforces this with a reflection on

memory: “The mind erases backwards, re-creating what one remembers.”

Peter’s life work is self-deceit, and he deceives us too. Early in *The Affirmation*, a clash of viewpoints with his visiting sister reveals that his own bland record of events so far contains a shocking, central lie. He calls it a higher truth, and carries the principle further by beginning a new “autobiography” which will in some sense be truer than mundane facts. This tells the story of another Peter Sinclair in the world of the Dream Archipelago, who is one of a lucky few lottery winners offered the rare gift of immortality – an “athanasia” treatment that protects indefinitely against age and death from natural causes. Unfortunately the treatment causes a fugue-state and total amnesia, so that the patient will need to relearn his life. Therefore Peter must write an autobiography as his legacy to himself... and has already done so, defining himself through a fictionalized, metaphoric story which he believes to be in some sense truer than mundane facts.

Just as the first Peter has distanced his own life by changing Manchester and London to “Jethra City” and renaming the woman with whom he has had a disastrous relationship from Gracia to Seri, so the Dream-Archipelago Peter disguises *his* problems by referring to London rather than Jethra, Gracia rather than Seri. Like the reflection of a reflection of reality in *A Dream of Wessex*, this tangle suggests Escher’s lithograph in which each of two hands is busily drawing the other – or the ancient dilemma of the Chinese philosopher Chuang-Tse, who dreamed of being a butterfly and afterwards was unsure whether he might not be a butterfly dreaming he was a man.

There are further complications. Another of Peter’s unveiled self-deceptions is, apparently, the claim that he has typed out his story at all; to Gracia, it’s all blank pages. Yet here is his book, breaking off at the same unfinished sentence where Peter was interrupted early in the text, and we are reading it. The story turns in on itself, and in a sense becomes its own sequel. Its portrayal of dislocated reality and the quicksand borders of madness is profoundly disturbing. Great narrative power is generated by the tension between “true” and “false” narrations, and repeated shocks of uncertainty about which is which. *The Affirmation* is one of Priest’s finest novels, and like *The Space Machine* won the Ditmar Award.

Just as *The Affirmation* made play with the science-fiction theme of immortality – only to stray into altogether different territory – *The Glamour* (1984) engages on one level with invisibility. This is not the physical invisibility of H.G. Wells’s novel *The Invisible Man* (1897), but something more akin to the psychological version in G.K. Chesterton’s

identically named detective story. Rather than people and things that cannot be seen, Priest concerns himself with those that escape our attention. “Invisible people were *there*, they could be *seen*, but unless you knew how to see they would not be *noticed*.”

Again, matters of memory and perception are fused. The apparent hero Richard Grey is a professional news cameraman, accustomed to editing film and shaping filmed memories of the past: irrelevancies and inconsistencies which have been cut become “invisible”. Now Richard’s own memory has been brutally edited, since injuries caused by a terrorist car-bomb have blanked out part of the record and left him amnesiac. An attempt at medical hypnosis (containing a discontinuity which is not illuminated until much later) reminds us of a standard effect in the repertoire of hypnotic suggestion. Here “induced negative hallucination” conjures up a subjective cloak of invisibility, so that Richard is temporarily unable to perceive someone sitting in plain sight in the same room.

A long flashback then seems to reveal the erased period of Richard’s life – but subsequently this is contradicted. For example, much of it concerns an intended trip to the south of France which never happened. We realize that Richard, or Priest, has constructed a *tour de force* of paramnesiac recollection, partly-false memories evoked by the attempt at hypnosis. Much of this is woven around hints dropped during a hospital visit by Sue Kewley, with whom Richard has evidently had an affair during the lost time. She mentions postcards, and Richard sends a significant postcard; indicates that someone called Niall was a problem in their relationship, and a plausible triangle is duly outlined; asks if he remembers a unexplained “cloud”, and an unusual, ominous cloud blots out the sun. With the fantastic irrelevancy of dreams, an artist found painting in a French village seems to be Picasso.

But there is input from genuine buried memories too: Richard’s version of the affair resonates all too closely with Sue’s later account of how it all happened in England, and we guess that the transposition to France has been suggested by the fact that Richard’s rival Niall – whom he never sees – claims for a time to be away in France, from where he sends or appears to send that same postcard. Although Richard’s memory of a strange cloud in the French sky proves to be a mistake, the literalization of a metaphor, it nevertheless causes him to think at once of Niall.

At the science-fictional level, in the interpretation of *The Glamour*’s enigmas which is urged by Sue, she and Richard and Niall are linked by possession of the glamour – the psychic talent or affliction of invisibility. The cloud is a cloud of unknowing, the fog of unnoticeability which

sometimes controllably, sometimes permanently, conceals those who are "glamorous". Sue relates her attempts to escape London's dismal community of unnoticeable street people who live by shoplifting, walking into stores and unseeably filling their sacks. Richard, she explains, makes unconscious professional use of the talent, distancing himself through the camera's viewfinder to film gunmen or terrorists at close quarters, unnoticed. The unpleasant and arrogant Niall is so deep in glamour that only Sue can ever see him at all.

(Now, remembering how Richard has observed Sue apparently arguing violently with herself in the street, we understand the presence of the unseen rival – but also recall Peter Sinclair of *The Affirmation*, conversing with his fictional Seri in a London café and being politely asked to leave.)

While our understanding remains at this stage, there are disquieting episodes in which Sue and Richard go on holiday to escape Niall – only for the slow realization to emerge that he is accompanying them at every stage, an invisible presence in the back seat of the car, watching and in one horrifying scene participating in their sexual encounters. As in some pact with the devil, Niall is very literal about his promise to Sue that "You won't be seeing me again for a while."

In the disorienting conclusion, the tricky complications and reassessments of *The Glamour* are further undermined by a sideslip into metafiction, distantly reminiscent of John Fowles's auctorial intervention in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Niall, long referred to as an aspiring writer, seems to have written down an earlier sequence of Richard's story before it happened. He implies that he is invisible because he exists on a different level from the others: that he is the author of the book, the "I" of the brief opening segment (whom we have assumed to be Richard). Finally he allows Richard an escape from the nightmare, in words that once again return to the central metaphor:

> Everything will probably be much tidier, your body will heal, matters will improve. I doubt you will ever know why. You will forget, induce a negative hallucination. You are no stranger to doing that, because for you forgetting is a way of failing to see.

The mesmeric power of *The Glamour* arises from a deepening sense of wrongness in successive, clashing versions of what is seen and what is remembered. Priest himself became almost obsessively involved with the book, revising it several times before reaching the final text of 1996. In 1988 it won the Kurd Lasswitz Award, Germany's equivalent of the

Nebula Award.

In keeping with its self-effacing title, *The Quiet Woman* (1990) is a quieter novel – although it contains some laceratingly deadpan satire on policies of the European Union and of the British government under Margaret Thatcher.

The setting is the near future. There has been a nuclear accident in France, and a plume of fall-out has contaminated parts of south-central England. The coastal towns of Portsmouth and Southampton have been evacuated. Exactly how great the danger might be further north at the protagonist's home in Wiltshire (where Priest lived through much of the book's writing) is uncertain. The muffling fog of instinctive government cover-ups lies over England as pervasively as the remnants of radioactive dust... invisible, easily forgotten, perniciously unhealthy.

The heroine Alice Stockton is a writer who has unknowingly stepped into booby-trapped territory. Her latest work, an innocuous collection of biographical studies called *Six Women*, is impounded by the Home Office for unstated political reasons and she is required to destroy all her copies. Meanwhile her elderly friend Eleanor Hamilton is murdered, with a hint that her Campaign for National Disarmament activism may be the reason. The link between these seemingly unrelated events is Eleanor's son, a highly placed "information contractor" whose company (in keeping with Thatcherite policies of outsourcing government functions) proves to be effectively running Britain's internal intelligence and disinformation services.

This son, Gordon Sinclair (a surname from Eleanor's first marriage), sometimes calls himself Peter Hamilton. If there is an allusion to Peter Sinclair of *The Affirmation*, it merely confirms that this unpleasant man's segments of the narrative should be distrusted. He sees gigantic alien cylinders grinding crop-circle patterns into the Wiltshire cornfields; hallucinates a nuclear-armed stealth bomber crashing close by as his mother is buried; recalls his father's and nine-year-old brother's death in an impossibly extravagant fairground calamity; and replays unexceptional interviews with Alice as grossly sadomasochistic fantasies. He is mad, bad and dangerous to know.

In other parts of the narrative, Priest shows an unusual playfulness. When Sinclair, misusing his power to change national security databases, deletes a visiting friend of Alice's... this friend abruptly vanishes from the story. The best joke satirizes the European Community's subsidy system, whose support of farmers by "intervention buying" of crops is here extended to writers. Literary effort is rewarded on a sliding scale based on

page count and past performance, and the work dumped into the public domain.

Alice learns that her book was suppressed not for any serious reason but for touching on a trivial state embarrassment, one of the *Six Women* being "the unmarried companion of Sir Percival Arnold-Smythe" (a diplomat). Sinclair gets his deserved come-uppance, but not before lengthily and vindictively telling Alice the "judgement of the assessors" on her work:

> It's too long for its subject matter. The depiction of the characters is sketchy, and only the most shallow of motives are attributed to them to explain their actions. Your storytelling ability is not strong. [...] Parts of the story appear to have been left out. There are implausible concidences. You seem anxious to explain many things, but the reader is left unsatisfied. [...] At the end of the book there is a feeling of dissatisfaction, a sense that the book has been leading nowhere, that it is an artifical construct with no adequate purpose.

Besides blackly summing up the emotions with which almost every author regards a just-completed work, this seems to have an intentional ironic application to *The Quiet Woman* itself. Although it's a novel containing several good scenes and ideas, it seems deficient in that compulsive fascination of slowly unveiled secrets and complexities which characterizes Priest at his best.

He is assuredly at his best in *The Prestige* (1995), a story powered by twin mainsprings of fanatical secrecy and jealousy as the lifelong feud of two Victorian-era stage magicians comes to distort every aspect of their existence. Stage magic and misdirection provide a perfect metaphor for the established Priest technique of not so much fooling readers as allowing them to fool themselves. When a magician "accidentally" knocks a hoop against part of his apparatus and a metallic clang sounds, it is the unwary watcher who supplies the untruth that the hoop is therefore substantial and solid. As Priest has remarked:

> The narrative voice is comparable with a magician's act [...] Most people reading a novel told in the first person singular will reasonably assume that it's truthfully or reliably reported, or that only one person is writing it, or that no one apart from the narrator has tampered with the text before it was printed, and so on, but to me these assumptions open possibilities for a few sneaky reversals.

(Interview in *SFX 4*, September 1995.)

A minor example soon emerges in *The Prestige*, whose modern-day opening features a journalist who is descended from one of the warring magicians (and who suffers from the lifelong conviction that he has a lost twin – for which an eerie explanation will ultimately emerge). Briefly he examines the published memoirs of his great-grandfather Alfred Borden. The novel's next section does indeed consist of Borden's memoirs... but *not* the version edited for publication.

The differently slanted autobiographical narratives of Borden and his deadly rival Rupert Angier fill most of the book. Each, despite flickers of remorseful sympathy, is the villain of the other's story. After reading Borden, numerous shocks and reversals of interpretation await the reader in Angier's version of events. Mirror-images and dual roles abound, appropriate to a tale of magic in the age of gaslight.

Borden's triumph and curse is his trademark illusion, "The New Transported Man", in which he appears to travel instantaneously across the stage. (To use both rivals' professional jargon, this effect is the trick's payoff or "prestige".) Angier is deeply jealous, not knowing that the obsessively guarded secret has forced Borden's entire life into an unnatural pattern. Borden himself mentions a real-life example: the Chinese magician Ching Ling Foo, the misdirection for whose climactic effect required him to constantly act out the lie of being aged, weak and feeble – offstage as well as on.

His envy having reached near-desperation, Angier travels from London to Pike's Peak, Colorado, and seeks advice from the electrical pioneer Nikola Tesla. *The Prestige* moves into the territory of Wellsian scientific romance (turning a blind eye to problems with the as yet unknown Einstein mass-energy equivalence), when Tesla achieves the impossible by building Angier a marvellous stage apparatus which literally transmits the performer through space. Thus Angier now eclipses Borden's best efforts and storms to magical pre-eminence with the new keynote effect which he calls "In A Flash". It is Borden's turn for gnawing jealousy, and Angier's turn to cope with the life-distorting effects of a trick's "prestige": for the Tesla device is a matter duplicator rather than a transmitter, and each performance requires Angier to dispose of his own dead body.

Spying on Angier, Borden inadvertently sabotages this trick, with terrible effects. Vengeance follows. The final irony for both magicians is that owing to the strange nature of their secrets, each has literally *half*-killed the other; their exit lines are identical yet have different meanings.

The novel concludes with another modern-day episode which both explains and does not explain, transposing from scientific romance (with conscious echoes of Wells's *The Invisible Man*) to something atmospherically Gothic. It is not easily forgotten.

The Prestige effortlessly crosses genre boundaries: it was shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and won both the World Fantasy Award and the non-genre James Tait Black Memorial Award. It may be Priest's finest book.

His most recent novel is *The Extremes* (1998), an initially straightforward-seeming story in which "Extreme Experience" virtual-reality systems are first shown as used for intensive FBI training in handling violent situations, and then enter the public arena as a fast-growing and lucrative part of the entertainment industry. The protagonist Teresa Simons, an FBI agent, distracts herself from grief by investigating the coincidence that the "spree attack" mass shooting which killed her husband in America was paralleled by a similar outburst by a deranged gunman on the same day in England.

An implied answer emerges through a succession of violent or pornographic "ExEx" scenarios and a gradual blurring of the interface between simulation and reality. Software versions of events, held in computer memory, can be as misleading and (owing to interactivity) mutable as human memory tends to be in Priest fictions. Afflicted with fleeting hallucinations of the past massacre in the English town where she is staying, Teresa comes to see the local and American shootings as linked by feedback through ExEx itself; seemingly her own FBI training has leaked across time to assist that unskilled gunman whose crimes she relives. Like *A Dream of Wessex*, the story ends on a note of triumph which may be delusive, since it is not reliably rooted in external actuality.

There is an interesting contrast here between depicted violence and Priest's carefully controlled, understated, sometimes flat style, which tends to preserve a surface calm while building cumulative effects of menace and disorientation as his complex, devious plots take shape. He excels at lowering, rather than raising, a story's emotional temperature. "Experimental" stylistic devices rarely appear, besides minutiae like *The Affirmation*'s differing quotation marks for "real" and "unreal" voices, or Alfred Borden's peculiar usage of first-person pronouns. The auctorial voice is so disarmingly quiet that sparing repetitions of phrases resonate powerfully, like Peter Sinclair's broken sentence "For a moment I thought I knew where I was, but when I looked back"... the simple "Wish you were here. X" postcards of *The Glamour* ... or *The Prestige*'s duplicated exit

line, “I will go alone to the end.”

Christopher Priest remains a fascinatingly variable author with a rare skill of slipping unobtrusively across genre boundaries – unafraid either to undermine a science-fiction scenario with metafictional ambiguities, as in *The Affirmation* and *The Glamour*, or to produce a genuine SF device where only trickery is expected, as in *The Prestige*. As Ursula Le Guin once wrote, he is a versatile writer from whom we can expect nothing expectable.

Michael Scott Rohan (1996)

Rohan, Michael Scott

Nationality: Scottish. **Born:** Edinburgh, 1951.

Michael Scott Rohan's first novel *Run to the Stars* (1983) was sf; his debut fantasy (with a modern archaeological setting and horror overtones) *The Ice King* (1986) was written with Allan Scott, and the Rohan/Scott collaborations are discussed in the Scott essay.

The **Winter of the World** trilogy's seeming fantasy world is actually prehistoric Earth at the height of an ice age: the Wurm glaciation, promoted by supernatural Ice powers. Other forces like the enigmatic Raven (Odin) help beleaguered humanity in their own ways, and there is a wise Elder Race of apparent neanderthals. The hero Elof survives the bloody sacking of his village by sea-reavers in *The Anvil of Ice* (1986), to become apprenticed to an Ice-serving Mastersmith under whose grudging tuition he emerges as a gifted maker of magical tools and weapons – like the "mindsword" which scatters opponents in terror. All this smithcraft is lovingly researched and described. The closing confrontation between Elof and his former master has a neat magical twist... even if it's somewhat conventional for the hitherto irresistible evil army, once made leaderless, to disperse in a single paragraph.

The Forge in the Forest (1987), succumbs a little to a middle volume's characteristic longueurs as our hero goes on immense journeys through terrific perils. There are still some strikingly enjoyable highlights of battle and smithy-work: for example, an early and consciously Wagnerian scene sees Elof using lightning to reforge an indestructible sword apparently reinforced with carbon fibre.

Such technological buttressing of fantasy tropes continues through *The Hammer of the Sun* (1988), where even the Ice powers' main scheme proves to be based on plausible altering of Earth's albedo. After straying from heroism in a disastrous attempt to shackle the more-than-woman Klara whom he loves too possessively and who may not be bound, Mastersmith Elof falls on evil times and is made a slave, crippled by his own creations. He rises above this, literally; his stature has grown until he now casts mythic shadows as a proto-Vulcan, while even his prentice work like the Tarnhelm will echo through human mythology. Now the tally of his creations increases almost outrageously: having already mastered

electroplating and perfect energy accumulators, he adds Greek fire, distillation, napalm, powered flight and the solar furnace... while sly textual hints convey that the literal Hammer of the Sun with which Elof destroys the crucial redoubt of the Ice amounts to a tactical nuclear weapon.

While leaving much to inexplicable magic, this underpinning of practical physics adds considerable conviction – though sometimes its exposition sits oddly with outbreaks of "high fantasy" diction.

The **Spiral** trilogy uses the fantasy tradition of magical realms co-existing with ours, with importance given to borders, portals and crossings. Our known "real" world and its mindset comprise the Core: around it is the Spiral, a shifting between-region leading out to the spiritual ultimates of the Rim. Spiral time is negotiable, and mythic or historic places can be reached as easily as the real seaports where Spiral meets Core. Hence there's much fantasy action-adventure and piracy on literal high seas, since only ships can negotiate the Spiral (volume three extends this to zeppelins and even a helicopter). The first book, *Chase the Morning*, has a memorable scene when the unbelieving hero first sees an old-fashioned sailing vessel climbing from a dull English dock up through the cloudscapes of sunset.

This trilogy is set in the near future, each linked volume having a separate plot. *Chase the Morning* (1990) is an exhilarating pursuit of the not-quite-hero Steve Fisher's kidnapped secretary, sailing the Spiral with colourful and sometimes sinister allies to a climax of voodoo and possession in Haiti. Good set-pieces include the blazing appearance of a *dupiah* demon in a seafront warehouse, and technofantasy *frissons* like Fisher's early tracing of his new friend's ship *Iskander* in a CD-ROM Lloyd's Register: Reg. Huy Brazeal, 1868. The book's chief problem is that while we're repeatedly told that Fisher is a worthless "hollow man", with a crucial plot point depending on this, his first-person narration is engaging and he's constantly doing heroic things.

The Gates of Noon (1992) happens years later, with Fisher caught up in a multi-sided dispute over a new water system for (now) rainfall-starved Bali. His shipping company undertakes to transport the relevant computer gear, against strong opposition in Spiral and Core: Fisher rides guard on the container, which is gaudily protected by spray-can graffiti symbols thanks to a sorcerous ally. There's more neat crossover of magic and science when, beset by unpleasantness on the rail-freight stage of the container's journey, the magician complains there's no power to work with and Fisher points out the adjacent high-voltage wiring. Later our hero

succumbs to the wiles of a death-goddess who is one of the opposing forces, and subsequently learns that, possessed, he climbed naked down forty storeys from a Bangkok hotel room to steal his own shipment.... More Spiral sea-chases ensue, including landfall on Skull Island of King Kong fame. There are vivid confrontations and unmaskings. When all the concerned Forces are revealed, Fisher settles matters with a fast-talking diplomatic compromise more SF than fantasy in tone.

Further years elapse before *Cloud Castles* (1994), this time-discontinuity once again leaving Fisher free of his girlfriend from the previous book. Here the action is on a still more cosmic scale. When Fisher inadvertently steals the revered Spear associated with the holy Graal (later ingeniously concealing it in an automated container delivery system) one notes his name, his reiterated description as a hollow man, spiritually maimed, etc, and the fact that he's remotely descended from German royalty.... Apotheosis looms, but not before a muster of the Graal knights from all of history for rousing struggle with adversaries old and new – the worst of the new being an entire malevolent mountain (the Brocken) seething with the degenerated bodies and souls of once-humans incorporated into its being. There is an interview with a godlike Rim entity who offers Fisher the business whizkid his ultimate career opportunity; and again he gets the girl, this time a female Graal knight.

These Spiral books offer many audacious ideas and scenes, not to mention a pleasant sense of fun; they effectively contrast the fantastic with the streetwise, business-canny depiction of the Core. Despite patches of sloppy or hasty writing, the trilogy reads well.

Like others before him, Rohan effectively mixes a toughening alloy of science-fictional logic into his fantasy narratives. A new sequence of books based on Scots myth and history is planned, beginning with *The Lord of Middle Air* (1994) – a story of the 13th-century Borders featuring the historical "wizard" Michael Scot, one of Rohan's own ancestors.

Fred Saberhagen (1996)

Saberhagen, Fred

Nationality: American. **Born:** Chicago, Illinois, 1930.

Fred Saberhagen's best-known fantastic creations are the Berserkers, introduced in the collection *Berserker* (1967): the implacable, spacefaring death machines of his hard science fiction, coldly unliving and forever inimical to life. Their legend is stronger and more influential than any of the actual stories in which it develops. (Some of these pay homage to fantasy: "Starsong" retells the Orpheus myth in a berserker Hades and Poe's most unwanted guest is echoed in "Masque of the Red Shift".)

The exhilarating **Empire of the East** sequence may be Saberhagen's best actual fantasy – or science fantasy. Here magic is rationalized in a future world after nuclear war was halted by quasi-mystical transformation of Earth, with energy sources and patterns reorganized into magical, often sentient entities. The crippled god Ardneh who inspires the virtuous West is the former US defence computer system; the nastiest of all the East's demons was, before the change, a nuclear fireball.

The Broken Lands (1968) makes entertaining play with an Indian legend turning on a contractual quibble. The stormgod Indra, rider of elephants, promised not to slay a particular demon by day or by night, using a wet weapon or a dry, etc; and killed him in the morning twilight with sea-foam. This prophecy is quoted in chapter one, and quietly works out after various adventures centring on Western guerillas' discovery and use of an ancient nuclear tank (called Elephant) against the local satrapy of the East. When the satrap himself steals this behemoth, another functional relic is applied to its air vents: a foaming fire extinguisher. Explicitly magical devices also appear, like the Thunderstone – another nod to Indra – which attracts a devastating lightning bolt whenever it changes hands.

The Black Mountains (1971) shows the West on the offensive against the Eastern citadel run by Som the Dead, who has a permanent corpse-reek since making a deal with death that leaves him immune to any weapon, and the Demon Zapranoth, whose life is well hidden. Also present is the Beast-Lord Draffut (revealed to be a dog evolved by millennia of exposure to techno-magical life elixir), compelled to heal men of East and West alike. The climax sees Zapranoth's life traced and destroyed in the nick of time, while Som is neatly annihilated by a well-meant act of healing.

Interesting extras include a technological djinn who builds whatever he's instructed to, and sniggers when a wizard orders an airship using huge, evacuated iron spheres – without regard for atmospheric pressure....

Finally, *Changeling Earth* (1973; retitled *Ardneh's World* 1988) reveals the nature of Ardneh and introduces the top brass of the East: the all-devouring but deeply banal Emperor John Ominor, the wizard Wood and the caged Demon Orcus. Earth's transformation is explained (puzzlingly implying that the nuclear dreadnaught of book one could not have worked). At the height of battle, with Ardneh ringed by Ominor's army and succumbing to the raging onslaught of Orcus... Ardneh releases the transformation and allows Orcus to re-assume its true nature as a thermonuclear blast. Not high fantasy, but clever and satisfying.

The many subsequent **Swords** books are linked to this trilogy by legends of Ardneh and by certain long-lived characters (Draffut and later Wood). Two thousand years later, our mythological gods have re-emerged from human belief to play a game with humanity: Vulcan forges twelve magic swords to be scattered through the world, his little joke being that these swords can kill the gods. The game's rules are obscure. Apparently the series was devised as the basis of a computer game, perhaps accounting for its jerky and episodic nature, the plethora of loose ends, the general lack of that rounded satisfaction expected from a Saberhagen plot. (*The Second Book of Swords* [1983] consists largely of a find-the-guarded-treasure sequence that reeks of *Dungeons and Dragons* cliché.) There are several good ideas, but these are poorly organized, and there's a sense of auctorial laziness in the arbitrary way the swords move about the gameboard, often by divine intervention.

The swords themselves are plot devices of such power as to dominate the action and marginalize the characters. Dire mnemonic doggerel details their names, properties and restrictions, devised with considerable comic-book ingenuity. Shieldbreaker, for example, is invincible against all weapons including the other swords, the loophole being that its blade won't touch unarmed opponents. Farslayer flies irresistibly to kill a specified enemy anywhere on earth... but remains in the heart of the victim, whose friends may then return the favour.

With the gods eliminated by book three, the series straggles on with a new villain (Wood) forever manifesting and disappearing like the insidious Dr Fu-Manchu, while the swords are relentlessly swapped, stolen, shuffled, lost, pursued... one, the luck-giving Coinspinner, even tends to sneak away of its own volition. *The Third Book of Lost Swords: Stonecutter's Story* (1988) seems one of the better books precisely because

it shelves the endless skirmishing with Wood and his demonic allies to become a kind of detective caper about various factions' plans for this sword that cuts rock like butter – complete with a Holmes figure making plausible deductions.

The "real" Holmes appears more than once in Saberhagen's **Dracula** sequence of vampire thrillers beginning with *The Dracula Tape* (1975), which presents undead Vlad Tepes/Drakulya as less black than Bram Stoker painted him. Scrupulously honest (he claims), occasionally sucking people dry for vengeance but perfectly able and willing to live on rats' blood, he's a old-style gentleman who under various names tends to battle, or even defend mortals from, worse things than himself – like the plague carried by the Giant Rat of Sumatra in *The Holmes-Dracula File* (1978). Settling in America, he even gives occasional help to the vampire-beset Homicide squad of Chicago, where his police contact Joe Keogh learns like Holmes before him to use wooden bullets as high-tech stakes.

Saberhagen handles fantasy devices with the inventiveness and precision of a practised SF writer, but can let his series run on too long.

Saki (1998)

Saki (Hector Hugh Munro)

Nationality: British. **Born:** Akyab, Burma, 18 December 1870. **Died:** France, 14 November 1916. **Military service:** King Edward's Horse, 1914; 22nd Royal Fusiliers, 1914-1916; killed in action. **Family:** none. **Career:** Military police, Burma, 1893-1894 (invalided home); *Morning Post* correspondent in Poland, Russia and Paris, 1902-1908.

The stories which Hector Hugh Munro wrote as "Saki" are often thought of in terms of cosy nostalgia for the pre-World War I scene, with leisured fops swapping post-Wildean epigrams in an era of general opulence. This is indeed an element of their charm; but the tales have endured because of their subversiveness as well as their genuine wit. Saki loved to unleash strange beasts and disquieting violence in those Edwardian drawing-rooms. Again and again there are darkly grotesque episodes where the epigrammatic glitter takes on the chill of ice.

Wolves and hyaenas were perhaps his favourite animals. "The She-Wolf" (*Beasts and Super-Beasts*, 1914) is mere fun, a hoax on a pretended magic-maker who is dismayed to find he has apparently turned the house-party's hostess into a real and tangible wolf. The tale within a tale of "The Story-Teller" (*ibid*) sees an unpleasantly moralistic child consumed by a fearful wolf as punishment for excess virtue; with equal relish, a hyaena in the witty "Esmé" (*The Chronicles of Clovis*, 1911) devours an unfortunate gypsy baby, to the very slight lessening of two society ladies' aplomb. "The Wolves of Cernogratz" (*The Toys of Peace*, 1919) twists the old supernatural tradition of beasts that howl for the dead, when Cernogratz Castle's wolves decline to mourn deaths among the parvenu owners, but terrifyingly salute the passing of the impoverished governess who is the last von Cernogratz. In "The Interlopers" (*ibid*), two old enemies trapped by circumstance end their feud and vow friendship hereafter; but the setting is the Carpathians and, cruelly, the "rescuing" figures prove to be wolves. The title character of "Gabriel-Ernest" (*Reginald in Russia*, 1910) is a troublingly beautiful sixteen-year-old waif who – as emerges too late to save another small child – is also a werewolf.

Other alarming creatures abound. The eponymous cat of "Tobermory" (*The Chronicles of Clovis*) learns to talk at a country house-party, and only fortuitious death prevents his revealing all the hideous

scandals seen through the windows by night. Sickly Conrad in the brilliant *conte cruel* "Sredni Vashtar" (*ibid*) makes a god of his illicit pet ferret, which duly savages to death the malicious guardian who would take away all the boy's pleasures. A rogue stag in the dark "The Music on the Hill" (*ibid*) kills the woman who has unbelievingly desecrated an offering to Pan; at the death, we hear the god's laughter. "The Remoulding of Groby Lington" has a protagonist who is persistently influenced by the traits of his pets: a monkey proves particularly disastrous, until Lington settles into stagnation with a tortoise. The mischievous title character of "Laura" dies and at her own wish is reincarnated as an otter that wreaks havoc among unloved neighbours' hens and gardens: although the otter is hunted to a grisly death, Laura's cycle of reincarnation and petty revenge continues. A monstrous spectral hedgehog crawls by night in "The Hedgehog" (*The Toys of Peace*).

Saki's less beast-ridden tales of the supernatural still take an eccentric approach. A quintessential example is "The Soul of Laploshka" (*Reginald in Russia*), featuring the unfearsome but dreadfully unhappy ghost of a miser whose death has allowed the narrator to bilk him of two francs. The haunting will continue until this trifling sum is repaid – not given to the poor, for whom Laploshka has no sympathy, but somehow bestowed on the deserving rich. In "The Saint and the Goblin" (*ibid*), a carved saint in a church proves to have his own share of folly and vanity – leading, after attempts to manipulate a mortal through visions, to a hilarious come-uppance. A dreadfully petty struggle between rustic witches dominates "The Peace of Mowsle Barton" (*The Chronicles of Clovis*), its peak of dismaying wrongness coming when several bespelled ducks lose buoyancy and pathetically, strugglingly drown. "Ministers of Grace" (*ibid*) sees all England's politicians replaced by lookalike angels from Heaven who, being genuinely well-meaning, soon cause national disaster. The creepily effective ghost-*frisson* of "The Open Window" (*Beasts and Super-Beasts*) is not so much deflated as capped by the revelation that the story which sends a man fleeing in terror is an improvisation by one of Saki's ruthless children: "Romance at short notice was her speciality." Slightly more conventional premonitions of death are noted and duly fulfilled in "The Cobweb" (*ibid*) and "The Seventh Pullet" (*ibid*). "The Infernal Parliament" (*The Square Egg*, 1924) presents a comic Hell where all constituents are compelled to listen to all political speeches, and the torment in preparation for an unnamed playwright is to spend eternity reading a gigantic volume of indexed theatrical press-cuttings *with the letter S omitted* – presumably a dig at the egotistic George Bernard Shaw.

The author's grim wit also spices non-supernatural stories of grotesquerie and weirdness. The punchline of "The Reticence of Lady Ann" (*Reginald in Russia*) highlights the failure of a marriage as, following a one-sided quarrel with his silent wife, Lady Ann's husband exits without realizing she has been dead for two hours. "The Background" (*The Chronicles of Clovis*) relates the sadly comic life of a visitor to Italy who impulsively has a masterpiece tattooed on his back, and is trapped there by art-export regulations. A recurring theme of practical joking attains savage intensity in "The Unrest-Cure" (*ibid*), whose victim spends a night of terror believing that all the Jews in the neighbourhood are to be lured to his house and massacred, with a Bishop presiding over the slaughter. There are several casual killings: murder is lightly condoned in "The Blind Spot" (*Beasts and Super-Beasts*) because, Wodehouseianly, one doesn't wish to lose a fine cook to the gallows; the comic-sinister plot to gas a hated lap-dog in "Louis" (*The Toys of Peace*) might have been too much for British sensibilities, if not for the neat closing twist.

Saki continues to be read as a celebrated Edwardian wit, but his poisoned barbs are always waiting for the unwary.

Allan Scott (1996)

Scott, Allan

Nationality: British. **Born:** 1952.

Allan Scott's fantasy output has not been huge, and two of the three novels discussed here are collaborations with Michael Scott Rohan.

The Ice King (1986), written with Rohan, is a contemporary fantasy-horror thriller with an archaeological background – both authors had worked in archaeology – and effective use of the blacker byways of Norse myth, all set on the Yorkshire (Danelaw) coast. It soon emerges that the sealed chests found in the remains of a sunken Viking ship contained something still alive after a millennium, an authentic horror: *draugar*, the undead of Icelandic legend, irresistibly strong corpses who can recruit fellows from their kills. Meanwhile, a traditional local folk-dance connects fatally with the sacrificial rite of Odin....

Much bloodshed ensues, with some interestingly and unusually choreographed fight scenes. Worldwide computer-net collation of myth databases reveals something of the true situation to an appalled professor of archaeology, who goes on an involuntary research trip to the Corpse Strand and Yggdrasil while in the real world the eternal Fimbulwinter is closing in. Hela and Odin both take a hand, and modern technology is ingeniously if unwisely turned against the ancient horror. In the end the chief *draug*, Raven the Ice King, is shown as not wholly unsympathetic and at last receives his due Viking funeral in fire and water.

The Ice King reads well enough despite a profusion of spelt-out dialect and that frequent horror-novel sense that numerous characters are there solely to be nastily killed.

Scott's one non-collaborative novel is *The Dragon in the Stone* (1991), an original and distinguished treatment of Norse mythic themes which expands through time from a modern Danish setting to encompass the clear, icy despair of that Ragnarok where all must die and the only important choices remaining are how one falls and in what company.

A tight knot of connections is gradually established. The liosalfar and svartalfar, light and dark elves, are here stripped of any vestigial sentimentality to show as creatures of pure ice, fire and darkness. The man who passes through the standing stone into magical time and returns prematurely old has more of a past and more of a future than convention

dictates. The “Watcher”, guardian of the stone gateways, is a fearful, detestable monster, and a cognate of Grendel whom (when the crosstime action shifts to the legendary and cursed mead-hall of Rolf Kraki) a cognate of Beowulf will maim and later kill (part of the emerging tangle of relationships clarifies why just this one man can do so) – while the monster is also our world’s only protection from the destroying svartalfar.

Amid this complexity hard decisions must be made, notably when a modern-day farmhouse is besieged by various outer terrors culminating with real children temporarily possessed by svartalfar: can one humanly save oneself by killing attackers who at dawn will be ordinary Danish kids again? History bends on itself, old weapons and men may be reforged, and the moving finale shows time-loops made complete like Odin’s symbol of the endless knot, implied prophecies fulfilled and much saved from ruin at a high cost in pain.

After an opening made just a trifle uninviting by confusing narrative cuts, human cross-purposes and gestures of disbelief (in “fairies”), *The Dragon in the Stone* develops into a fine and hard-gripping novel.

Lastly... *A Spell of Empire: The Horns of Tartarus* (1992), again written with Rohan, had an odd genesis. Originally plotted for the **Warhammer** fantasy game world, it was rejigged in haste when its prospective publisher severed the game connection; the slightly ramshackle result is a light-hearted swashbuckler studded with Warhammer-style mutant chaos abominations. It’s set in an alternate world where the Germanic and Scandinavian “barbarians” allied themselves with Attila the Hun to create the Nibelung Empire, while over the Alps is “the Southern Empire, vast and decadent, last heir of vanished Rome... gangrenous and crumbling, yet still seething with malign life”.

Little actually depends on the interesting pseudo-historical background. Our half-elf hero with his amusingly motley companions must transport one of two eponymous and powerfully magical wind instruments from Nurnberg to Syracuse in the far south, threatened by the usual gameworld succession of encounters with varied foes and horrors. The humorous touches are generally better than in the off-key prologue – where Emperor Constans demonstrates his Italianness with “So, whats-a da matter this-a time?” etc – but contrast oddly with desperate battling against slimy menaces, as though the whole mixture needed to be cooked a little more. Occasionally a light-hearted notion does successfully enter into the heavy action, as when a menacing sentient cavern whose voice is a waterfall is choked by the hero’s alchemical conversion of the water to *aqua vitae* or schnapps. The apocalyptic resolution is exciting enough, and

its aftermath leaves us smiling... but the book as a whole seems over-long and uneven.

Scott's knowledge of Old Norse (in which he has an Oxford degree) and the whole "Northern thing" brings a bleakly persuasive erudition to these aspects of the books. His solo novel is genuinely impressive.

Brian Stableford (2003)

Brian Stableford is best known as a prolific author of science fiction based on themes of biology and sociology, disciplines in which he is academically qualified. He brings an unsparing critical intelligence to his treatment of the supernatural, in particular the vampire myth and (in his Werewolves trilogy) the possibility of "angels" with the power to alter physical law and disrupt causality at whim.

Brian Michael Stableford was born on 25 July 1948 in Saltaire, Shipley, in the English county of Yorkshire. He attended Manchester Grammar School from 1959 to 1966 and went on to the University of York, graduating in 1969 with first-class honours in biology. After three years' postgraduate research studying the population dynamics of flour beetles, he switched to the sociology of literature in 1972, leading to his 1978 thesis "The Sociology of Science Fiction" and a 1979 D. Phil. doctorate.

Stableford has held various full-time and part-time academic positions since 1976 – chiefly at the University of Reading, Berkshire, the town where he has lived since 1980 – while pursuing a parallel career in writing. Besides publishing much imaginative literature he is acknowledged as a major critical authority on the subject, notably for *Scientific Romance in Britain, 1890-1950* (1985). In 1999 he received the Pilgrim Award for scholarship in SF.

He began to publish science fiction as a teenager with the novelette "Beyond Time's Aegis" (*Science Fantasy* magazine, 1965) written with his friend Craig A. Mackintosh under the joint pseudonym Brian Craig – a name later revived by Stableford for solo game-related fantasies. His first SF novels *Cradle of the Sun* (1969) and *The Blind Worm* (1970) were colourful, exotic and slapdash. Stableford cheerfully acknowledges the potboiler nature of his early "Dies Irae" trio (all 1971), which essentially reworked Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* as a fast-paced mixture of space opera and sword-and-sorcery.

As the 1970s progressed his work blended entertainment with greater thoughtfulness, some psychological depth, and an exhilarating sense of scale – with whole planets re-engineered, and viewpoints extending over gulfs of evolutionary time, as in *The Walking Shadow* (1979). *The Encyclopedia of SF* (1993) compares his better novels with the scientific romances of Olaf Stapledon.

Stableford's first venture into book-length supernatural fantasy was the children's novel *The Last Days of the Edge of the World* (1978). The story is witty, charming, inventive and critical of all magical wish-fulfilment. As in John Brunner's *The Traveller in Black* (1971), the ultimate quest goal is to remove the taint of chaotic, irrational magic from the world so that reason can prevail.

The title's magic-poisoned edge is the last of the seven edges of a world that elsewhere has subsided into roundness. Close by is the bankrupt kingdom Caramorn, which hopes to ally with itself with magic and presumed power by marrying its unlovable prince to the daughter of the last, near-senile wizard of the world's edge. Naturally the girl objects, decides to test her suitor with extremely difficult questions, and unwittingly stumbles on a spell comprising the six hardest questions of all.

Once begun, this spell must be completed. It is the last will and testament of the long-dead mage Jeahawn, who put an end to the old wars of wizardry that have left the edgelands still haunted and polluted with "curses and counter-curses stacked six or seven deep". Now it's time for the final decontamination, each question posing a tougher challenge – such as learning the colour of a gem buried within an ancient monster's head – whose answering has more spectacular side-effects. The finale is apocalyptic, with the enchanted realms collapsing in chaos and flood to give Caramorn not magical wealth but a sea coast and a fishing industry.

Rationality triumphs, and the young heroine and hero (who, subversively, is not the prince) are free to go to university. *The Last Days of the Edge of the World* is an enjoyable, undeservedly neglected story.

In 1988 Stableford published his first major assault on the vampire mythos, *The Empire of Fear*, opening in an alternate seventeenth century where vampirism has been loose in the world for centuries. Class divisions of Grand Normandy (England under the Gaulish empire) are made sharper and crueller by the presence of an immortal vampire aristocracy whose local prince has ruled since the twelfth century: Richard I, the Lion-Heart (*Coeur-de-Lion*).

Here the nightmarish trappings of supernatural horror, of blood, fangs and perverse lust, are shadows to be dispelled by the light of scientific reasoning. The story opens with Edmund Cordery, Mechanician to the Court of Prince Richard, busying himself with the newly invented microscope. This, rather than garlic and crosses, is his talisman – the thin end of the wedge of understanding that will topple an empire of fear that's also an empire of ignorance. A tiny elite of undying vampires has long lorded it over millions of commoners, but now: "Our arts mechanical have

outstripped their arts magical, and they know it."

In fact Cordery's key insight is that vampirism in this world is *not* magical in origin, not a gift of God as official doctrine claims, nor of the devil as whispered in folklore, but something essentially natural, biological. Therefore... knowing himself already doomed for having learned too much, Cordery conducts the final experiment of infecting himself with plague and allowing his vampire protector and sometime lover (the Lady Carmilla, a nod to J. Sheridan le Fanu's classic vampire story "Carmilla") to take his blood. The battle between science and superstition is fought out in her veins, with fatal results.

This lamp of reason is passed on to Cordery's son Noell, who makes a gruelling heart-of-darkness journey to the African wellsprings of the vampire plague. The crater of Adamawara, centre of the mystery, is guarded by jungles poisoned with a fungus-like infection called the silver death, seemingly a precursor of vampirism. Legends of a sky-god smiting the earth at Adamawara suggest a meteor impact that brought something alien into our world, like the contamination of H.P. Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space" (1927).

For Noell, true heroism doesn't lie in moral worth or brute courage but in proper use of the intellect. He sees past the appalling trappings of the African vampire initiation ceremony – intended to terrify and overawe – to the essential facts. The tormented vampires-to-be are *inoculated* with something, and cruelly unmanned to ensure they can never pass that something to others.

> "But [Noell], who had sat upon the knee of Francis Bacon, and carried in his flesh and and spirit alike the heritage of Edmund Cordery, had seen neither gods nor devils, nor any superhuman magic, nor anything at all to humble the soul of a common man with fear and dread. He had seen only opportunity – the birth of a confident understanding which made him feel that he was no longer a bondsman in the empire of fear, but a free citizen of the republic of enlightenment."

Far from cowering in the face of things with which mankind wasn't meant to meddle, Noell knows the importance of understanding the rationale behind seeming abominations. Turning on this pivot, *The Empire of Fear* moves from supernatural horror and the dread of the unknowable to a more science-fictional prospect in which knowledge can break the vampire hegemony and bring the benefits of quasi-immortality (conveniently accompanied by reduced fertility) to the whole human race. Exceptions

remain, a few who are tragically immune to immortality, and Noell himself ironically proves to be one such.

In the final section of *The Empire of Fear*, Stableford breaks entirely with the static, petrified tradition of horror and extrapolates the benefits of vampirism into what might be called his default utopian future. This, outlined in the futurological *The Third Millennium: A History of the World AD 2000-3000* (with David Langford, 1985) is a world transformed by "emortality", an improved human condition whereby death – still inevitable in the long entropic run – may be indefinitely postponed.

The late 1980s also brought the "Orfeo" trilogy of entertaining but uncomplex action-adventure fantasies, written as by Brian Craig. Stableford and other British authors were commissioned to produce spinoff fiction set in the world of Games Workshop's *Warhammer* role-playing system. However successful as a game, this offered little originality as a fantasy setting – as suggested by the world map of such heavily copyright-protected lands as Albion, Nippon, Araby, and Cathay, peopled with innovative creatures like orcs, trolls, dwarves, elves, vampires and the Norse. The lively "Orfeo" trilogy that resulted comprises *Zaragoz* (1989), *Plague Daemon* (1990) and *Storm Warriors* (1991); further game-related titles followed.

In the major "Werewolves" trilogy of 1990-1994, Stableford introduces a range of supernatural entities – werewolves, immortals and "fallen angels" of incalculable powers – and, even more so than in *The Empire of Fear*, subjects them to severe philosophical testing by the standards of what a reasonable man might find worthy of belief. The analysis is prolonged and scathing.

The eponymous shapeshifters of *The Werewolves of London* (1990) have a literal existence in Victorian London, cheekily buttressed by references to Sabine Baring-Gould's *The Book of Werewolves* (1865) and Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) which would not have been recognized by their supposed authors. Equally real is the manufactured immortal Adam Clay, or the Clay Man, who as "Lucian de Terre" once wrote *The True History of the World*.

But the Earth of this trilogy is "a world with many histories, none of them true" – thanks to the possibility of supernatural "Acts of Creation" which by remaking the present also rewrite the past, rooting their changed reality in false but unfalsifiable history. Adam Clay, made rather than born, nevertheless has a navel implying a past that never was. In which case, as argued by Philip Henry Gosse in his much-ridiculed *Omphalos* (1857; the title is Greek for navel), the Earth might be only thousands of

years old despite the many millions implied by the geological record.

Acts of Creation are possible to the elusive beings tentatively designated as angels, who have been generally quiescent since what human myth recollects as a golden age of gods, miracles and chimeras. Now, in 1872, there are new stirrings. In Egypt, the sequence's central character David Lydyard is bitten by a seeming snake which infects him with apocalyptic, heretical visions of God and Satan. An angel (later taking the name Bast) has made him its creature, its eyes on a world which it cannot directly perceive.

Meanwhile the aspiring mage Harkender, a kind of Aleister Crowley figure, has attempted to exploit such angelic linkage via a ritual intended to make the foundling Gabriel Gill a focus of angel power. Lydyard's mentor and future father-in-law, the hardline sceptic Tallentyre, must deal with inexplicable events that challenge the framework of his beliefs. The werewolves, once real wolves, still resent the angelic intervention that condemned them to spend most of their time in the less joyous human form, and take a dangerous interest in magical doings.

The book's ramified storylines climax in Hell – a tawdry Hell like something from Dennis Wheatley, improvised by the nameless angel (known to some as the Spider) with which Harkender communicates through ugly rituals of pain and sexual humiliation. The Spider's intimidation is limited by what it can pluck from human superstition and fear. It is Tallentyre who retorts with a more compelling vision of the cosmos as it seemed to Victorian eyes, a starry infinity whose impact on the Spider's comprehension brings the book to a pyrotechnic end.

Lydyard's visionary journey has barely begun, and continues with increasing, harrowing intensity through *The Angel of Pain* (1991), set in 1893. In this curiously static but densely argued text, external events – grave-robbery, wolf attack, shocking magical killings – seem hardly more than distractions from Lydyard's and others' inward agonies and ecstasies. The Angel of Pain herself, with terrible talons and burning eyes, is no more than a symbol of Lydyard's constant torment by arthritis; yet she's a rewarding mistress whose attentions fuel his clairvoyant visions, his ability to see (his inability *not* to see) through certain others' eyes.

Plato's allegorical cave is a recurring image. Men chained in the cave see only shadows on the wall before them, being unable to turn and look at the real objects which cast the shadows. Even Lydyard has been allowed only glimpses over his shoulder; even the angels see only metaphorical shadows, though different ones, since human and angelic viewpoints come close to mutual incomprehensibility.

The Angel of Pain culminates with a sixfold "oracle" of human characters mentally linked, through a common gateway of excruciation, for a visionary journey beyond Plato's cave. The oddly assorted six include the newly introduced "Hecate", a malformed woman who like Gabriel is a conduit for angelic power, and Sterling, an ambitious biologist whose anachronistic success in inducing artificial mutations suggests covert help from an interested angel. In the final, transcendent vision which they share, there is insight at last – if only by allegory – into the angels' inhuman sensoria. These beings might easily destroy humanity, but nevertheless need it as a mirror to help understand themselves. In a closing dream-encounter with "Bast", which wins Lydard a few concessions and some relief from pain, he addresses the angel:

> "You're not human, I know, but you are a thinking person. Aren't you lonely for the sight of eyes which may look into your own and have some inkling of what you are?"

There is no reply, but for the first time it is recorded that an angel seems forlorn.

A further quarter-century passes before the closing volume *The Carnival of Destruction* (1994), whose title quotes George Griffith's future-war novel *The Angel of the Revolution* (1893) and whose action begins in 1918 amid the carnage of a World War I that's taking a different course from our history. When Joan of Arc seems to appear to young French soldier Anatole as he lies dying in a shell-hole, we know that the angels have begun to meddle anew. A further example of how their powers are defined by human expectation is the transformation of a former henchman of Harkender who simplistically worshipped the Spider as Satan, and as his reward has become the immortal, invulnerable and vestigially horned "Asmodeus".

Whatever the angels may be, it emerged in book two that just seven of these trans-natural entities are associated with Earth. It is time for another kind of oracle to determine the best (in whatever unimaginable scale of values) long-term relationship between angels and mankind. In scenes of considerable destructive power, various angels gather "focus groups" of human and other characters to survey the sheaf of possible futures.

Thus Mandorla, pack leader of the werewolves of London, joins the Clay Man to examine the most obvious carnival of destruction: a grim Stapledonian timeline where peace never returns after 1914, with London under gas attack in 1930, consumed by nuclear fire in 1963, uninhabitable

except by deep tunnel-dwellers in the 21st century, and so on through increasing desolation.

Pelorus, the werewolf most sympathetic to mankind, accompanies Harkender and Sterling on a critical survey of possible utopias – from SF dreams (including emortality) to abstract heavens of light and ecstasy or perpetual unspoilt childhood. All are found wanting.

Anatole, meanwhile, has boldly asked "Jeanne d'Arc" for a vision of the entire universe and its workings, and together with Lydyard and Hecate experiences vast cosmological perspectives. The oracular zoom-lens ranges from immensity to submicroscopic tininess. At last the nature of the angels is suggested: beings rooted in our universe's underlying quantum reality and perplexed by the strange sluggishness of matter. Yet they remain, for all practical purposes, supernatural creatures.

There's no going back after exploring the deep future, and when this coldly exhilarating carnival of destruction is over the surviving characters are stranded far, far from Victorian gaslit romance and the low-tech horrors of 1918. However, the final epilogue suggests that by removing themselves retrospectively from history in an ultimate Act of Uncreation, the angels have allowed another of the world's many histories to assert itself. In 1872, Lydyard is spared that snake-bite; in 1918, World War I is ending as we expect....

This extraordinary trilogy synthesizes a vast range of myth, philosophy (that of Plato and Lucretius in patricular), invention and literary allusion into a bleak but bracing overview of human history, from past to distant future and the ultimate limiting factor of our own imagination.

Before his Werewolves trio was concluded, Stableford returned to the vampire theme in a contemporary setting with *Young Blood* (1992). Its heroine Anne Charet is a philosophy student at a very ordinary British university, low on self-esteem and carrying on a tepid affair with postgraduate psychology researcher Gil Molari. Then she discovers curious ecstasy ("much sexier than sex") with the shadowy being Maldureve, who identifies himself as a vampire.

Charet willingly lets Maldureve take her blood. Fangs are not involved; as her tutor remarks in a light-hearted discussion of vampire mythology, "We can all see that Christopher Lee's canines are at least two inches apart, and the two holes in the girl's neck are never more than half an inch from one another..." In reality, or seeming reality, the victim's flesh co-operates – voluptuously reshaping itself to allow free passage of blood.

Becoming dangerously anaemic, Charet quixotically decides to go the whole way and become a vampire herself. The stage seems set for a sardonic comedy of embarrassments, but the feeding trick works equally well for her and she duly inducts or infects Molari. To him, euphoria, weakness and hunger suggest a more literal infection. His research work involves psychotropic viruses that can alter mental states. “Obviously” there has been a leakage.

Molari’s rationalization proves disastrous when he’s taken unawares by the craving for blood. Charet may be equally rash in assuming that Maldureve has an independent, supernatural existence. His name, after all, suggests the French for an evil thing in a dream, *mal du rêve*. Was he conjured up by a psychotropic virus, by Anne’s complex emotional dissatisfaction, or by both in concert? Indeed, are these two causes necessarily distinct?

> “Maybe all the wars of religion were just contents between diseases of the brain. Maybe the world really was full of monsters once...”

To deal with the dangerous, vampiric hunger, Charet journeys into her own mind for symbolic battle. She survives, and so after a fashion does Molari, but *Young Blood* ends on a note which simultaneously evokes the traditional shudder of “The End... *or is it?*” and transcends supernatural horror. Perhaps, whispers the persistent voice of Maldureve, all this has been no nightmare but the opening of a new threshold in the evolution of human consciousness. It is a science-fictional rather than a supernatural unease.

The British publishers of *Young Blood* had suggested that the author pick a different title, but retreated when Stableford gleefully offered the more – in his word – perfervid alternative *The Hunger and Ecstasy of Vampires*. Instead this became the title of a 1995-1996 homage to H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895), which flirts playfully with Victorian gaslight-era romance, *fin de siècle* decadence, and the “club story” where adventures are related to an amazed audience in cosy clubland surroundings.

It is 1895. Professor Copplestone tells the tale of how carefully compounded precognition drugs took him – or rather, his projected “timeshadow” – on dream journeys to a curiously familiar future Earth of cattle-like humanity and vampiric “overmen”, recalling the Eloi and Morlocks of *The Time Machine*. Meanwhile, part of the fun for the reader is the gradual revelation of audience members’ identities.

These include the authors Dr Watson (accompanied by a unnamed, keen-faced person on whom Watson allegedly based his best-selling detective yarns), M.P. Shiel, and young H.G. Wells himself – spluttering about plagiarism. Science is represented by physicist Sir William Crookes, also a stalwart of the Psychic Research Society, and by maverick inventor Nikola Tesla. Decadence is supplied by Oscar Wilde and, perhaps, the mysterious "I" of the frame story, an eastern European count eventually named as Lugard. Spelt backwards, of course, this gives Dragul, a variant of Dragulya or Dracula.

In the Wellsian future of Copplestone's report, humanity has all but destroyed itself. Its former evolutionary niche was opened up to the blood-drinking shapeshifters who had long lived on the fringes of civilization, and who farm the barely sapient remnants of mankind until – yet farther in the future – the ugly necessities are superseded by manufactured, synthetic blood. Listening to this account of what to him is utopia, "Lugard" plans to escape persecution and entirely justified rumours of vampirism by travelling forward in time....

Sequel novellas develop the situation into a struggle ranging from the beginning to the end of existence, to determine the proper structure of the universe itself. *The Black Blood of the Dead* (*Interzone* magazine, 1997) filters this through the consciousness of the Holmes-like detective who travels yet further forward in time and reports to a sceptical gathering in Paris in 1900, with the dying Oscar Wilde as a characteristically mannered frame-story narrator. *The Gateway of Eternity* (*Interzone*, 1999; also title of 2002 omnibus collection) features a regenerated far-future Wilde but is told by author William Hope Hodgson. Taken from the trenches of 1918, Hodgson is projected forward into a still broader arena of cosmic conflict and meets a powerful entity which he identifies with the "Hog", the astral menace in the most threateningly numinous episode of his occult-detective story sequence *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder* (1913). It is confirmed that the future, with Hodgson as its instrument, can dramatically alter the past.

Throughout, Stableford's quasi-scientific extrapolation is complemented by – to quote his jacket copy for *Hunger and Ecstasy* – "fascination with... the style and sensibility of the so-called Decadent Movements." There has already been a whiff of this rich decay in the perverse rituals of pain and humiliation in the Werewolves trio, which also features two Black Masses; and like the ultra-decadent Des Essientes in J.K. Huysmans's *À Rebours* (1884), the heroine of *Young Blood* comes to value the joys of refined sensuality above humanity and life itself.

Oscar Wilde – or at least a future lookalike who has consciously

patterned himself on Wilde – also features in Stableford's *Architects of Emortality* (1999), second of the SF "emortality" sextet and heavy with a sense of *fin de siècle* at a time of global change. This includes a sequence of decadent murders *via* Baudelairean "Flowers of Evil", genetically engineered to consume their victims' flesh and leave each corpse as its own floral tribute, a skeleton wreathed in black blossoms with one bloom rising stylishly from each emptied eye socket.

Stableford has also edited such anthologies as *The Dedalus Book of Decadence (Moral Ruins)* (1990). He has published several translations into English of relevant French texts by various authors, including the notable decadent Rémy de Gourmont and the astronomer Camille Flammarion, both featuring in *The Black Blood of the Dead*. *Vampire City*, his 1999 translation of Paul de Féval, won a "Children of the Night" award from the Dracula Society.

Mention should be made here of the "Genesys" trilogy, which is pure SF but wittily takes the shape of a fantasy quest epic set on a colonized world where human and alien genes have been intermingled to aid survival in a lush biosystem where all manufactured objects are subject to rapid decay. The titles are *Serpent's Blood* (1995), *Salamander's Fire* (1996) and *Chimera's Cradle* (1997).

The approaching millennium was celebrated with *Year Zero* (2000), chronicling the adventures of downtrodden heroine Molly – struggling to survive on meagre British welfare benefits while separated from daughters in foster-care, but feisty, streetwise and irrepressible. Her bizarre exploits began with "When Molly Met Elvis" (*Interzone* magazine, 1997, revised and incorporated into novel), in which a surprise meeting with Elvis Presley in a London supermarket does not lead to a dream love affair since they have so little common ground and since – thanks to a flawed immortality treatment – he does tend to smell a bit. After further close encounters with a stranded angel, abduction-happy Alien Grays, and bullying Men In Black, Molly moves into a seedy 13th-floor apartment surrounded by literal neighbours from hell, major demons who have deserted their infernal duties. A meeting with His Satanic Majesty is inevitable.

Weirdness continues to dog Molly's footsteps. Dull employment as a pharmaceutical guinea-pig leads to missing-time episodes, contact with a prehistoric, tentacled "mother race", and an explicit wink at H.P. Lovecraft's portrayal of this situation as shudderingly horrific in "The Shadow Out of Time" (1936): Molly is made of sterner stuff than Lovecraft's narrator. After a trip to Faerie to ransom a stolen daughter,

Molly meets the more modern nightmares of global corporate conspiracy, gruesome biological engineering, and the fear that all her experiences may be just paranoid delusion. Next comes a plague of zombification which the government downplays as no worse than 'flu.

The world really is ending. When the Rapture occurs, only 37 people are saved; for those remaining on Earth, "Hell's finished. The Devil is moving to London. Don't ask me why – in his place I'd have picked Paris or Vienna..." Satan and his cohorts are both reality and reification, a distilled essence of human fear and weakness. Armed only with a "*deus ex* machine" gun supplied by Heaven, Molly has the task of outwitting ultimate evil, complicated by the fact that the Father of Lies has become her elder daughter's boyfriend.

Year Zero is an enjoyable though intermittently disquieting romp that mingles comedy, urban myths and chiliastic terrors, with a satisfyingly unsentimental closing twist.

A second children's novel, *The Eleventh Hour* (2001), partly echoes *The Last Days of the Edge of the World* in that the goal is to sweep away the festering remnants of magic and open an era of rationality. In theory, the land of Iridia has enjoyed a perpetual Age of Gold in the thousand years since magicians halted its inevitable "decay" into a more practical Age of Iron – by literally stopping the clock. Thinning and stagnancy followed, with a dwindling of magic, purpose and even population.

Restarting the Great Clock of Iridia, a project rashly undertaken by a group of youngsters, will restore the full-strength magic of yore for one last hour as the Age of Gold ticks away. Unfortunately this laudable plan was initiated by long-dead black magicians who during that hour intend to return, seize power, and stop time again with Iridia frozen in eternal tyranny. There are grim struggles, triple-cross betrayals, and a high body count before the new age can begin. The survivors' only reward is the possibility and inevitability of change.

Stableford consistently rejects both the wish-fulfilment of magical solutions in fantasy and the paradoxical comfort of supernatural horror fiction that plays with terrors we know very well are unreal. Even when paying sardonic homage to the decadent tradition, he uses careful realism and close-knit arguments to imagine what follows from such counterfactual premises as the reality of vampirism, and builds to an often transcendent conclusion. Again and again he deftly negotiates the bridge from Bram Stoker to Olaf Stapledon, from horror to scientific romance. Brian Stableford is a important and much underrated genre author.

Paula Volsky (1996)

Volsky, Paula

Nationality: American. **Born:** Fanwood, New Jersey.

Paula Volsky's fantasies began with the minor *The Curse of the Witch-Queen* (1982), a recomplicated romp about one Zargal, a duke's son afflicted with overeating and gigantism owing to the curse of an insulted king whose whole house lies under the curse of the eponymous witch-queen, who herself suffers from a curse....

Volsky attracted more attention with her **Sorcerer** trilogy, comprising *The Sorcerer's Lady* (1986), *The Sorcerer's Heir* (1988) and *The Sorcerer's Curse* (**1989**), all set in a kind of fantasy seventeenth-century Venice and couched in tones reminiscent of Jack Vance. In hope of retrieving the fortunes of her merchant father and family, the heroine is married off to the eponymous Sorcerer who runs the local magicians' guild. He is cold, proud and aloof; they predictably fall in love. One finds oneself on the Sorcerer's side despite his incredible arrogance, which along with intra-guild rivalries, conflicts with the city ruler and the hysteria of the populace eventually gets him killed. Continuing the trilogy, she finds sanctuary with their son amid the Sorcerer's non-human subterranean allies; the son becomes obsessed with revenge on the city and manipulates the cave-dwellers' culture to this end. Our heroine tends to dither in an ineffectually liberal way through books two and three, while more ruthless relatives and their allies finally save the city from the son's revenge.

Much more fun, the genial *The Luck of Relian Kru* (1987) is an entertaining exercise in quietly humorous fantasy which again owes something to Vance, and makes no secret of the debt: the luckless Relian Kru gives offence in refined foreign society by unknowingly wearing clothes whose colours convey the "Taunt Doubly Contemptuous of Matriarchal Liaison with Diseased Goat". Pursued for this by a charming though implacable assassin, he finds dodgy sanctuary with an exploitative wizard who forces him into various dangerous quests, such as stealing a (heavily guarded) magical disembodied hand which is not only good at evasive scuttling but makes extremely rude gestures at its pursuer. After several ingenious complications Kru manages to get a grip on his own magical abilities – here magic involves complex finger exercises, training

one to see and feel through a spare dimension called Forn – and goes off happily with a lady co-prisoner. Notably, there are no utter villains: the assassin is merely dutiful, the wizard a monster of self-centred egotism who nevertheless has endearing flaws, and even the dimwitted magico-mechanical snake that constrains the hero (wrapped around his neck) has a soft spot for its female counterpart.

Cynics have dismissed Volsky's fattest work, *Illusion* (1991), as written to cash in on the bicentennial of the French Revolution. Certainly it feels like a worthy but familiar historical melodrama novel "fantasied up" to permit its sale in the genre where the author is established: we have the "Exalted" aristos with their incomprehension of growing popular wrath, the increasingly vituperative pamphleteers, the numbered city districts, the storming of something very like the Bastille, actual characters who can be matched with the movers of the Revolution, etc. Few other-world fantasies can be praised as "well researched".

The magical aspects of *Illusion* are of interest. Magic's great days are past and the ability to work it is an aristocratic thing. Three major "Sentient" relics remain and are pressed into the revolutionary cause, each a metaphor for part of the historical Terror. There is ZaZa the two-headed, flame-belching metal snake, useful in crowd control: terror on the streets. NuNu is a giant mechanical bee whose roving workers gather titbits of news from all over this alternative Paris: the terror of informers and anonymous denunciation. Kokotte, a fearsome, self-acting Iron Maiden that kills bloodily and in public, is of course the guillotine. The initially young and foolish Exalted heroine eventually escapes all three, with a good deal of help from her unworldly but illusion-adept Uncle Quinz. All in all, it's a pleasantly sugar-coated pill for readers who like fantasy and think they dislike historical romance.

The Wolf of Winter (1993) is ambitious in a different way: an expansive story of kings, usurpers, power and necromancy. In the icy country of Rhazaulle the king or Ulor takes his title from the legendary winged wolf of winter. His youngest brother Varis, the intending usurper, is initially a sympathetic if weak viewpoint character who is relentlessly bullied by the middle brother. In a classic "ineffectual man makes bad" development he discovers both that he has a talent for necromancy, command of the spirits of the dead, and that the addictive potions that enhance necromantic power will also bolster his poor health and eyesight. One thing leads to another: by inventive murders and magic he carves a path through his own relatives to the throne, heedless of the apparent fact that a necromancer will always eventually go too far and burn out his

mind, thus becoming (in a term unfortunate to British ears at least, with its echo of children's comics) "spifflicated".

The viewpoint shifts to his niece Shalindra, whose brother Cerrov is the rightful Ulor: both are temporarily safe in exile, and she is further hidden in a dry-as-dust research library on an isolated island. Thanks to the librarians' secret plan to do away with necromancy by using its power to free the earthbound dead, Shalindra acquires a supply of magic-enhancing drug and is able to intervene slightly when Cerrov's loyalist army has been demoralized through necromancy and she herself captured by Varis. After dangling a romantic red herring (could Shalindra marry Varis, as for political reasons he wishes, and reform him?), Volsky offers a different and quite moving conclusion. The story reads well.

This author's knack for offbeat variants of fantasy magic, and engaging portrayals of even the nastiest characters, promises interesting books to come.

Dennis Wheatley (1998)

Wheatley, Dennis (Yeats)

Nationality: British. **Born:** London, 8 January 1897. [...] **Died:** 11 November 1977.

The prolific Dennis Wheatley was a highly popular, best-selling author of rip-roaring adventure in various genres: historical romance, thrillers, tales of war and espionage, and his sometimes loosely linked "Black Magic" stories. There is a sense in which these occult yarns are not deeply felt supernatural fiction. Instead, they tend to plug supernatural devices into an adventure-thriller template. Nazi villains may be replaced or supplemented by evil adepts, and McGuffins like treasure or secret plans by such occult plot tokens as the Talisman of Set. But Wheatley's vigorous if uninventive narrative pattern of revelations, confrontations, pursuits, captures and escapes remains much the same.

Nevertheless the formula can be effective. Its advantages over more traditional ghost/horror fiction are the excitement of slam-bang action on two complementary levels, physical and occult; and the fact that evil magicians of the Left-Hand Path are villains of human scale with human weaknesses, who may plausibly be defeated. Dr Saturday in *Strange Conflict*, for example, must eventually sleep and become astrally vulnerable.

The sequence opens with the energetic *The Devil Rides Out* (1935), in which the wise Duke de Richleau and his younger friends (established in the non-supernatural *The Forbidden Territory*, 1933) cross swords with forces of Satanism, led by the adept Mocata. Two striking scenes which transferred well to the movie version involve an open-air Sabbat where the massed power of darkness is broken by the brilliance of car headlight beams, and the lengthy siege of a defensive pentacle constructed by de Richleau – within which his party stands off various unpleasant manifestations, culminating with the Angel of Death. The ritual preparation of this "astral fortress" is described with a panache which foreshadows Ian Fleming's spy thrillers and their knowing use of brand names: the eclectic occult name-dropping runs from Ancient Egypt through Hebrew *gematria*, the karmic wheel, paganism, early Christianity, the Cabbala, astrology, folklore, and even a detectable steal from William Hope Hodgson's *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder*. After a final pursuit, Mocata

gains the evilly all-potent Talisman of Set (the Egyptian god's mummified penis) and reduces his opponents to helplessness; the tables are turned by divine intervention.

In the sequel *Strange Conflict* (1941), Wheatley added a heavily Spiritualist dimension to World War II, with a hostile adept spying from the astral plane on British convoy-route orders. De Richleau rather implausibly contrives to be enlisted as an astral counter-espionage agent – as his War Cabinet contact puts it, "in those slender hands of yours lies the Victory or Defeat of Britain." There follow lively etheric scenes as the Duke conducts night-time security checks on such possible suspects as an Admiral whose sleeping life includes much intangible copulation with dusky maidens. When the black-magician spy is traced to the Caribbean, de Richleau and cronies journey there physically to confront the local perils of voodoo, poison, zombification, and – incongrously – an evil summoning of Pan. But virtue triumphs: "As long as Britain stands the Powers of Darkness cannot prevail. On Earth the Anglo-Saxon race is the last Guardian of the Light, and [...] our island will prove the Bulwark of the World." The chief disappointment of *Strange Conflict* is that large chunks of occult exposition, including the detailed construction of a pentacle, are reproduced almost verbatim from *The Devil Rides Out*.

The Haunting of Toby Jugg (1948) is a more claustrophic exercise in paranoid horror, with the crippled, bedridden title character tormented by "irrational" fears and visions. These are in fact diabolical in origin, conjured up by a sinister guardian doctor – in particular, a spider-demon whose shadow crawls and dances nightly at the hapless invalid's window. The aim is to break his mind and sequester his family fortune to support the international "Brotherhood" of communist Satanists, with Jugg either a brainwashed convert or consigned to the asylum. Although Wheatley's notions of political nightmare now seem badly dated (and not without embarrassing touches of antisemitism), useful tension is wrung from our hero's immobile situation: struggling against overwhelming evil and the constant threat of madness, armed with only will-power and ingenuity. Unfortunately the author's own ingenuity fails towards the Black Mass finale, resorting to a multiple *deus ex machina* which includes the miraculous healing of Jugg's paralysed legs.

Wheatley returns to his more standard formula in *To The Devil – A Daughter* (1953), though with new characters, led by the redoubtable mystery novelist Molly Fountain. The shadow of evil lies over a mysterious young woman who proves to be unwittingly consecrated to Satan. Each night, as darkness falls, she is possessed and transformed from

a “nice girl” to an amoral and mildly promiscuous one... the Satanists, however, are keeping her virgin for a sacrifice (intended, for no clear reason, to complete the manufacture of a repellent homunculus) while the young male hero is incorruptible. An unpleasant expedition to a demon-infested crypt is characteristically saved from disaster when lightning strikes the evil altar: “God had intervened”. Finally the ceremony of sacrifice is disrupted at the very last minute of the eleventh hour and the chief Satanist killed by his own homunculus – while Molly Fountain irrepressibly disposes of the remaining evil congregation with a Mills bomb.

The Ka of Gifford Hillary (1956) rings the changes slightly as Sir Gifford Hillary is reduced to a spirit attempting to expose his own murderer. His faithless wife’s lover has killed him with an experimental death ray (the background contains much voluminous exposition and advocacy of Cold War arms escalation). Eventually, after lurking helplessly and intangibly behind the scenes of the thriller plot, Hillary reanimates his own corpse and re-enters the story to find himself accused of murder.

The books continued. *The Satanist* (1960) revisits now-familiar formula material, as does *Gateway to Hell* (1970). *They Used Dark Forces* (1964) makes minor use of occult tropes – astrology, numerology, thought-transference – in an over-long spy story featuring Wheatley’s series character Gregory Sallust, sent into Hitler’s Germany towards the end of World War II and aided by an adept. *Unholy Crusade* (1967), primarily an adventure thriller set in Mexico, makes some play with reincarnation and flashbacks to past lives in Inca times. *The White Witch of the South Seas* (1968), hardly even borderline-supernatural, is another Sallust caper which uses firewalking and voodoo curses as incidental local colour. *The Irish Witch* (1973) introduces the established historical-adventure series character Roger Brook to some mild supernatural elements.

Wheatley’s narratives are too often burdened with expository lumps and arguments for his own political and military views. The charm of the Black Magic sequence was a spice of wickedness that particularly appealed to adolescents. Its once great popularity has waned with the widespread availability of stronger meat, more skilfully prepared, in the modern horror genre.

Charles Williams (1996)

Williams, Charles

Nationality: British. **Born:** London, 1886. **Died:** 1945.

Charles Williams is best known for his weird and quirkily personal novels, all theological thrillers. Despite contemporary English settings they tend to feature oddly-named characters, unlikely or stilted conversations and farewells ("Under the Mercy"), and a view of women which seems odd to modern eyes. The young, nubile female who reverences and platonically obeys a much older man is a recurring figure. For more on the author's fascination with magic and power see his nonfiction *Witchcraft* (1941), a brief history of ritual magic.

Despite its 1933 publication date, *Shadows of Ecstasy* is the first-written (1928) and weakest of the novels. Like the rest it involves a breaking-through of spiritual power into the world, this time via the charismatic leader Nigel Considine's Western adaptation of yogic discipline. One is a little unconvinced by the resulting war of a Considine-dominated Africa against the old colonial powers, and by the book's kitchen-sink jumble of magical themes and notions.

War in Heaven (1930), the first published Willams novel, nods frequently and sometimes wittily to the detective story: opening with a corpse, it continues with theft and police investigation where the coveted "McGuffin" is the Graal, the Holy Grail. "What an infernally religious case this is getting!" complains an Assistant Commissioner. Notable set-pieces include a spiritual assault which threatens to dissolve the Graal by remote control, and an occult booby-trap whose effect on the setter (let alone the victim) is graphically horrible. Overall, the book is a trifle confused: car chases and police work sit oddly with the metaphysical struggle and transcendent finale.

The next three novels are better integrated, each with a clear focus of magical power that informs the action. *The Place of the Lion* (1931) sees Earth invaded by Platonic archetypes, the ultimate pure forms of beasts real and mythical: lion, eagle, serpent, phoenix. One striking scene has all the merely physical butterflies of the world absorbed into the single, huge Ideal Butterfly. Characters become linked with archetypes, like the spiteful woman who finds her counterpart in the serpent and progresses through poison-pen letters to disconcerting habits of hissing and coiling herself

around people. Meanwhile the nominal heroine Damaris Tighe is haunted by an archetypal pterodactyl stinking of carrion: Williams explains with relish that this is her come-uppance for academically studying ancient philosophies without believing in them. So much for uppity intellectual women. It is left to her boy-friend to accept and dispel the blazing idealizations by naming them (the parallel with Adam's naming of the beasts is explicit).

Many Dimensions (1931) revolves around the Stone of Solomon, whose attributes of teleportation, healing and even time travel are worked out with science-fictional cleverness but a non-sf sense of divine morality. The initial conflict is between those, notably the amoral Sir Giles Tumulty from *War in Heaven*, who regard the Stone's commercial exploitation as entirely sensible, and those who feel instinctively that the thing is holy – that both secular use and dividing it (when split it yields two Stones identical to the original) are blasphemous. Some unusual and disquieting implications of travel into one's past or future are explored. Ultimately, through a strange act of submission, one of Williams's reverent young ladies is transfigured, re-unites the now countless Stones, removes them from the world – and dies.

The magic focus in *The Greater Trumps* (1932) is the "original" pack of Tarot cards (of special interest to Williams owing to his links with A.E. Waite, designer of a revisionist Tarot, and the Order of the Golden Dawn). Additionally there's a set of golden images, one for each card, forever in motion except for the central still figure of the Fool – though to the eyes of one enlightened woman (subtly named Sybil) the Fool moves fastest of all and is everywhere in the dance, an image that influenced T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "the still point of the turning world", "we must be still and still moving". The gipsy "hero" and his grandfather have the images and covet the cards... so eagerly unleash the cards' powers of air and water to kill their legal owner, the hero's prospective father-in-law, in a violent storm. Thanks to his daughter's and sister Sybil's intervention, he is saved; but the now uncontrolled storm promises to wreck the world. A typically mystical and surreal finale restores order, with both cards and images destroyed.

Descent into Hell (1937) was a new and ambitious venture. Supernatural strands intertwine, with the crucial action happening in what Lewis Carroll called "eerie" states of perception – landscapes of hypnagogic imagery. A woman goes in fear of meeting her doppelganger... until, by a curious pact, an older and wiser man offers to take on the agony himself (such "Substitution" or "Substituted Love" was a important notion

to Williams and his circle), a solace which she is subsequently able to pass on to a martyr burned centuries earlier. A workman commits suicide and wanders the desolate construction site of houses which in "real life" are complete. Another woman's progress to death is described in hallucinatory detail. A historian dreams of ominous descent by rope, and later (by yielding to a petty jealousy) crosses some spiritual boundary into a pseudo-paradise which brings him the perverse, increasingly sickening love of a succubus. Lilith is present. Graves open. There is a scarifying closing scene of damnation. Following a slow start, *Descent* contains some of Williams's most powerful passages but diffuses its effect through the sheer quantity of unearthly happenings.

Lastly, the simpler *All Hallows' Eve* (1945) returns in part to *Shadows of Ecstasy* territory, tracing the downfall of the black magician Simon Leclerc (Simon Magus) who preaches Love but has no scruples about sacrificing his own daughter to the Art. Those against him include a recently dead woman who at one point saves the daughter through Substitution, and an artist who can't help painting this "Prophet" as an imbecile with a congregation of mindless insect-humans (the grotesquerie of which is heightened when Simon *likes* the portrayal: "No one has painted me so well for a hundred years"). The left-hand path is treacherous: with each misjudgement Simon slips further back from pure mental mastery to crude ritual, confining the astral opposition in a grubby dwarf golem and finally resorting to sticking pins in images. He fails; his daughter triumphs. Character depiction has improved, with dead Lester Furnival the strongest personality – though slightly patronized for former uninterest in spiritual matters, she is at last a likeable, wilful, and credible ordinary woman. Her coming to terms with death in the eeriness of a subjectively depopulated London strikes a deeper note than the almost conventional doings of the black magus.

Williams's Arthurian poems in *Taliessin through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944) contain much fantasy interest (evil is represented by the unArthurian "headless Emperor" of P'o-lu on the far side of the world, with his bodyguard of tentacled abominations), but are knotty and problematic for outsiders. Even his friend and literary interpreter C.S. Lewis couldn't always unravel the poems' highly personal theological symbolism.

Charles Williams specialized in descriptions of piercingly strange or numinous experiences, and is still read for these scenes even when other material (like certain chunks of discursive exposition or unbelievable dialogue) may be skipped.

Colin Wilson (1998)

Wilson, Colin

Nationality: British. **Born:** Leicester, 26 June 1931.

Colin Wilson's supernatural stories form only a tiny fraction of his voluminous and popular output, much of which is non-fiction (some of it potboiling). His own strongly held occult and paranormal beliefs may not be his greatest fictional asset, since they can occasionally lead to taking such matters for granted rather than weaving a spell of narrative plausibility. But his extensive knowledge of occult lore and historical oddity provides a fund of corroborative detail – where M.R. James would invent a sinister legend or manuscript, Wilson likes to make creative use of a genuine source. Above all, he has a personal philosophical agenda which interestingly resonates through his better novels.

Wilson's career began with literary philosophy in the initially over-praised and then (in a critical backlash) over-reviled *The Outsider* (1956), exploring the alienated "Outsider" figure through a ragbag of quotations and sources. His first novel *Ritual in the Dark* (1960) features a modern Jack the Ripper, an Outsider, violently murdering women in Whitechapel: these horrors are filtered through abstract discussions of sadism and of the possibility that murder might somehow be a creative, spiritually liberating act. The existentialist viewpoint character Gerard Sorme reappears in later novels.

The author's probing, intellectual approach to themes of supernatural terror is well suited to H.P. Lovecraft's brand of "cosmic fear", as in the explicitly Lovecraftian *The Mind Parasites* (1967). This strange curate's egg of a novel mingles extensive archeological and Cthuloid research (an aged August Derleth appears as a character), some shambolic science-fictional props and patter which are best not scrutinized, and several episodes of intense, deliberately paranoid dread. On one level the eponymous parasites are foul Cthulhu-mythos entities which feed on human neurosis, encouraging mental stagnation and routinely driving those who discover their existence towards madness or suicide. "Real" evidence for the creatures is marshalled from copious (though selective) examples of humanity's spiritual decay, from de Sade to Hitler.

These malign psychic vampires are intangible, dwelling in the deeps of the mind; an insubstantiality which makes them no less loathsome. They

are, in fact, mental cancers. Metaphorically, they represent all the negative factors in the human psyche: slimy, sluglike, octopoid-seeming personifications of laziness, cowardice, self-doubt, self-hatred and despair. Wilson's subtext is that the chief obstacles to humanity's mental development are such tumours within the mind itself. The narrator's rocky spiritual progress from helpless parasite-host to independence and true sanity (and then beyond) is considerably more fascinating than the book's incidental SF apparatus of vast cyclopean cities beneath Turkish deserts, global war fostered by the parasites to distract us from the truth, the Moon's baleful influence, etc.

Wilson returned to Lovecraftian themes in *The Philosopher's Stone* (1969), which, although more rambling and discursive than *The Mind Parasites*, is ultimately a more satisfying work. The hero is much possessed by death, and gropes towards a philosopher's stone of literal immortality – to be achieved, as was freedom from the parasites, by transcendent efforts of will. (Philosophical echoes of Nietzsche and the George Bernard Shaw of *Back to Methuselah* recur throughout Wilson's works.) This mental self-discipline through self-understanding duly leads to the development of psychic abilities. There are interesting psychometric glimpses of Shakespearean and Classical Greek times; in one dramatic occult-detective episode, the narrator disperses a claustrophobic tangle of repressed family emotions which have spawned a poltergeist.

Experimenting with his growing powers, our hero stumbles into psychic traps and safeguards left by the Lovecraftian monstrosities who dwelt on Earth before us, and who for aeons have lain in coma after a disaster resulting from racial hubris. ("That is not dead which can eternal lie....") Wilson's heady mix of ingredients includes not only the Cthulhu Mythos but Theosophy, a dash of *Forbidden Planet*, various real-world sources like the mysterious Voynich Manuscript, and a revisionist history of the Lovecraftian monstrosities which passes through horror and out on the other side. It is up to humanity to develop its full potential so that when the almost infinitely powerful Elder Ones wake again, we shall meet them as equals....

The novella *The Return of the Lloigor* (1974) is a rather more conventional Lovecraftian chiller which outlines the eponymous and slowly growing psychic menace through an accretion of sinister incidents and hints, halting on the brink of worse things to come.

Also of genre interest is *The God of the Labyrinth* (1970; US title *The Hedonists*), the third in the loosely connected "Gerard Sorme" series but the first with real supernatural content. Here, however, the approach

varies. Just as Wilson adapted the paraphernalia of supernatural horror for his own purposes in the Lovecraftian novels, he now uses conventions of pornography as an alternative route to his familiar transcendental vision. The lead character Sorme becomes entangled with a centuries-old erotic cult which – in a sly allusion to Jorge Luis Borges – is known as the Sect of the Phoenix. Naturally there is a good deal of sex, much of it less than pleasant. Sorme is amicably possessed by the spirit of a long-dead rake and adept, somewhat reducing his personal responsibility for later sexual excess. Here, the characteristic Wilsonian escape from mundane habits of mind and gaining of psychic abilities (including astral travel) comes from strenuously and, one might think, impossibly prolonged orgasm.

An occult detective who sees clues to crime in visions plays a small part – indeed, is consulted by the offical police investigator – in Wilson's otherwise non-supernatural crime novel *The Schoolgirl Murder Case* (1974). Speculations on energy vampires in *The Space Vampires* (1976) are of science-fictional rather than supernatural interest: the book is a homage to A.E. van Vogt's similarly themed 1942 SF story "Asylum". The "Spider World" science-fantasy sequence opening with *Spider World: The Tower* (1987), though featuring something very like the Shavian Life Force to which Wilson often alludes, is still more remote from the supernatural tradition. *The Strength to Dream* (1962), a polemical critical work on "Literature and the Imagination", interestingly discusses – among others – de Sade, Gogol, Hoffmann, M.R. James, Le Fanu and Lovecraft.

Colin Wilson hops without prejudice from genre to genre, and may yet revisit supernatural horror.

Appendix 1
Fragments

Richard Bleiler, editor of *Science Fiction Writers: Second Edition* (Scribner's, 1999), had inherited many essays from the first edition of 1982, edited by his father Everett F. Bleiler for the same publisher. He asked me to write continuations of those for Damon Knight, Larry Niven and Jack Vance, bringing them up to date for 1999 publication.

Damon Knight continued (1999)

> As well as the following update I asked for an omission to be repaired in the existing essay's 1970s section, by adding: "His critical achievement was honoured by the 1975 Pilgrim Award for distinguished contributions to the study of science fiction."

Damon Knight's next novel was *The Man in the Tree* (1985), telling the story of a gentle boy with a magic/psychic gift who grows into an eight-foot adult and eventually becomes the Christ figure of a new religion. His talent of reaching into parallel worlds for alternative versions of objects echoes Knight's earlier "What Rough Beast" (1958). Similarly, the idiosyncratic emerging utopia of the CV trilogy – *CV* (1985), *The Observers* (1988) and *A Reasonable World* (1991) – is reminiscent of "Rule Golden" (1954). That story's alien gas that imposed nonviolence on humanity by sensitizing us to our victims' pain is now replaced by alien symbionts first perceived as a dangerous disease – for they may punish violent impulses with death. It is characteristic of Knight's conscientious intelligence that he should return to these interesting notions and expand on their possibilities.

But he can still surprise us. *Why Do Birds* (1992) is a *sui generis* oddity, a comic yet melancholy end-of-the-world novel starring an apparent fraudster who announces that the entire human race must be placed in suspended animation and stacked in a colossal box to be rescued from doomed Earth, by aliens. Absurd: but he has a magic ring, allegedly an alien gift, whose touch can convince anyone of his story. Subversively, events turn out precisely as science-fictional expectations have led us to assume they will not: the part-filled box is uplifted, Earth is destroyed, and we are left uncertain of whether it was all a black joke on humanity. Even odder is *Humpty Dumpty: An Oval* (1996), whose hero's skull is cracked by a bullet, causing his reality – or is it only his? – to topple into surrealism. Craters like bullet-wounds open in the earth, semi-comic aliens and conspiracies abound; disorientation escalates towards a monstrous nonsense-nightmare climax as in *Alice in Wonderland*, and gives way to enigmatic, elegiac, perhaps tragic clarity. These strange, late books may be Knight's fictional masterpieces.

In 1995 Damon Knight was honoured with the Grand Master Award of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.

Larry Niven continued (1999)

Larry Niven's subsequent career has been dominated by collaborations, sequels, and reshuffled story collections. Though containing much of interest, his 1980s and 1990s output has not won further Hugo awards to add to the five he collected in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Descent of Anansi (1982), with Steven Barnes, centres on traditional hard-science-fiction ingenuity with mass, momentum and orbital mechanics. Attacked by hijackers who covet their cargo of super-thin and super-strong monofilament cable, the crew of the spaceship *Anansi* (named for a trickster spider-god) use the cable itself for evasive and defensive tricks. The book feels like a clever novelette padded to novel length.

A new series began with *The Integral Trees* (1983), distantly connected to *A World Out of Time* (1976) and its dystopian future State. Here Niven echoes the scale of *Ringworld* by presenting a vast, habitable free-fall environment – the "Smoke Ring" – within the still larger doughnut-shaped gas cloud surrounding a neutron star. Trees are rootless; floating "ponds" are spherical. Human colonists, descended from a ship's crew who escaped State control, have forgotten much about their world and past. The novel is a travelogue of discovery, exploring the highlights of a bizarre astronomical background which unfortunately dwarfs the unmemorable characters. The sequel is *The Smoke Ring* (1987).

A further collaboration with Jerry Pournelle, *Footfall* (1985), reworked a discarded scenario for their earlier disaster novel *Lucifer's Hammer* in which the Hammer – a devastating asteroid strike – was to have been a deliberate extraterrestrial attack. This story has its longueurs and political embarrassments, but the herd-society aliens are engagingly Nivenesque creations despite being determined to subjugate Earth. Occupying the tactical "high ground" of orbital space, their "Star Wars" military machine can bombard any point on the globe while remaining beyond the reach of most human attack. The exhilarating finale unveils Earth's secret weapon, an unthinkable (in peacetime) monster spacecraft powered by rapid-fire nuclear explosions, which storms the orbiting fortresses and compels an alien surrender.

The Legacy of Heorot (1987), written with Pournelle and Barnes, is straightforward action-adventure on a distant world being colonized by humans who encounter ravening monster "grendels": hence the

Beowulf/Heorot allusion. These beasts are reminiscent of the creature in the movie *Alien*, and as in horror movies the colonists react slow-wittedly to the threat. Indeed the authors find it necessary to insert an explanation that people have been variously brain-damaged by cryogenic "sleep" during their long space journey. A few nevertheless win through. The less coherent but still energetic and readable sequel *The Dragons of Heorot* (1995), also with Pournelle and Barnes, introduces the next human generation and the mild mystery – whose solution is telegraphed well in advance – of a previously unnoticed menace that effortlessly eats even grendels.

Late-period Niven shows less of the intertwined joys of creation and storytelling which fuelled the Known Space series at its best. There is a tendency towards slightly didactic political agendas, like the warm pleas for spaceborne weaponry in *Footfall* and for development of space and Mars in *The Barsoom Project* (1989, with Barnes). The latter, an effective sequel to *Dream Park* which similarly counterpoints real and role-playing tensions, ultimately appears to endorse its pro-space campaigners' assassination of a political opponent. *Fallen Angels* (1991, with Pournelle and Michael Flynn) presents a 2073 dystopian Earth where most people are resolutely anti-space, anti-science and anti-science fiction. In contrarian response to accepted theories of global warming, there is a new ice age. SF fans have become a virtuous underground opposition which hides fugitive astronauts from a still functioning space station (the "fallen angels"), and helps them get home. Fans' names and fannish in-jokes abound, reducing the appeal for most readers.

Other sequels followed. *The California Voodoo Game* (1991, with Barnes) is a further return to Dream Park. Barnes seems to bring useful narrative energy to these collaborations, stimulating Niven's own inventiveness and producing strong narrative lines. *The Gripping Hand* (1993, with Pournelle) returns to the settings of *The Mote in God's Eye* and was generally thought anticlimactic for its too-easy and too-early introduction of a biological miracle cure for the intractable racial dilemma of the first book's likeable but dangerous alien "Moties". *The Ringworld Throne* (1996) pays a third visit to the huge artifact which dominated *Ringworld* and which in *Ringworld Engineers* was given a somewhat fussily revisionist overhaul to satisfy science-minded fans who had pointed out technical flaws. With the ringworld's secrets stripped bare, it is now little more than a backdrop for meandering adventures in the vein which the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* terms "planetary romance". Niven's heroes relish problem-solving and need new challenges.

Thus, after a slow opening, the relatively modest *Destiny's Road* (1997) radiates a good deal of the old charm as its young protagonist explores the mysteries of Destiny, a human-settled colony world. Earthly and alien biologies are in conflict, and children grow up stupid if their food lacks a regular dosage of "speckles". This spice, unavailable in the hero's home town, must be expensively bought from traders: why? Ensuing revelations about Destiny and its settlers are not of universe-shattering consequence, but neatly mesh with human-scaled conflicts and characters.

Larry Niven's place of honour in modern science fiction has been amply earned. His early dazzling manipulation of far-out notions from theoretical physics could perhaps not be sustained forever, and other writers have crowded to mine that particular vein of inventiveness. Nevertheless he is an adept storyteller when sufficiently interested in his material, and the later work still entertains.

Jack Vance continued (1999)

In the 1980s Jack Vance published a number of collections, chiefly rearranging earlier stories. Those most welcomed, and containing most fresh material, were two new books of linked *Dying Earth* tales which incorporate the 1979 chapbooks (*The Bagful of Dreams*, *The Seventeen Virgins* and *Morreion*). *Cugel's Saga* (1983) extends this rogue's adventures with suave inventiveness and makes him more likeably human. *Rhialto the Marvelous* (1984) deals with a group of rival wizards in a somewhat earlier age, and further blurs the distinction between fantasy and science fiction with much magical time travel and a remarkable space voyage to the edge of the universe: the Dying Earth is post-technological rather than being set in some fantasy otherworld. This aspect of Vance's creation was acknowledged by Gene Wolfe as a potent influence on his landmark tetralogy *The Book of the New Sun* (1981-3).

By contrast, the next major project from Vance had a pre-technological setting. The Lyonesse trilogy comprises *Suldrun's Garden* (1983), *The Green Pearl* (1984) and *Madouc* (1990) and takes place on imaginary isles west of France and the English Channel, supposedly drowned before history began. Pretending to anticipate "later" Arthurian legends, the story includes versions of the Round Table, Siege Perilous, etc. A rather conventional saga of war over little kingdoms and their royal succession is overlaid with typical polished wit and quirky infusions of magic, including visits to fantastic realms with a Dying Earth flavour. Vance's multi-stranded narration seems almost a conscious response to criticisms of weak plotting; although some lack of enthusiasm for the inevitable battle scenes is detectable, storytelling energy is sustained throughout this trilogy's considerable length.

Even before completing Lyonesse, Vance returned to science fiction and the Gaean Reach with *Araminta Station* (1987), first book of The Cadwal Chronicles. The sequels are *Ecce and Old Earth* (1991) and *Throy* (1992). Here a theme from *Marune: Alastor 933* and *Maske: Thaery*, concerning the desirability of keeping naturally beautiful landscapes unspoilt, expands to planetary scale. The world of Cadwal is a vast and lovingly depicted nature reserve administrated under a Charter of Conservancy, and young protagonist Glawen follows his stern but devoted father into the "Bureau B" police force which defends the Charter.

Again plot interest is supplied in good measure, neatly meshing with

the exotic background. *Araminta Station* is an enjoyable murder mystery (with an ultimately pitiable villain) varied with family intrigues, espionage, off-planet adventure, and Glawen's imprisonment by another of Vance's appalling religious cults. Eventually there come satisfying revelations and a dramatic finale. Meanwhile, political conflict rages between supporters of the Charter and those who wish it abolished, ostensibly in the name of freedom but usually with an eye to carving up the unspoilt land into private estates. A further complicating factor is a teeming island society of "Yips" descended from runaways and illegal immigrants, who covet the mainland for themselves.

Narrative drive continues in *Ecce and Old Earth*, in which Glawen must first rescue his kidnapped father from the jungle-surrounded prison of a political enemy, and then join his girlfriend in an interstellar search for the lost Cadwal Charter. This reads well enough, but the hunt is over-long and the reader suspects the document's hiding-place long before it occurs to Glawen. The closing Cadwal volume *Throy* sees Vance attempting to unravel the political problem he has set himself, with all its moral awkwardness. The Yips, however sly and unlovable, have done nothing wrong in being born on Cadwal – yet the Charter of Conservancy requires that they be uprooted from home and deported, and it is our hero's distasteful duty to help do so. The slightly disappointing solution leaves Glawen, Bureau B and other Charter supporters as mere bystanders while the anti-Charter factions quarrel and fight, conveniently burning the Yips' island town with enormous loss of life. As in several past series, the author's interest seems to have waned, and *Throy* is barely half the length of the superior preceding volumes.

Yet Vance was on good form when, at the age of 80, he published *Night Lamp* (1996) – another substantial Gaean Reach tale. Many ingredients from past novels appear: amnesia, adolescence and vengeance, wildly eccentric status-based societies, faded splendours of a glorious past, and a search for true identity, all drawn with wit and dark irony. Like Glawen in the Cadwal Chronicles, the youthful protagonist Jaro is not the lone figure opposed to society who is familiar from so many past Vance narratives. Instead he works hard, enjoys good relations with kindly foster-parents, and is reunited with a lost father – who is instrumental in carrying out the revenge which amnesiac Jaro no longer knows is justified by the torture of his mother.

This late outbreak of strong and loving father-son relationships (one also features in Lyonesse, with the principal character as father rather than son) contrasts interestingly with the past tendency for Vance heroes to be

orphans, or at best to have strange and remote fathers as in *Emphyrio* and *The Anome*.

Most recently, *Ports of Call* (1998) apparently opens a loosely episodic series of Gaean Reach interstellar picaresques. Its young hero has intelligence but little determination, soon loses his post as a capricious great-aunt's personal spaceship captain, and is rescued from difficulties by older and more capable spacefarers who rapidly upstage him. There are amusing and dramatic vignettes in transit and at the title's planetary ports of call. The overall narrative, however, seems shaped towards denouements at journey's end – yet halts abruptly in an "Epilogue" without reaching any real destination or significant subclimax. Full closure and satisfaction await the implied sequel* or sequels.

** The story was completed, satisfyingly enough though with a sense of waning energy, in* Lurulu *(2004).*

Jack Vance has not lost his stylistic polish, nor his gifts for speculative ecology and ethnography. The jury is necessarily still out on the *Ports of Call* sequence, but the Cadwal Chronicles and *Night Lamp* are fine late achievements. Vance's stature in the genre was acknowledged by the World Fantasy Convention's Lifetime Achievement Award in 1984, and by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America Grand Master Award in 1997.

Appendix 2
The Discworld Angle

Report on *Equal Rites* (1986)

[Written for Gollancz; previously unpublished.]

Background

Equal Rites is in effect the third volume of a loose trilogy, the other two being *The Colour of Magic* and *The Light Fantastic*. The vein throughout is that of humorous – sometimes slapstick – fantasy with the common setting of a flat "Discworld" supported by four elephants who stand on a vast turtle plodding through the void.

The Colour of Magic was particularly successful in terms of humour, and fantasy fans were much tickled by passages parodying SF/fantasy sources (Leiber, Dungeons & Dragons, Howard, Lovecraft, McCaffrey, Vance, Niven *et al*). There's also a fruitful and fairly original analogy between magic and nuclear physics, with problems like thaumaturgical contamination of magical disposal sites, high-energy spells leaking from their surrounding books, etc. I found this one very enjoyable.

Light Fantastic, a direct sequel featuring the same lead characters, substitutes a rather limp thread of plot for the first book's complete anarchy, and plays down the parodic content considerably. There are plenty of funny passages and conversations, with footnotes and one-line jokes reminiscent of Douglas Adams. ("The reason why distant ships looked as though they were disappearing over the edge of the world was that they were disappearing over the edge of the world.") However, the tone of voice is beginning to stale a little, and every so often there's a feeling that the author is marking time with semi-humorous froth in hope that sooner or later a good joke or witty idea will come to mind. Amusing, but not a book which offers great hopes for its sequel.

Equal Rites

Happily, this third volume is *not* a direct sequel to the second but a book which can stand alone and has rather more plot than either predecessor. The Discworld setting remains; a slender thread of continuity with *Light Fantastic* is preserved chiefly by Unseen University (a higher educational institute for wizards) and one very minor character therein.

A brief plot summary, with comments:

The wizard Drum Billet, predicting his own death, arrives in the sensitively named village of Bad Ass to pass on his power and staff to the predicted eighth son of an eighth son. (Eight rather than seven or five is

the magical number in Pratchett's world: wizards draw mystic octograms, and "the colour of magic" is the eighth in the spectrum, "octarine"... a point which could stand being made again in this book.) Unfortunately, as emerges too late, the child is a girl.

It has been implicit in the previous books that women aren't let into Unseen University and can't become wizards. This now becomes explicit, to an extent: "Where does it say women can't be wizards?" "It doesn't say it anywhere, it says it everywhere."

After a seven-year break, the child Eskarina (Esk) spends pages 21-114 of the typescript discovering her talents via the staff and the reluctant tutelage of a witch called Granny Weatherwax – who on and off is a successful comic character, with a good line in cynical psychology and general worldliness. In one section Esk makes the mistake of overreaching herself when magically riding the mind of an eagle, the point being "a body is like a jelly mould. It sets a shape on its contents... you can't have a girl's mind in an eagle's body. Not for long, at any rate." This episode sits oddly amid the surrounding light-heartedness: it has the moral punch of one of Ursula Le Guin's parables of balance, and I'm uneasily reminded that a closely similar development can be found in *A Wizard of Earthsea*.

A further large chunk of the novel, comprising pages 115-212, is occupied with Granny's and Esk's travels from their native parts (the Ramtop Mountains, a cringe-making joke for the computer-literate) to Unseen University in the sleazy city of Ankh-Morpork some 500 miles away. There's a fair bit of incidental fun as, for example, Esk wanders through a market town as a focus of uncontrollable magic ("A boxful of marzipan ducks on a nearby stall came to life.... The stall itself sidled off down an alley and was never seen again.") and some of the one-liners are outrageously effective, as when unbidden thoughts are described as "arriving in her mind like some unexpected limbo dancer under the lavatory door of life".

Functionally, though, this section exists (a) to get Esk and Granny to Ankh-Morpork; (b) to introduce, somewhat late in the day, two plot elements required for the finale: the stuttering (often for whole pages) theoretical wizard Simon, and some mildly prefigured Lovecraftian Outside Entities which lurk on the fringes of dreams and are to be a serious threat despite being introduced with gags about "old dark gods of the *Necrotelicomnicon,* the book known to certain mad adepts by its true name of *Liber Paginarum Fulvarum* [Yellow Pages]", etc. Since the first real turn of the plot can only take place when Esk knocks on the door of Unseen University to demand her "equal rites", the sheer amount of

preceding text does induce a slight, gradual disappointment for all its incidental drollery.

Now:

Esk is refused entrance to the University, her unreliable magic failing her at the crucial moment. Simon gets in. His advanced mathematical modelling of magic is unfortunately just what the Outside Entities need to get a theoretical grip on the Discworld: he becomes a focus of their astral attention. Meanwhile Esk sneaks in by the back door as a maid, and pokes around behind the scenes. There are enjoyable descriptions of the University's atmosphere and personality (Granny and later Esk contrive to ride the building's "mind", as earlier with the eagle: "For the first time in her life [Esk] knew what it was like to have balconies."). As things, and Things, come to a focus on Simon, Granny fights a traditional duel of magic with the University Archchancellor (more to provide a bit of spectacle than because the plot requires it, I felt) and there's a confrontation with the unspeakable Things in their own displeasing "Dungeon Dimension". *In extremis*, the Archchancellor bends the rules of admission. Esk more or less simultaneously becomes officially a wizard and gives up magic, with a Le Guinish (but remotely so) line about "The important thing about magic is how you don't use it" – and thus don't give rapacious Things anything to feed on. And so to a happy ending for all concerned, amid a flurry of wisecracks.

Conclusions

Terry Pratchett is a genuine humorist, and this book provokes many smiles, if fewer belly-laughs than *The Colour of Magic*. With some exceptions as noted above, the humour is quite well integrated with the action. Even the Lovecraftian Things are surprisingly effective as they shift from joke to "reality" and back again while consistently described in light-hearted terms. ("The whole thing had a self-assembled look, as if the owner had heard about anatomy but couldn't quite get to grips with the idea," etc.) Routine bridging passages are usually enlivened by a swift one-liner: a few such are quoted above.

I feel, though, that humour needs the support of a certain plot tension: unless the humorous invention is continuous, jokes alone won't carry the story through slack periods. Thus in the "Esk discovering her talent" section cited above, the only long-range tension is a vague "What will become of her after?"; the even longer "journey" section is pulled along by an equally vague "When will they get to Ankh-Morpork and what happens then?" The final third works much better, as for the first time Esk encounters frustrations rather than mere delays, and the ominous hints of

Things give a pull of suspense against which the humour reacts very effectively.

The book is well-written and quite publishable as it stands. I hope it will be published – but would first prefer some tightening-up throughout the first two hundred pages.

February 1986

Report on *Mort* (1987)

[Written for Gollancz; previously unpublished.]

1. General summary

This is a fourth "Discworld" book, following on from Terry Pratchett's humorous fantasies *The Colour of Magic*, *The Light Fantastic* and *Equal Rites*. (Henceforth: TCM, TLF and ER.) In ER and *Mort* the all-permeating craziness of this series' debut is visibly settling down a bit: *Mort* has the strongest plotline so far, and sometimes TP's extravagantly funny verbal flourishes seem to be written as conscious counterweight to the grimmer elements of the story itself.

Mort is a hopelessly gangling teenager who is taken on as apprentice by Death (for no apparent reason, bar his name). In the House of Death, Mort meets Albert the aged cook, Death's adopted daughter Ysabell, a great deal of morbid skulls-and-bones interior decor ("It's only his fancy. He doesn't mean anything by it," explains Albert), and the awesome pale horse of Death, called Binky. As his introduction to the trade he's taken along as observer to the seeing-off of one King Olerve of Sto Lat, whom he impulsively but unsuccessfully tries to save.

Mort fancies the heiress, Princess Keli, and begs an afternoon off in hope of getting to know her better. ("BUT WHY? said Death. IT CAN'T BE TO ATTEND YOUR GRANDMOTHER'S FUNERAL, he added. I WOULD KNOW.") He has no success beyond meeting a final major character, the young Sto Lat wizard Igneous Cutwell, "DM (Unseen), Marster of the Infinit, Illuminartus, Wyzard to Princes, Gardian of the Sacred Portalls, If Out leave Maile with Mrs Nugent Next Door".

It's now time for Mort to practise his trade by ushering his first souls out of the world. His first two .jobs are easy and instructive: the witch Goodie Hamstring knows the ropes via arcane lore, and the significantly named Abbot Lobsang has had much practical experience (it's his 53rd or 54th reincarnation). The third is Princess Keli, due for assassination like her father. (Even Death, having deputized some of his implacability to Mort, feels a bit wistful about this untimely end.) Mort fluffs it, kills the assassin instead, and leaves Keli alive in defiance of all predestination.

Fate turns out to be an extremely powerful force on the Discworld: although the Princess is alive, the momentum of fate is such as to make people think "for no good reason" that she's dead. "Bluntly, the universe

knew Keli was dead and was therefore rather surprised to find that she hadn't stopped walking and breathing yet." She consults Cutwell, who as a wizard is capable of noticing her non-deadness, and appoints him Royal Recognizer with the duties of arranging for her name to be called out, posters of her to be hung everywhere, etc., to force her existence on her subjects. The success of these measures is lukewarm.

Death, developing disconcertingly human tendencies, takes a fishing holiday. Mort and Ysabell have a non-love scene in which they insult each other a lot and declare undying non-devotion. A "sort of historical event horizon" begins to contract around Keli's city-state of Sto Lat: reality as it ought to be, pressing in on reality as changed by Mort's unprofessional conduct. As the interface of this event horizon moves in towards Keli, things waver in small ways noticed only by Mort and, later, Cutwell: a man has put on a different shirt, say, in the outside reality where the Princess is dead, and his shirt changes as he passes through the interface with the contracting reality where the Princess lives. Eventually the Princess will be squeezed out of existence by the shrinkage of her reality to a dot. Mort manages to conceal all this from Death.

By now (TP informs us rather abruptly on p.101), Mort has matured a lot, ceased to gangle, and unconsciously picked up some Deathly ways. Like Death he walks through walls, not by virtue of magic but by being of "more solid" stuff – eternal. He makes contact again with Cutwell and the Princess; discovers Albert the cook to be Alberto Malich, a "long-gone" wizard who plans to live forever by being a servant in Death's house outside of time; is somewhat alarmed to find that crossbow bolts can pass through him without his noticing....

Death, meanwhile, is letting his figurative hair down: doing the conga, playing dice, indulging in solitary drinking, driven by curiosity about the nature of FUN. ("TO HEAR LOUD MUSIC IN HOT ROOMS IS FUN? 'Possibly.' HOW IS THIS FUN MANIFEST? 'Well....'") The general idea is that as Death puts down the burden a bit, it lands more and more on Mort, who grows correspondingly less cheery and human, and develops a worrying tendency to SPEAK IN HOLLOW CAPITALS.

Mort and Ysabell demand Albert's magical help in saving Keli. En route to their confrontation with him comes an excellent fantasy *frisson*: Death's library stack contains the Life of everyone who's ever lived, magically updated from moment to moment; and in the vastness of the stacks for 2000 years previously, More and Ysabell hear the faint scratching noise of Albert's biography still being written. Nice one. The real-time biography also comes in handy for checking Albert's veracity:

"'*Albert looked at him uncertainly*'," Ysabell read.

"You can't believe everything writ down there –"

"– *'He burst out, knowing in the flinty pit of his heart that Mort certainly could.'*," Ysabell read.

It's around here that the plot starts getting a bit less logical. Albert admits (when threatened by Mort at his most leaden and Deathly) that time can be slowed by a special spell: the pressing question of how Princess Keli can be saved has been unobtrusively replaced by the less involving goal of keeping her "real" – preventing her being wiped out by the final shrinkage of the historical interface to point size – until her coronation is over. To prevent everything falling apart, Mort also has to do the soul-collecting duties of Death (who is still absent), in remote continents (some nice bits of Chinese and Egyptian spoof here), thus introducing time-wasting delays before lie and Ysabell can get to Keli's coronation. By the time this final soul-collecting is over, Mort has become generally indistinguishable in personality from the old Death: I HAVE FINISHED MY APPRENTICESHIP, he announces, to Ysabell's horror.

Albert, meanwhile, angry at being pushed around by this upstart Death, has resumed his wizardly role and muscled in on Unseen University (the wizards' college which he founded 2000 years back) in order to put a stop to Mort's disrespectful activities, by spilling the beans to Death. As established in TLF, Death (now working happily as a cook, free of world-shaking responsibilities and not speaking in capitals at all) can be summoned by a rite performed by eight wizards. "The Rite of AshkEnte, quite simply, summons and binds Death. Students of the occult will be aware that it can be performed with a simple incantation, three small bits of wood and 4cc of mouse blood, but no wizard worth his pointy hat would dream doing anything so unimpressive...." Both Death and Mort feel the summons, which has the effect of solving Mort's personal problem of turning into another Death. Urged by Ysabell to make his own choice (she eventually clinches the argument by socking him on the jaw), he manages to revert to being Mort, while Death is called from Harga's House of Ribs to Albert's octogram at Unseen University. Albert cringingly reveals all: Death angrily goes back to being DEATH. Mort and Ysabell ride like hell (on Binky) to the coronation.

Everything goes wrong, of course. The senile High Priest flubs the ritual sacrifice of an elephant, the usurper (the Duke of Sto Helit, responsible for offing the King) makes his move and announces that Keli is going to have been tragically crushed to death by the rogue elephant (a story the guests are advised to go along with since, as Cutwell gloomily

observes, “being tragically crushed to death by rogue elephants can be catching. You can even die of it in bed.”) and the shrinking reality interface comes through the wall, threatening to blot the whole event from history along with the Princess. Mort and Ysabell arrive in time only to postpone the reckoning by whipping Keli and Cutwell outside of Time, to Death’s house, where Death is waiting... wholly restored to normal. I AM BACK. AND I AM *ANGRY*.

The concluding events seem a bit rushed. In a final effort to save Keli and Cutwell, Mort fights a duel with Death in the latter’s room full of the hourglasses which measure everyone’s lives: sword against scythe, good rousing stuff with a nice joke on the reader (who like the others present will expect Mort to triumph by smashing Death’s own hourglass, a ploy which proves not to work). Mort loses (“...better than winning. Who needs eternity, anyway?”), but Death, possibly softened a bit by his recent experiments in being unDeathlike, spares him.

With a sudden final wrench the scene shifts to the “real” coronation of “Her Supreme Majesty, Queen Kelirehenna I, Lord of Sto Lat, Protector of the Eight Protectorates and Empress of the Long Thin Debated Piece Hubwards of Sto Kerrig.” Keli is queen after all, Cutwell is installed as Master of the Queen’s Bedchamber, and Mort and Ysabell are duke and duchess of Sto Helit. (What happened to the wicked duke is unexplained.) Death, it emerges, has arranged this happy ending with the gods: THEY WERE AMUSED. THE GODS ARE SENTIMENTALISTS, YOU SEE. I HAVE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO MASTER IT, MYSELF. In other words, it’s literally a *deus ex machina* resolution.

2. Style & characters

The general style is of course light-hearted, with a nice line in hyperbole and some extremely funny one-liners: Albert has the idea that one can tell a princess by her ability to pee through a dozen mattresses, and TP’s fabulously sleazy fantasy city is summed up in the Johnsonian epigram “A man who is tired of Ankh-Morpork is tired of ankle-deep slurry.”

Style and character clash a bit in the figure of Death, who obviously needs to be terrifically sombre and dignified for his occasional pratfall to work, and who is (I think) sent up just a little too much too soon: he lapses out of character for the sake of quick laughs, before the doom-laden presence is really established. Thus in his first scene, his falling over on a patch of ice (p.8) is just about OK as a one-off bit of bathos, and the dialogue at cross purposes with Mart’s father (to the top of p.11) works rather well; then the bit of French (KILL? MOI?) falls flat; and the I

COULD MURDER A CURRY line on p.15 is possibly off-key. Death is much more convincingly Deathly on pp.18-19, with some lines that are grimly funny in just the right way: “How do you get all those coins?” asks Mort. IN PAIRS. Indeed, for most of the rest of the book Death’s funniest moments come when he stays in character, with somewhat florid dignity in unlikely situations, as at the employment exchange. I USHERED SOULS INTO THE NEXT WORLD. I WAS THE GRAVE OF ALL HOPE. I WAS THE ULTIMATE REALITY. I WAS THE ASSASSIN AGAINST WHOM NO LOCK WOULD HOLD. “Yes, point taken, but do you have any particular skills?”

The other characters are more economically developed. Mort is just a nice young man, contrasting strongly with his more deathly persona. Ysabell is a pre-Raphaelite girl who’s eaten too many chocolates during the frustration of being sixteen for 35 years as Death’s adopted daughter, living outside time. Keli is appropriately imperious except when this doesn’t work. Cutwell is a young semi-competent who’s forever sitting on pizzas and letting his treacle sandwiches ooze where visitors are likely to rest their hands: he has agonizing struggles between his hot feelings for Keli and the strictures of a wizard’s life (resolved in Mort’s line near the end: “Notice how he doesn’t do any magic these days?”).

All the characters work pretty well, the only really irritation being Cutwell’s magical gargoyle/doorknocker and its speech impediment: “I can tell you the fmaster iff having a trying day and duff fnot fwant to be disturbed,” etc.

3. Cross-references

Some minor characters have been met in the previous books: Rincewind the magician from TCM and TLF, and Unseen University’s simian librarian from TLF and ER. (Granny Weatherwax from ER also gets a bare mention.) The major characters Death and Ysabell have also appeared before: Death in every book so far, Ysabell in TLF. A few points about internal connections within the series:

* Although Death remarks on the “coincidence” of Mort’s name, it’s only once in TLF that Death himself is addressed as Mort.

* Fans of the whole series will be struck by the reference in TLF to a discrepancy between Death’s house as it appears and as it really is, as revealed in a picture which “...would have been quite horrible even in broad daylight.” No particular horribleness emerges in *Mort*, although its hero becomes far more intimate with the domestic arrangements. Probably this isn’t too important: humorists can be forgiven a lot.

* One joke situation is repeated rather too faithfully from TLF,

though. There, Death is summoned by wizards and comes straight from a cocktail party, holding “small cubes of cheese and pineapple on a stick”. Here, he’s summoned from working as a short-order cook and appears “holding a small fried onion ring”. A bit too similar? (I also note the rather good image of Death’s handshake feeling like “a glove full of dice”. Granny Weatherwax’s hand was described similarly, in ER.)

Viewed as part of the fantasy genre (admittedly a horrid thing to do to a funny book), *Mort* seems pretty original and unusual. The one recent work which provokes inevitable comparisons is Piers Anthony’s *On a Pale Horse*. Similarities boil down to a handful of relatively superficial points: the notion of an ordinary mortal wimp stepping into the awesome office of Death (passim) , the obvious philosophical problem of how a single Death can cope with all the work (p.28), the stressed point that Death merely does a shepherding job and neither kills (*passim*) nor judges souls (e.g. p.38ff), the expository use of early “victims” who know more about the process than the apprentice Death (p.59ff), the fact of innate “powers” which go with the job (e.g. p.181), and the question of how to be a compassionate Death (Anthony’s trainee Death satisfies his conscience by bending the rules about ending or sparing lives; TP’s causes all the subsequent plot complication by ill-advised efforts in this direction). A lot of these points can be dismissed as simply following from the subject matter – for example, it would hardly be fair to add the “coincidence” that both books dwell on Death’s expert use of the scythe in combat! – but if TP can face the thought, he might like to skim the Anthony effort and consider whether it’s worth tinkering with the odd sentence in order to defuse such chance similarities.

4. Minor points and problems.

Concerning the MS in general, I’ll merely mention that if TP’s word processing software can’t do page numbers, I’ll be happy to sell him some that will.... There are a few literals in the text, now hand-corrected (without comment) where I noticed them.

p.1-2: the colour “octarine” is introduced without any defining context... rather baffling if you haven’t read any of the other books. (The full definition comes on page 168, possibly a bit late?)

p.2: “green thumbs”. The “green fingers”/“green thumbs” joke doesn’t really work, because the latter phrase is also used as a variant of the former (especially in the USA, says my dictionary).

p.17: “...like an elderly bachelor uncle who has been landed with his nephew for a holiday and has spent the past week reading child psychology books.” The anachronistic humour is usually OK in auctorial

intrusions, but this one example is off-key at the end of a sentence which starts “Mort got the feeling...”: his vocabulary wouldn’t include “child psychology books”.

p.34: I started noticing the “boy”/"Mort" running gag around here. It’s repeated four more times in the next eight pages. This is a matter for the author’s conscience.

pp.206-7: the intercutting between shattering hourglasses (during the duel) and consequent deaths out in the real world is nice – especially when for variety one victim is impossibly saved at the last moment – but I’m a bit bothered by the fact that these too are arbitrary deaths in defiance of predestination, the same kind of interference which has disturbed the whole universe when Mort did it once. But see below under “Recommendations”.

pp.207-8: shome mishtake surely? Mort slices the handle of Death’s scythe into little bits, but still, most improbably, “There was no opening.” Next paragraph, Death is swinging his “blade” again. Presumably he’s drawn his sword (is there more than one? Mort is already holding Death’s sword) since that’s what he’s carrying a few paragraphs later. Clarification needed, please.

5. Conclusions

Excellent fun. Better than ER, I think, *Mort* should be published.

Minor points aside, the only real awkwardness is this rushed *deus ex machina* ending. Mort, Ysabell, Albert, Cutwell and Keli all turn out to be completely powerless, and everything has to be saved by Death – who, having just reclaimed his true character, implacability and CAPITALS, must immediately step out of character again and behave like an old softy to (a) spare Mort; (b) spare Cutwell and Keli, whose lives – he has remarked – are forfeit; (c) arrange for the hitherto unthinkable rewrite job on reality which sorts out everybody’s problems.

I wondered whether the incident of the smashed hourglasses (during the duel) couldn’t be developed a bit further to make all this more plausible. Might one or more of the characters not point out – during the fighting – that these further disruptions of fate are Death’s own responsibility, making him as guilty as Mort? (Presumably, unless the Discworld’s local Fate is unbearably elitist, the offing of these minor characters could be as disastrous as Princess Keli’s survival. ONLY THE GODS ARE ALLOWED TO DO THAT, explains Death on p.39. TO TINKER WITH THE FATE OF EVEN ONE INDIVIDUAL COULD DESTROY THE WHOLE WORLD.) The appeal to Death’s highly developed sense of justice and logic seems to stand on firmer ground than

the reliance on his having a heart of marshmallow: of course one could leave plenty of ambiguity as to the proportions of justice and marshmallow responsible for the ensuing actions. Any use?

The race to save Princess Keli also has a rather artificial feel: thanks to the general consensus that she *can't* be saved, it becomes (see for example pp.156-7) a somewhat arbitrary race to get her crowned before she (not to mention the memory and retrospectively the fact of the coronation) is blotted out. If there's a good reason for this, I missed it. Would her social standing in the afterlife be disastrously impaired should she arrive there before officially becoming Queen? Just a thought....

January 1987

Report on *Sourcery* (1987)

[Written for Gollancz; previously unpublished.]

The background of Terry Pratchett's "Discworld" series, beginning with *The Colour of Magic* and *The Light Fantastic*, should by now need no summary (see the mighty Gollancz files for my extended comments on *Equal Rites* and *Mort*). These existing books are henceforth referred to as TCM, TLF, ER and MORT. So much for background: TP's vein of light fantasy is consistently amusing and popular, although I think I can detect a very slight falling-off of reader enthusiasm with the publication of the somewhat less continuously funny and more "plotty" ER. This (statistically dubious) impression may become clearer or be proven false in the near future, when ER appears in paperback.

See also Michael Moorcock's unexpectedly enthusiastic remarks in *Wizardry and Wild Romance* (some good potential jacket quotations there, eg. on p118, about TCM: "It is excellent farce – intelligent entertainment. [TLF] is even better, and I look forward to [...] further sequels.") and the present writer's frighteningly authoritative review of ER in *Foundation* 40.

Sourcery itself has somewhat less in the way of plot than its predecessors ER and MORT. The structure leans to the picaresque, with various episodes strung together on a thread of tension concerning the looming "Apocralypse" or "Teatime of the Gods" which seems liable to be brought on by a resurgence of wizardly pride, power and internecine rivalry. This construction is vaguely similar to that of TLF, with fewer manic asides and a generally more serious tone despite a good level of characteristic wisecracking.

Familiar characters, this time round, are: Rincewind the failed wizard of TCM and TLF, back in a major role after two books' obscurity; the sentient, many-legged and murderous Luggage (same history); the Librarian of Unseen University (TLF, ER and MORT); Death (passim); and a few of Death's apocalyptic cronies (TLF). Familiar locations: Ankh-Morpork, the legendarily smelly fantasy capital of (the most familiar part of) the Discworld, and, therein, the wizard college Unseen University which has already played a major part in both TLF and ER.

This does lead to an immediate question. One can assume a fairly rapid turnover of wizards at Unseen U, owing to their lovingly described practices of rising through the ranks by assassination, inadvertently turning

themselves into very unpleasant things thanks to mistakes in magical research, or buggering off to indulge the naughty impulses said to be incompatible with wizardly skill. However, since Rincewind and the Librarian are still going strong, one does wonder what's happened to the moderately important young characters Esk and Simon from ER, who might be expected to be around at Unseen and to have a particular interest in this book's culminating events. I don't particularly *want* them in *Sourcery* (TP is quite right not to overdo the long-running characters who bog down, say, Piers Anthony's hugely inferior "Xanth" fantasy series), but at the same time feel vaguely that they ought to be accounted for.

Summary, with comments

By way of prelude, we have the final minutes of a chap called Ipslore the Red, who as the eighth son of an eighth son is a powerful wizard, and in defiance of convention has not only had seven sons ("each one from the cradle at least as powerful as any wizard in the world": as with my mild ER peeve above, one wonders why none features in the plot, which is thick with particularly powerful wizards) but has gone on to produce an eighth, who for impeccable numerological reasons will be a sort of hyper-wizard, in direct touch with the fundamental sources of wizardly power, a "Sourcerer". Ipslore passes on his staff to this infant, Coin... and should now die, his time being up and Death tapping an impatient foot. But Ipslore cheats Death, transferring his soul into the staff and vowing that Coin will bring about the downfall of wizardry. Death insists on fair play, this downfall being apt to mean the downfall of the world, and Ipslore allows a microscopic loophole in his vow. "They shall have their chance when my son throws his staff away."

(This particular point could stand reinforcement once or twice during the body of the book. Although TP is free to ascribe this to drunkenness, cretinousness etc. on my part, I did at first have trouble with the eventual climax since [a] I'd forgotten the fairly unmemorable terms of Ipslore's loophole, and [b] in point of fact, nowhere in the present narrative is Coin clearly shown to throw the staff away....) Death, by the way, is quite taken with the attempt to cheat him. "At least this was a bit more interesting than the usual symbolic chess game, which Death always dreaded because he could never remember how the knight was supposed to move."

The action shifts forward some ten years to Ankh-Morpork and a mildly convoluted opening to the main story. The almost sacred Hat of the ArchChancellor of Unseen University awaits its latest incumbent, Virrid Wayzygoose, selected by the aeons-old magical principle of Buggins' Turn. But down in the University's lower social strata, Rincewind

encounters a series of hilariously daft portents which make him as “alert and jittery as a long-tailed cat in a rockingchair factory”. Not only the rats are leaving the shuddering University building: the bedbugs are in flight (taking a mattress with them for comfort), the ants, the cockroaches, the gargoyles from the rooftops.... A “black clad thief” moves through the campus. And youthful sourcerer Coin (aet. 10) arrives, staff in hand, to become ArchChancellor by force and impose his father’s ideas on the University, not to say the entire Discworld.

(A point of mild confusion: expecting Coin along any moment and knowing he wants to wear this Hat, the reader is liable to get him temporarily mixed up with the “small dark figure” prowling the University with the precise intention of stealing the Hat. The awkwardness arises because TP wants a big entrance for Coin in the Great Hall and therefore shows him only indirectly before this point [a knock at the door, etc], while simultaneously he wants to keep the thief’s identity and sex for a mini-revelation a little later; and Coin is described on his entrance [p41] as “a small dark figure”. A very little clarification would make it easier to follow the progress of these two separate and so far unnamed characters.)

Coin – not as yet named – converts Wayzygoose to greasy smoke and. heads for the University’s Great Hall to take on the massed might of wizardry. Meanwhile, Rincewind is calming his nerves in the Mended Drum pub. In a display of power, Coin converts a leading wizard to more greasy smoke and goes to bed with a hot milk drink, The wizards Spelter (bursar of UU) and Carding make an uneasy alliance with a view to directing Coin’s power, it being incidentally revealed that wizards don’t rule the Discworld because “something about their genetics or their training left them with an attitude towards mutual co-operation that made an old bull elephant with terminal toothache look like a worker ant.” Meanwhile, the potent and – as it proves – sentient Hat (it’s been soaking up magic while worn by the world’s greatest wizards for 2000 years) is heading for the Mended Drum under the arm of a puzzled, black-clad thief....

Revealed to be female, the thief shortly recruits Rincewind (despite his instinctive cowardice) for a Quest to take the Hat to far-distant Klatch where it wants to go, since (as the Hat itself explains after a violent escape from city guards in the pub):

> “*The death of all wizardry is at hand.* [...] *The world is going to end.*”
>
> “What, again?” [Rincewind is presumably referring to TLF.]

"*I mean it,*" said the hat sulkily. "*The triumph of the ice giants, the Apocralypse [sic], the Teatime of the Gods, the whole thing.*"

Off goes Rincewind with the Hat, the Luggage and the girl, Conina, a really ace fighter and mayhem expert who is a daughter of the legendary Cohen the Barbarian [TLF] and suffers the curse of heredity despite her actual career wishes:

> "Not much call for a barbarian hairdresser, I expect," said Rincewind. "I mean, no-one wants a shampoo-and-beheading."
>
> "It's just that every time I see a manicure set I get this terrible urge to lay about me with a double-handed cuticle knife. I mean sword."

The University fills up with new, fresh magic through the channel formed by Coin, and the wizards find themselves able to wield power hitherto undreamt of. Coin begins to magically rebuild the stuffy old University buildings, makes it clear that wizards ought to be ruling the world by right of might, and starts by converting Ankh-Morpork's temporal ruler, the Patrician, into a small yellow lizard. The Patrician is or was your average fantasy overlord:

> He did of course sometimes have people horribly tortured to death, but this was considered to be perfectly acceptable behaviour for a civic ruler [...] The people of Ankh are of a practical persuasion, and felt that the Patrician's edict forbidding all street theatre and mime artists made up for a lot of things.

Meanwhile Rincewind's party is at sea, fending off pirate attacks thanks to Conina's murderous skills, with a bit of help from the Luggage ("while it was bad enough to be attacked with deadly and ferocious accuracy by a rather pretty girl in a white dress with flowers on it, it was even worse for the male ego to be tripped up and bitten by a travel accessory.") and none whatever from Rincewind. The pirates manage to pinch the Hat and head for Klatch with it –

Meanwhile (at present the book is cross-cutting between these two narrative lines) the wizards leave the University and start muscling on in Ankh-Morpork itself, cleaning it up for the first time since its founding, equipping themselves with super new magical robes (see note on p161, below), Coin proposes – orders – that wizards unite to rule the world and do away with injustice, and Carding supports him:

Carding nodded. “Tomorrow the world, on...” he calculated quickly, “...on Friday the universe!”

That leaves the weekend free, thought Spelter.

Spelter is getting a bit dubious, especially on hearing that Coin wants the fuddy-duddy old University Library burnt. (The orang-utan Librarian fights a rearguard action here and at odd moments through the rest of the book.) Instead, a vast, ostentatious and wholly sorcerous tower is magically erected.... It’s also Spelter who discovers that the seemingly arrogant and self-confident Coin spends his nights sobbing, being bullied and ordered around by his staff, i.e. by Ipslore. Subsequently the staff, operating independently, nobbles Spelter.

(A mild objection might be lodged here. Coin is by definition a very much more powerful wizard than Ipslore. To make this intimidation work convincingly, there needs to be more stress on psychological rather than physical persuasion. Evasions based on Coin’s not having come into his full power won’t work, his abilities being utterly apocalyptic from the start. Not many bullying parents would last long against a child physically stronger than them. Ipslore’s domination should be made more subtle.)

Rincewind and Conina wind up at the palace of Creosote, Seriph of Al Khali, which is the capital city (I think) of Klatch: a good comic character, he spends his time suffering poetic inspirations which he lacks the ability to convert into poetry:

A summer palace underneath the bough,

A flask of wine, a loaf of bread, some lamb couscous with courgettes, roast peacock tongues, kebabs, iced sherbet, selection of sweets from the trolley and choice of Thou,

Singing beside me in the Wilderness....

(TP abandons the plot briefly, to develop Creosote’s problem into a dotty theory about how particles of inspiration go sleeting through the universe and tend to hit the wrong targets.) The Hat achieves its apparent aim of meeting Abrim, who is Creosote’s archetypically wicked, twisty and cunning Grand Vizier, and who – having no further use for Rincewind – indicates the snake pit.

(Well, actually, first he suggests the spider tank, but they’ve run out of spiders, and the tiger cage is out because the tiger isn’t well, and the shaft of eternal fire hasn’t been lit today, and the snake pit proves to contain only this one very elderly snake, and I am not even going to enquire whether TP has read Alan Coren’s fairly well-known spoof of 1984’s rat scene, which may be found in his *Golfing for Cats.* Just an

aside.)

In the snake pit Rincewind meets a sort of counterpart of Conina: Nijel the Barbarian, who has taught himself endless things via correspondence courses, including the essentials of swordplay, looting and pillaging. The Hat having "taken over" Abrim as a suitable wearer, another sorcerous tower rises over Al Khali, dissident wizards from Unseen U flock to the Hat, and such is the resulting level of ambient magic that even Rincewind finds himself able to do enough in the way of erratic spell-casting to escape from the snake pit. Just like Coin/Ipslore, the Hat/Abrim combination is all-powerful and completely ruthless: opposition, however ineffectual, is burned down without compunction. Rincewind and Nijel "rescue" Conina from Creosote's harem, meaning they find her thoroughly in charge of the situation (the demands of Creosote on his harem being anyway limited to requests to be told stories about fluffy bunnies).

The Mage Wars are now explained. In the old days, wizards used to wield lots more power, and tended to live in towers (= hardened command bunkers) hurling nuke-level magical blasts at one another, casualties mostly being amongst ordinary people. Now that new towers have begun to rise, it all looks like happening again....

(There is some confusion as to how much of all this was originally in Ipslore's mind. Coin's behaviour under Ipslore's direction indicates that the initial idea was for Coin to assume the Hat [whose considerable abilities do not seem to have been previously known to anyone] and then to carry out the plans for world domination already outlined. In this scenario there would not have been any opposition with magical ability to match Coin's, and although magically enforced "benevolent" fascism would not be a good thing for the Discworld, it hardly squares with Ipslore's expressed wish to bring about the downfall of wizardry. Was the plan a longer-term one – waiting for Coin to have sons as powerful as himself, whose rivalry might then lead to new Mage Wars? Note in this context that the past Mage Wars, fought when sourcerers *did* walk the world, may have left large tracts of the Discworld magically contaminated but demonstrably ended up with this series' easy-going world containing Unseen University: so that bringing about new Mage Wars is evidently not the way to topple wizardry. TP seems a little uncertain in this area, and later makes some tentative references to the Unspeakable Things from the Dungeon Dimensions [TLF, ER] which are attracted by over-use of magic and might overrun the world – though they didn't in the old Mage Wars.)

The war between Coin's and Abrim's towers rages. Nijel, Rincewind, Conina and Creosote escape on a magic carpet from the latter's ludicrously

booby-trapped treasure chamber: this needs a lot of persuasion to get it started ("Down", orders Rincewind with eventual brilliance, noticing that the carpet has been laid upside-down)... presently Rincewind abandons the others in a fierce need to get back to Ankh-Morpork. The Luggage fights its way into the Al Khali tower and is instrumental in distracting Abrim's concentration so that he and the Hat are zapped by the long-range spells of Carding and Coin: but more towers are already appearing as the orders of wizardry break up.

(We can more or less accept the coincidence of the Coin/Ipslore and Hat/Abrim combinations being almost exactly evenly matched; it is not so clear how any other tower has the remotest chance once the impasse between these super-potent two is broken.) Conina, Nijel and Creosote travel somewhat further with the aid of a magic lamp with time-sharing problems ("I am somewhat over-committed on lamps," the genie agreed. "In fact I am thinking of diversifying into rings. Rings are looking big at the moment."). After the inevitable disaster, they steal three rather odd horses from the four left outside a wayside inn, with awkward side-effects since the end of the world really is in train:

> WEIGHT DOESN'T COME INTO IT. MY STEED HAS CARRIED ARMIES. MY STEED HAS CARRIED CITIES. YEA, HE HATH CARRIED ALL THINGS IN THEIR DUE TIME, said Death, BUT HE'S NOT GOING TO CARRY YOU THREE.
>
> "Why not?"
>
> IT'S A MATTER OF THE LOOK OF THE THING.
>
> "It's going to look pretty good, then, isn't it," said War testily. "The One Horseman and Three Pedestrians of the Apocralypse."

In the Ankh-Morpork tower, Coin has gone for the ultimate hubris by successfully taking on and imprisoning the gods. (Objection: sourcerers' power has been defined as next only to that of the gods. We need a bit of an extra reason for this success, e.g. the Discworld's rather downmarket gods all being hungover that morning.) At this juncture Rincewind arrives on the scene, armed with a half-brick in a sock, which Coin finds it hard to believe is no more than that.

> "And then perhaps it destroys a whole city?" [...]
>
> "Not really," [Rincewind] said at last. "It sort of kills people but leaves buildings standing."

The staff instructs Coin to kill Rincewind. Coin, for no apparent reason, displays qualms and rebels; while he argues with the staff, Rincewind knocks the latter out of his hands. The staff turns on Rincewind. Death arrives and appears to be waiting for something – Rincewind thinks he knows who. As the staff moves in for the kill, Coin catches hold of it and tries to stop it, e.g. smashing it against a parapet (but not, as previously noted, actually and overtly throwing it away). Coin and the staff vanish in a blaze of magical conflict while all the other wizards run like hell (p437: "All the wizards were wazards"... oh *dear*, must this one stay in?) – except for Rincewind, whose uncertain conscience persuades him to jump into the fray. Blackout.

In flashback Rincewind dimly remembers the staff/Ipslore being nabbed by Death at last, and finds himself with Coin in the chilly sand of the Dungeon Dimensions: the magical outbreaks have indeed burnt a hole in the fabric of space and all that.

Meanwhile, still travelling by apocalyptic horse-power, Conina and Nijel and Creosote encounter more end-of-the-world stuff: the Ice Giants herding glaciers to bring eternal winter (their Germanic/Scandinavian accents possibly recalling something about the Nazis' keenness for Hörbiger's World Ice Theory).

With uncharacteristic heroism, Rincewind fills his other sock with the chilly sand of the Dungeon Dimensions and distracts the Things while Coin returns through the short-lived portal to the real world. The Librarian and Coin release the gods in time to save Nijel and Conina from oncoming glaciers and give them a Happy Ending. Coin restores the damage to the University and (presumably) the world before taking the Librarian's advice ("Oook") and exiting into a world of his own, being too powerful for the Discworld to contain. Rincewind's fate is not disclosed, but there is a certain note of optimism, and the heady fertile smell of further sequels.

Small points and niggles

Obvious uncorrected literals have been sensitively marked in the text and will not be used for padding here....

p5 Re. Death being well built for shrugging... the quip *has* been used before, in TLF.

p13 "Cimarrons and roseattes" – ornaments of the Hat – leave me foxed. Maybe the former is an incredibly subtle formation from "Cimmerian", indicating a black gem, and maybe the latter is an incredibly obvious typo for "rosette", but with TP one never knows.

p79 "Apocralypse" – here I really am lost. It is evidently meant to be spelt this way (cf. many subsequent appearances), and p132 indicates that

it's a pun, albeit "not very good", but I still can't make it out. Something to do with apocrypha? Okra? If this one is as remote as TCM's "reflected-sound-of-underground-spirits" (echo-gnomics) it needs to be spelt out just as in TCM, for slow-witted persons like me.

p110 "*Anus mirabilis*" [sic] has been corrected by some hidden hand to its more conventional spelling, but one suspects (with some contextual support) that TP typed exactly what he meant.

p161 "Carding's robe, for example, had become a confection of silk and lace of overpoweringly expensive tastelessness, giving him the impression of a big red jelly draped with antimacassars." This is a funny line, but uncharacteristically a bit clumsy: can I suggest substituting "silk and lace confection" to lose the repeated "of", and changing "impression" to "appearance"?

p363 "Optical allusion" is presumably a typo; I am very nearly confident enough of this to change it in the MS, but not quite.

Conclusions

This book doesn't seem to have any serious problems... just a few minor ones. Most of these have been indicated in the bracketed asides which appear during my summary.

I think, to begin with, the first minute change should be for Ipslore to swear that his son will cause the humbling and subjugation rather than the downfall of wizardry. This is what Coin and the staff actually seem to aim for, and certainly to achieve, with Coin at the top of the tree (even if the wizards are initially having a great time lording over Discworld under Coin, it could easily be indicated that life will be very much less nice for them once the worldwide hegemony has been established). Ipslore's fatal mistake then becomes the inclusion of the gods under the heading of wizardry.

Coin's climactic reluctance to clobber Rincewind could do with a bit more prior setting-up. Some earlier conflict, perhaps, between Ipslore's ruthlessness and Coin's personal observation that hurting people, well, hurts people? (Coin's first two kills are painless or at least instantaneous disintegrations. He doesn't seem to witness any of the really repulsive transformations and cruelties which later occur. He should.) Then a trifle more visible remorse when Carding is disposed of by the staff... and then, I rather suggest, a complete breakdown into hysterical laughter when it becomes clear just how ineffectual Rincewind is, and how deeply pathetic is his city-busting half-brick in a sock. In other words, this scene could not only be milked for a little more hilarity but could be made a clearer lead-in to Coin's reluctance to splatter anyone as hopeless as Rincewind. And as a

result of the ensuing dispute, could he please throw the staff away in a complete unambiguous and unmetaphorical fashion?

Page 440 suggests an answer to the question I've already raised, of why for all their frightfulness the old-time Mage Wars didn't lead to the Apocralypse themselves.

> "But it isn't *time* for the Apocralypse," said Conina desperately. "I mean, a dreadful ruler has to arise, there must be a terrible war, the Dungeon Dimensions have to break into the world...."

If you add the rising of the Ice Giants and the riding of the Four Horsemen, you have here a number of conditions which could need to be fulfilled – the components of one of those fantasy prophecies which awesomely direct the plot and which TP could have some fun sending up on the legal-technicality basis. Although all these things happen *to some extent*, they never in this book all happen all the way and all at the same time. I particularly like the idea of Nijel's, Conina's and Creosote's purloining of three of the Four Horses acting as a technicality which for some short period delays the Apocralypse from being signed, sealed and delivered (thus also giving their rather objectless later wanderings a function in the plot). Merely an idea....

The Things from the Dungeon Dimensions remain a bit of a bother. TP evidently doesn't want to overplay them after their use towards the ends of both TLF and ER; yet under the existing logic of Discworld, they are not merely the most immediately obvious reason for the downfall of anyone who over-uses magic, but should also have been evoked by Coin's/Ipslore's magical overkill a damned sight sooner. It might be necessary to steel oneself for a casual, loophole-plugging reference to Simon and Esk of ER (see my earlier comment) having used their zen anti-magical theories (e.g. deliberately and with cosmic intent *not* drawing octograms) to strengthen the barriers between Discworld and the Dungeon Dimensions and make things safe for all... until, of course, Coin overdoes the magical barrier-weakening towards the end of *Sourcery*.

(Another question which might be addressed to any self-respecting Thing is, "What did *you* do in the first Mage Wars, daddy?" Oh well, it was all a long time ago and the fabric of reality etc. didn't get seriously weakened until the very end of the Mage Wars, OK? Something like that.)

I am not 100% happy with this, since it introduces an awkward chunk of exposition... which could however be slimmed down by TP's staggering literary genius etc; he might perhaps like to cast it in the form of a comic footnote for the benefit of smartarse readers. It's a question of how

consistent TP wants the series logic to be, balanced against how prepared he is to put up with the odd nitpicking letter or review by one of said smartarses. E.g. in *White Dwarf.*

September 1987

Report on *Wyrd Sisters* (1988)

Let me confess that my word processor is now preset with a version of the following opening paragraph: The setting of Terry Pratchett's "Discworld" series, beginning with *The Colour of Magic* and *The Light Fantastic*, should by now need no summary (see the mighty Gollancz files for my extended comments on *Equal Rites*, *Mort* and *Sourcery*). These existing books are henceforth referred to ss TCM, TLF, ER, MORT and SOUR. So much for background....

In general, TP's on pretty good form in *Wyrd Sisters* (henceforth WS), particularly because he's once again come up with something solid and (in the Discworld context) novel to bounce his ideas off. The something is *Macbeth*, which is constantly being echoed, perverted, written and rewritten at intervals through the book. The relationship isn't anything like as close and serious as that of *Hamlet* to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are* Dead: but as Stoppard put a couple of attendant lords in the lead roles, so TP gives most of the best lines and business to his three witches.

SUMMARY with some reflections

WS naturally opens with three hunched figures on a blasted heath ("When shall we three meet again?" "...Well, I can do next Tuesday."), and re-introduces the witch Granny Weatherwax of ER fame. "Witches... certainly don't have leaders, / Granny Weatherwax was the most highly-regarded of the leaders they didn't have."

Meanwhile, King Verence of Lancre is having a reluctant chat with Death on account of having been done in by a Macbeth-like pair of usurpers, Duke Felmet and his Duchess: Verence has drawn one of Fate's short straws and is doomed to hang around his castle as a ghost until he's "fulfilled his destiny".

Meanwhile, the two-year-old royal heir has been spirited off by (presumably) a loyal castle guard, who is swiftly done in by a ducal posse, which after a brief confrontation leaves the lad – and the crown of Lancre – in the care of the witches: Granny, Nanny Ogg, and the young, idealistic and affectionately drawn Magrat Garlick (who in our world and time would be one of those very plain young vegan ladies who do tarot readings and practice alternative therapy by e.g. treating appendicitis with earlobe massage plus daubs of essential oil).

The royal-succession part of the plot now splits two ways (as, come to think of it, does that in *Macbeth*), with the infant – named Tomjon after a dispute between Granny ("Tom") and Nanny ("John") – sent off with the trouper Vitoller and his strolling players, both to get him out of the way and to allow a Chestertonian concealment of the true crown among the players' far more impressive pasteboard ones. In Castle Lancre, Verence does some ineffectual haunting, Duke Felmet goes through both Macbeths' spasms of guilt, and the court Fool gets several good (bad) lines while establishing himself as the brightest fellow in the kingdom.

Meanwhile the witches, whose coven is a shaky experiment with strong overtones of the coffee morning, generally hover around in the fog and filthy air, making the plot more tortuous as:

(a) the Duke gets increasingly anti-witch following the loss of the royal brat and Granny's general non-cooperation;

(b) the Fool and Magrat start eyeing each other in shy and deeply unromantic young love;

(c) Verence goes into a terrific round of ectoplasmic press-ups and jogging in hope of developing his spiritual muscles enough to have some effect on the real world (specifically, Felmet: initially he can get no further than conveying, by a titanic effort, extra pinches of salt to over-season the Duke's food), and, having been informed by Death that witches and cats can see and talk with ghosts, manages to lure and trap Nanny Ogg's wonderfully smelly and appalling cat Greebo (who likes to search the long grass in hope of finding and giving a hard time to wolves).

Subplot (c) leads to a nice set-piece with Nanny Ogg, duly lured and incarcerated, fending off the torture-minded Duke and Duchess; Magrat and Granny rushing to the rescue with some bizarrely eccentric magic, mostly Magrat's (this also advances the (b) subplot from above); Verence managing the supreme effort of lifting and waving a threatening dagger at the Duke, definitely not a dagger of the mind and with the handle definitely not towards the Duke's hand.... Despite nominal success in rescuing Nanny, this sequence leads to a standoff (with the crazed Duke pointing out the logic which prevents witches from major interference in politics: a magically appointed replacement ruler wouldn't be sovereign but would remain a puppet) and to a hardening of ducal anti-witch sentiments.

Granny and her coven resolve on a desperate expedient: if they can't deal directly with the Duke, they'll provide someone who will. In another exuberant set-piece, Granny adapts the time-twisting spells of the legendary Black Aliss (h'mm), the witch responsible for the Sleeping

Beauty variety of magic. (“There was always a bit of romance in her spells. She liked nothing better than Girl meets Frog.”) The idea is to slow time in the whole of Lancre so that, effectively, the kingdom sleeps for fifteen years and the Tomjon who returns to it will be eighteen, able to claim the throne. This plan works, just, though laying the spell all round the kingdom’s boundaries in a single night is a hair-raising experience for Granny and her cronies, since a broomstick’s range is limited and they have to invent in-flight refuelling.

Meanwhile Duke Felmet’s thoughts have also turned unknowingly to Tomjon, via Vitoller and the players. The Fool, trying to keep himself safe from the increasingly loony Duke and malign Duchess by means of a quick tongue, has rather to his surprise invented (and persuaded the ducal pair to believe in the efficacy of) the propaganda machine. Rumours, jokes and gossip are helping give witches a bad name: the Duke’s master stroke is to be a play in which a thoroughly evil king who consorts with three unspeakable witches is very properly nobbled by a virtuous usurper who sets all to rights. Something, I know not what, makes one suspect at once that this plan will go awry... but the Fool is despatched to the city of Ankh-Morpork and after some characteristic escapades returns with the players, including the now 18-year-old Tomjon, who (possibly as a result of cradle gifts from the witches) is a rilly triffic actor who can quell bar brawls with his ringing declamations and generally charm the socks off anyone but a born critic.

The best new character amongst the players is not Vitoller but Hwel, a weirdly talented dwarf playwright whose inspirations are prophetic (and include traces of, for example, Wilde, *Waiting for Godot,* the Marx brothers, Laurel & Hardy, Chaplin, and of course Shakespeare – the good bits always overlaid with the low comedy and pantomime demanded by Vitoller). Hwel is an alienated dwarf who isn’t too keen on his race’s traditional five-hour song cycles about gold: “The actual words are ‘Gold, gold, gold, gold, gold, gold.’” “Is there a chorus?” “‘Gold, gold, gold, gold, gold.’” It’s Hwel who writes the Duke’s play, to specifications. Some early draft scenes, somewhat heavily influenced by Vitoller, appear on pp206-7 to give the general flavour.

The action may slide off to far-off Ankh-Morpork, but the witches stay in touch via complicated scrying spells, as in the famous Cauldron Scene: “‘Whole grain wheat and lentils too, in the cauldron seethe and stew’? What happened to the toad?” “*Please*, Granny. You’re slowing it down. You know Goodie [Magrat’s mentor] was against all unnecessary cruelty. Vegetable protein is a perfectly acceptable substitute.” “That

means no newt or fenny snake either, I suppose?" Later ingredients include baboon hair and mandrake root, carrot juice and tongue of boot....

The climactic and concluding set piece is of course the play itself, which at first leaves the witches aghast at the power of words to distort history and generally give them a bad press. Before they can retaliate they're drawn into the action, mistakenly called onstage instead of the real witch-actors. Likewise, Death turns up because he has an appointment with someone, and sort of merges into the part of Death in the play ("He was going to get out there and slay them" – but forgets his lines since he's never ever before done this in public). Tomjon is "coincidentally" wearing the real crown of Lancre in his part as Verence. Granny bends Hwel's rousing speeches into echoes of what actually did happen on the night of Verence's death. The real Duke is provoked by all this to come onstage too, with a fine manic speech: "I was asleep at the time [...] I could not wash off the blood, but these are not proper subjects for the enquiry. I cannot allow the discussion of national security [...] Who would have thought he had so much blood in him?" This goads the ghostly Verence into assuming control of Tomjon's lips and issuing his own challenge, drawing the Duchess too on to the stage....

The Duke runs amok when the Fool proves to be an admissible (unlike Death and Verence) witness to his dastardly deed: he stabs the Fool and several others with a dagger which ("Death gave the Fool a puzzled look. Then he reached into the recesses of his robes and pulled out an hourglass. It had bells on it.... Death tapped the hourglass, and then peered at it to see if it had gone wrong.") turns out to be a stage prop. Maybe TP was thinking of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* after all. Exit Felmet, gibbering, to an appointment with Death after tripping over the battlements.

The far more formidable Duchess remains unintimidated: unfortunately her guards won't act since they've been so tremendously impressed by the play's build-up of witches as able to "turn people into newts... and then shipwreck them." When the Duchess tries to take matters into her own hands, she's magically disposed of by Granny (more of this below), and some final work with smoke and mirrors leaves the Fool (who proves to be Tomjon's brother) as King while Tomjon is free to go back to the strolling-player business. The standard happy ending, almost. Only afterwards do Granny and Nanny add an extra twist by admitting that although the Fool and Tomjon were brothers all right, it was the Fool's father who cuckolded the King....

Good incidental bits

I particularly liked the ambitious storm which roves atmospherically about the fringes of the plot, auditioning for some really big role in weather vaudeville, and the extension of this stage metaphor (on p149 the storm has been languishing in bit parts and understudy work, still hoping for a break); the intelligent Fool's initial appearance on p22, with desperate attempts to stay in character as a real Shakespearean fool whose jokes are musty, incomprehensible and never actually funny; the acknowledgement of the problem of effectively disposing of crowns and magic rings in the literary context ("How many times have you thrown a magic ring into the deepest depths of the ocean and then, when you get home and have a nice bit of turbot for your tea, there it is?"); the witches' invocation (p78ff) using laundry impedimenta and concentration in place of the proper witchy equipment; the Duke's "all the perfumes of Araby" problem with his guilty hand, which gets more thickly bandaged as he tries to clean it with, eventually, sandpaper and a file (this could stand further development, actually: would it be too macabre for his arm to start getting shorter as the efforts persist? Room for a poetic-justice bit then, at the end where he falls off the castle battlements: he could try at the last minute to save himself by hanging on with a hand which... oops); and the general ducal jitters which don't confine themselves to Macbeth's style but at his worst moments become Nixon or Reagan fending off Congressional enquiry.

Most of these have the common factor of reinforcing WS's crazed but effective echo of the *Macbeth* story.

Minor nitpicking and not-so-minor suggestions

p21 The joke about how falling down a flight of steps with a dagger in your back can be "extremely infectious" is rather too like the similar gag about the contagiousness of being trampled by a rogue elephant, in MORT. A matter for TP's conscience.

para 2, the repeated "a... bit" could stand rephrasing.

p56 The evasive talk about Verence's *droit de seigneur* is funny and builds on the King's vague idea that this was "some kind of large hairy dog" needing "regular exercise" (footnote, p19). Unfortunately the witches' development of this joke gets self-contradictory since it seems to become clear that Verence not only knew exactly what his *droit* was, but exercised it with both regularity and skill.

p64 Since the stuff about particles of inspiration sleeting through the universe is now part of the basic Discworld background – the sort of thing Larry Niven used to explain anew in each story – I suppose one can't complain of having had it all before in SOUR. However, Hwel's dippy and

prophetic literary genius can stand as a “given” without the re-use of this prop.

p66 From this point to p86 we have a major set-piece which occasions a funny cauldron scene and some good repartee with a demon, the resulting revelation being that the land of Lancre itself has “woken up” – with anguished earthquake-like tremblings that shake the tottering castle, with even the country’s dumb beasts sitting accusingly in Granny’s garden to demand justice – all because Lancre now has and will not tolerate a ruler who hates it. Which is a good strong notion, but fades out of the plot too rapidly for such a portentously introduced effect: one feels that there should be continuing tremors and harassment by the wildlife for so long as the land is unhappy. Perhaps a few ongoing reminders of this unease, and a loud chthonic sigh of relief when the kingship is finally resolved?

p98 Following on from the disquiet of the land, we have a more routine discontent among the people. Specifically, the burghers. “They want a king they can trust.” “A burgher king?” ...Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen.

p138 After the Nanny Ogg dungeon rescue scenes there’s a funny sequel involving Verence’s ghostly destiny of haunting the stones of Castle Lancre: he invokes a loophole by persuading Nanny to take a bit of castle rubble home in her pocket (“Currently I am haunting her apron”), and this trick escalates in characteristic TP fashion as the ghostly by-products of the whole castle’s long history follow to take up residence in Nanny’s small home. No complaints so far, but I strongly feel that the very essence of light comedy is a thrifty and ingenious tying up of loose ends. (The itinerant storm is an example, if not a very complicated one, of this being done satisfyingly – as it makes its stage debut at the climax of the book by playing the special effects in the pseudo-*Macbeth*.) Can the ghostly housing problem not be given some further twist late in the book? Is the Duke, himself a ghost by the end of the story, equally free to infest Nanny’s hearth? Verence may have “fulfilled his destiny” and buggered off, but what sort of welcome does Felmet get from the rest of the existing shady population? pl60 “In fact no witch can change her shape....” does not quite agree with p53’s “unbendable rule” that witches “cannot change their own appearance *for any length of time. Their bodies... gradually return to their original shape.”* I only point this out in hope of being thought perceptive and alert.

p!99 “Some incontinent creature of the night.,,.” Cf. *Lucky Jim,* ch6: “His mouth had been used as a latrine by some small creature of the night, and then as its mausoleum.”

p246 There seems to be a slight red herring at work here. The ghostly Verence has long ago been informed that the only non-magical people with whom he can communicate are his close blood relatives. Sure enough, on this page he has a go at Tomjon and later (p256) succeeds in speaking through Tomjon's mouth. Since even later (p280) it is revealed that Tomjon is not the king's son at all, the initial groundwork about blood-kin becomes not only needless but vaguely annoying. Better, perhaps, to scrub the "close relatives" clause and let the whole matter depend on Verence's unprecedented ethereal ability to affect the physical world?

p262 Out of all the book, this scene – Granny's rapid nobbling of the Duchess – is the one I find least satisfactory, There are several reasons for this, as follows:

(a) The fate of the Duchess, that of torment through self-knowledge, is a very routine SF gimmick (it goes back to Doc Smith and the Lensman books if not earlier; even Douglas Adams has got around to sending up a variant of it, in his Total Perspective Vortex scene). It has no particular wit or originality.

(b) At the very least I would expect TP to give the notion, if it must be used at all, some original twist. One envisages a toughie like the Duchess confronted head-on with all her suppressed guilt and crimes and pangs of conscience, and saying, "So what?"

(c) It seems to be out of character for Granny. Granny is generally a thrifty sort of witch, relying a lot on sleight, and. suggestion ("headology", it was called in ER) but sometimes breaking out into something wild, extravagant, showy, eccentric, and risky (like the time-stirring spell here, or the duel of magic in ER). An effect as, well, silent and venomously efficient as what's done to the Duchess doesn't seem like Granny at all.

(d) It's out of character for TP too. Good grief, a major villain is being disposed of without any attempt to get a laugh! The Duke's madness and death is successfully played for giggles – surely the Duchess deserves no less?

What seems to be needed is some mildly harrowing but comic fate which similarly but less routinely embodies the Mikado's ambition to make the punishment fit the crime. Something along the lines of Pinnochio's nose, or something exploiting a hidden silly weakness (e.g. the Duchess is squeamish about animals if not people, and is granted the witchy ability to see and hear the ghosts of slaughtered animals which reproached Verence in the castle kitchen – just a sample suggestion]. If the Duchess's revised fate could tie up some loose end of plot (isn't the Land

of Lancre still angry?), that would be spiffy, and doubly so if it could be made to incorporate some final flourish of *Macbeth* echoes (one thinks of sleepwalking, of a curse of speaking in ringing blank verse which causes all the Duchess's most appalling commands to be merely applauded rather than obeyed, of an animal-loving compulsion to do good by throwing physic to the dogs... oops, sorry). But TP is the boss.

A small niggle included to annoy the author

If (as for all I know is the case) Terry happens to be using the WordPerfect word processor, and if (as I desperately hope) he would secretly prefer to avoid those accumulating rows of stars (as on p121) which get longer with each footnote in this MS, the trick is to use the Setup menu (WP/S from DOS) to alter the "Options" submenu of "Foot/Endnotes", where Option 4 allows footnotes to be restarted with a single * on each new page. Sorry about this digression, but when I see footnotes like this**********, everything starts to go black.... There is no charge for this impertinent paragraph of digression.

********** Or this.

Overall

Good stuff, well up to standard... with the reservations noted above (these include nothing which can't easily be fixed). The Shakespearean vein of humour makes WS especially fun. TP has again taken some care to make this a stand-alone novel; Granny Weatherwax, the orang-utan librarian from Unseen University (who gets a walk-on part) and Death have all been seen before, but their activities in this book don't require any previous background information. When the Duke reads Hwel's script:

> "...I see you've got Death in it too."
>
> "Always popular," said Hwel. "People expect it."

So they do, but TP is being careful not to give them excess of it.

February 1988

Josh Kirby (2007)

(27 November 1928 – 23 October 2001)

Josh Kirby's distinctive covers for the paperback *The Colour of Magic* and *The Light Fantastic* established him as *the* artist of Discworld. He went on to paint jacket art for most "main sequence" Discworld novels and numerous spinoffs, until his death.

Thief of Time was the last Pratchett novel for which Kirby painted the cover. His final completed cover appeared on a spinoff quizbook, David Langford's *The Wyrdest Link* (2002). Additionally, his artwork appeared on the Bromeliad trilogy, on Discworld-era reissues of *The Carpet People*, *The Dark Side of the Sun* and *Strata*, and on both original and revised editions of *The Discworld Companion*. Some paperbacks differ from the hardbacks: Kirby added an Ankh-Morpork city background to the original *Men at Arms*, and produced new interpretations for *Interesting Times* and *Lords and Ladies*.

His artwork also appeared on non-literary spinoffs, including three Discworld computer games, the 1994 *From the Discworld* music CD, the 1995 poster *Rincewind and the Luggage*, and Discworld calendars for 1999 and 2001.

To evoke the comic chaos of Discworld, Kirby used lavishly rich colours and crowded compositions reminiscent of the artists whom he regarded as major influences: Hieronymus Bosch (?1450-1516), whose famous *Garden of Earthly Delights* was echoed in Kirby's art collection *In the Garden of Unearthly Delights*; Pieter Bruegel the Elder (?1525-1569), whose depiction of the Tower of Babel inspired Kirby's monumental movie poster for *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979); and the muralist Frank Brangwyn (1867-1956).

The cover of *The Colour of Magic*, set in that low dive the Broken Drum, is more realistic than the exuberant interpretations that followed. One oddity is that Twoflower the archetypal tourist appears with four literal eyes: Pratchett had described him as "four-eyed", intending this as schoolboy slang for "wearing glasses".

Later Discworld covers were usually constructed as what Kirby called an action tableau. A central image loosely suggested by the novel – preferably a headlong chase – is surrounded by further characters, props, and fragments of scenery that caught the artist's fancy. Thus the original *The Light Fantastic* painting shows Rincewind and other characters

clinging to the Luggage as it careers through a swirling cloudscape, with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in distant pursuit. Outraged birds, axe-wielding trolls and architectural whimsies frame this energetic action. No such tableau can actually be found in *The Light Fantastic*: "I like to bring small scenes together if I can't find a single incident that represents the whole book," said Kirby in *A Cosmic Cornucopia*.

His comic-fantasy stereotypes, or Platonic ideals, sometimes clashed with Pratchett's twisting of cliché. Women tend to be more voluptuous and scantily clad than their prose descriptions. Redoubtable witch Granny Weatherwax, specifically described as uncronelike and wart-free, has a hook nose and warts on the *Equal Rites* cover. Her appearance was adjusted for *Wyrd Sisters*.

The space/time travelogue in the short novel *Eric* was devised as an opportunity for Kirby to produce sumptuous colour spreads of Discworld itself, its creation, its equivalents of Aztecs and the Trojan war, its demon-infested Hell, and the artist's favourite character Death. Without this riot of artistic energy, the later unillustrated paperback seems sadly thin.

Occasionally Kirby was asked to redo Discworld covers. His fondness for the action tableau made a careering wheelchair laden with wizards the centrepiece of his initial *Moving Pictures* painting; at Pratchett's request, the final version emphasized movie elements and marginalized that wheelchair. An interior view of the unexpected submarine in *Jingo* was rejected for giving away this plot element. "Lost" covers are collected in *A Cosmic Cornucopia*.

The popularity of these Discworld paintings made Kirby, to some extent, a victim of his own success. By publishing tradition he received a one-off fee for each cover. Most books which continue to sell well are regularly repackaged, but Kirby's covers were reckoned to be definitive. Fortunately his Discworld notoriety generated further commissions, and he painted covers for a variety of comic fantasies by Esther Freisner, Craig Shaw Gardner, Tom Holt, Dan McGirt, Christopher Moore and Robert Rankin.

As Ronald Kirby, his birth name, he studied from 1943 to 1949 at the Liverpool City School of Art. There he acquired the nickname Josh – because, supposedly, he painted like Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792). After a period of producing film posters, he began his long freelance career as a cover artist with a painting for Dan Morgan's minor SF novel *Cee Tee Man* (1955). Better remembered is his artwork for the first UK paperback of *Moonraker* by Ian Fleming (1956).

Kirby worked slowly and meticulously, usually in oil paint. From the

outset he had a strong taste for the fantastic and surreal. His own official checklist of his paintings omits almost all merely realistic work. But he loved to paint SF scenes with bulging, almost organic domes and spaceships, like his 1969 Corgi cover for Arthur C. Clarke's *The City and the Stars*; or swashbuckling swordsmen like Edgar Rice Burroughs's John Carter of Barsoom; or images both witty and macabre, such as his many comic-sinister jackets for horror and suspense anthologies edited by (in fact, ghost-edited for) Alfred Hitchcock.

After Discworld, Kirby's favourite cover assignments were for Robert Silverberg's "Majipoor" science fantasies, set against a vast planetary backdrop which Kirby rendered impressionistically. Dreamy pastels predominate, though some compositions vibrate with a energy surprisingly different from his Discworld extravaganzas.

Another of Kirby's variant styles was influenced by Guiseppe Arcimboldo (1527-1593), who constructed surreal human faces from mosaics of animals or vegetables. Kirby's cover for Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man* (Corgi, 1963) shows the title character glowing with tattooed scenes from the stories he tells. In similar vein, Kirby assembled Alfred Hitchcock's face from images of horror and filled Terry Pratchett's with ghostly Discworld characters – as seen on the first edition of *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature*.

David Langford (2007)

(10 April 1953 –)

David Langford has been associated with the Discworld sequence since its early days, first as a reviewer and subsequently as publisher's reader, editorial consultant, literary authority and the compiler of two official Discworld quizbooks.

His "Critical Mass" SF/fantasy review column (*White Dwarf* magazine 1983-1988, continuing in *GM* 1988-1990 and *GMI* 1990-1991) discussed several early Discworld titles, beginning with the paperback *The Colour of Magic*. All 101 columns were later collected as *The Complete Critical Assembly* (2001). Longer Langford essays on Pratchett and Discworld appear in his *Up Through an Empty House of Stars* (2003).

When Gollancz considered adding Discworld to their hardback SF/fantasy line in 1986, Langford was asked for a reader's report on the typescript of *Equal Rites*. The report was favourable, and *Equal Rites* became the first Pratchett title to appear from Gollancz.

Pratchett later requested detailed editorial feedback on the more ambitiously complicated plot of *Mort*, and Langford was again called in by Gollancz. This led to the tradition of "Langfordization", in which Langford reads early drafts and reports to Pratchett on issues of continuity, plot logic and comic devices. The tradition applies only to full-length "main sequence" Discworld novels – not novella-length work such as *Eric* or the *Science of Discworld* fictional strands, nor novels for younger readers.

This extensive study of Discworld was put to devious use in Langford's *The Unseen University Challenge* (1996), which not only featured straightforward questions about the series but tested the reader's understanding of Pratchett's more esoteric real-world allusions. A second quizbook, loosely themed around Discworld's many guilds and societies, was *The Wyrdest Link* (2002). Each quizbook contains a slightly bemused introduction by Pratchett.

Langford has frequently been commissioned to write about Pratchett and Discworld for encyclopedias and other reference works. Examples include *St James Guide to Fantasy Writers* (1996) ed. David Pringle; *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997) ed. John Clute and John Grant; *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1998) ed. David Pringle; *Supernatural Fiction Writers: Contemporary Fantasy and Horror* (second edition, 2003) ed. Richard Bleiler; and *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science*

Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works and Wonders (2005) ed. Gary Westfahl. Additionally, he contributed a Foreword to *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature* (2000) ed. Andrew M. Butler, Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, and expanded this into an Introduction for the revised edition of 2004.

He worked closely with Discworld artist Josh Kirby on the coffee-table art book *A Cosmic Cornucopia* (1999), containing numerous Kirby paintings with text commentary by Langford. Two of the six chapters present and discuss an assortment of Discworld artwork.

Langford himself has a background in science, having graduated from Brasenose College, Oxford, with a 1974 honours degree in physics. His first full-time employment was as a UK Ministry of Defence physicist at what was then the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment. He has been a freelance author and critic since 1980. Langford edits the British science fiction newsletter *Ansible* (1979-current) and has received numerous SF honours including no fewer than 26 Hugo awards (as of mid-2006). Perhaps his most popular work of fiction is the satirical novel *The Leaky Establishment* (1984), set in a dysfunctional nuclear research centre. Pratchett, having his own quirky memories of the nuclear industry, contributed an appreciative foreword when *Leaky* was reissued in 2001. The three Pratchett introductions to Langford books are collected in *Once More With Footnotes*.

Fritz Leiber (2007)

(24 December 1910 – 5 September 1992)

Fritz Leiber was a key figure in the evolution of the "sword and sorcery" (S&S) genre – also known as heroic fantasy – and there are several echoes of his witty fantasies in Discworld. This is especially true of *The Colour of Magic*.

In *The Colour of Magic*, Leiber's classic S&S duo Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser are homaged as the minor characters Bravd, an intelligent barbarian like Fahrd, and the "cat-like" Weasel. Lankhmar, the teeming, sleazy, functional city at the heart of Leiber's world Nehwon ("No-when"), both resembles and sounds like Ankh-Morpork – although Pratchett observes that this was less intentional. Both cities have an established Thieves' Guild, and some similar names: Lankhmar's Street of the Gods, Plaza of Dark Desires, and Silver Eel tavern are echoed by Ankh-Morpork's Small Gods, Plaza of Broken Moons, and Crimson Leech.

One sequence in *The Swords of Lankhmar* (1968) sees Fafhrd racing across the Sinking Land. This sea-island of Nehwon is lifted by accumulated volcanic gases and floats until instability sets in, the gas "belches" away – and the Land sinks again. Compare the coming and going of Leshp in *Jingo*. The same Leiber novel features a plague of highly intelligent, talking rats who are much better organized than the troupe in *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents*.

Nehwon is not flat but, according to its philosophers, inside-out with continents floating on the inner surface of a huge bubble in the universe-filling ocean. One crazed Overlord of Lankhmar attempts to explore other worlds *via* a leaden capsule slid into the sea ... not unlike the Krull space programme in *The Colour of Magic*, with its launch off the edge of Discworld.

Fritz Leiber was a notable author of science fiction as well as fantasy. He supposedly coined the term "sword and sorcery" in response to Michael Moorcock's 1961 request for a label to describe this subgenre.* The basic template for S&S had emerged in Robert E. Howard's crudely vigorous stories of the barbarian hero Conan (also parodied by Pratchett as Cohen the Barbarian). Lacking any magic powers, Conan relies on physical strength and determination to overcome an unending succession of warlords, sorcerers, and monsters both natural and supernatural.

** The actual, slightly confusing sequence was that Leiber coined the phrase in a letter to a US fanzine published in April 1961. The Moorcock call for a suitable term appeared in the May 1961 issue of a different fanzine,* Amra*, whose July issue quoted Leiber as an appropriate response.*

Leiber's first published story, "Two Sought Adventure" (*Unknown* magazine, 1939) introduced his much-loved S&S team. Fafhrd is a huge northern barbarian, but also intelligent; the Gray Mouser, small and dextrous, is a quintessential thief. Both characters were suggested in correspondence by Leiber's friend Harry Otto Fischer, who also wrote part of one story. They were loosely based on the friends themselves: Leiber was very tall, Fischer small and nimble.

Their adventures appeared until 1988, collected in a sequence of books whose titles led to this being also called the Swords series: *Swords Against Wizardry* (1968), *Swords in the Mist* (1968), *The Swords of Lankhmar* (1968), *Swords and Deviltry* (1970), *Swords Against Death* (1970), *Swords & Ice Magic* (1977) and *The Knight and Knave of Swords* (1988). By internal chronology *Swords and Deviltry* comes first, since it describes the heroes' childhoods and first encounter. The latter story, "Ill Met in Lankhmar", won a Hugo award.

Some apparent Leiber "influences" on Discworld are matters of common fantasy tradition. Magic shops which sell weird merchandise and are likely to disappear without warning appear in *The Light Fantastic*, *Soul Music*, and likewise in Leiber's earlier "Bazaar of the Bizarre" (1963, included in *Swords Against Death*) – but this much-exploited theme can be traced back to H.G. Wells's "The Magic Shop" (1903) and earlier. The notion of Death being a hard-working character with a duty to perform, as in both Nehwon and Discworld, is also far from new.

The End

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