

Pretension Corner

'In talking about Spenser and Bunyan, I have to confess that I go back to these writers with ulterior motives. In the twentieth century, it seems to me, realism in the photographic sense is almost played out and no longer suits our needs. The writers who do seem pertinent are those like Kafka, Samuel Beckett and William Golding who, in their very different ways, practise some kind of what I have called parable writing. This is not, in the sense of literary influences, a direct line of descent from such writers as Spenser and Bunyan: my point is that they are doing the same kind of thing. For at least two centuries the realists were dominant. Today they are still the favourite reading of the majority, though even the majority gladly accept certain kinds of parable, in the field of science fiction, for instance: a book like 'The Day Of The Triffids' seems to me closer to Spenser than to the main tradition of the English novel.'

Louis MacNice, 'Varieties Of Parable'

I'm grooving on a million cosmic volts, man!

Spellcheckers of Gor!

Marina Louise McDonald : Marina Lounge Medusa

Jason Stevens : Jaundice Stew

Chris Williamson : Christ Willies

Gerard Byrne : Gerbil Bystander

Context

Jason 'Half way through my tutorial I have to fight down the urge to jump out of the window screaming, "No! No! No more electricity!"'

Penny to Ivan 'Have you ever eaten any men?'

Jason 'My mind is not in my genitals. For one thing there wouldn't be room.'

Jason'n'Ivan 'Caffeine is the spiritual sellotape of Thatcher's Britain!'

Jason 'Simon is not grazing on my pubic hair. No way.'

John 'Thirty seconds is not really long enough for zero g sex unless you're doing it in spurts.'

Stuart 'It's much too muscular to be Adrian — and the wrong sex.'

Tim 'Jane and I have this Hoover relationship.'

Adrian 'My beard was sticky when I woke up in the morning.'

Mark Hirst 'You're sure it's a Pick Pockets roll — not Read/Write English or anything like that?'

Penny 'I claim Presidential droit de flagellation!'

Penny 'John Bray — I've got great-aunts just like him...'

Mark Hirst 'Trees aren't like us — they don't stand out in the sun all day.'

Credits

Matt Bishop typed in about six pages of this, so deserves your thanks. He won't get them, of course. Adrian then went off and typeset the thing, giving himself a headache. Of course, he's not going to get any sympathy as you're all hard bastards. For the next newsletter you're all going to write lots and lots and lots of words, or I'll double the text size. It isn't easy being an editor, the long hours spent at the keyboard which damage your back, the eyestrain, the cauliflowers...

Here I am in the POSTERIOR OLFACTORY LOBULE but I don't see CARL SAGAN anywhere!!

John Bray

The Late Orifice

OUSFG News — Late Michaelmas 1989

Well, here it is again, your half-termly collation of scrapings from the bottom of the barrel. Yes, I know it's late; most of you bastards didn't write anything, did you? We now desperately need articles for next term's issues. If you don't submit anything, I'll get Adrian to write you a very long article about parallel processing. You have been warned.

LIBRARY MEETINGS

The OUSFG library is still a-mouldering in Little Drawda 4, in Queen's College. Members can turn up to borrow books every Sunday, at 8:15. After about 9:00, the library closes and you can find us all in St Johns' Larkin Room doing silly things, talking and drinking.

DISCUSSION MEETINGS

After a brief but frank exchange of ideas between yours truly and the Dean of Jesus College, discussion meetings are continuing as normal, in Jesus 6/6 at 8:15 every Wednesday evening. Discussions for the rest of the term are :—

Fifth week : 'Operation Mindfuck'. Jason tells all about Robert Anton Wilson. This meeting has in fact already happened, yesterday, but I have to fill the pages of the newsletter with something...

Sixth week : 'Computers And AI in SF'. Adrian will read the technical bits of Gregory Benford in a fake Yorkshire accent, summarise Asimov's robot books in under ten seconds and then talk about something interesting. (In the future we will look like our CD players.)

Seventh week : 'John Brunner'. Simon will talk about Brunner, a man who has been described as 'A know-it-all who actually does know it all'.

(*'When Ian Watson grows up, he wants to be John Brunner' — Harry Harrison*)

Eighth week is, of course, the fast-becoming-traditional chocolate chip cookies, silly games and astral poles evening. Bring your own cookies. We may well move out of my room and into somewhere more spacious for this; I'll let you know nearer the time.

VIDEO MEETINGS

Video meetings are still held on Mondays of even weeks, at 8:15. We do at least now have a regular venue — Queens College Lecture Room A — but we don't know what the films will be. Keep an eye on Daily Info.

CHRISTMAS PARTY!!!

The annual OUSFG/OURPG christmas party will be exactly one month early, on November 25th — Saturday of 7th week. It's being held in the Lee Undercroft, Christchurch, at 8 o'clock. Admission will be £2.50 for non-alkies, £3.50 for alkies, and £4.00 if you're fool enough to pay on the door (because we want to go and buy the booze beforehand). Fancy dress is optional, but if your costume involves a water pistol then we'd prefer it not to be loaded (the floor gets slippery enough anyway, and we have lots of other people's stereo equipment there). Buy your tickets at OUSFG or OURPG meetings from their respective treasurers. OUCBS (the comic-book society) will be there as well, but then every silver lining has a cloud. Only kidding. Jenni, put the axe down...

MERCHANDISE

Those of you who only paid for a term's membership won't be getting any more newsletters unless you pay out more money. Other than that, there will be OUSFG mugs produced this term, at about £2.00 each — Mark Adams has already passed around a list for people to sign, but if you hassle him there's probably still time to get your order in. The design was printed in the last newsletter. Sweatshirts and T-shirts are still being redesigned by Colin and Stuart, but will be ready sometime soon, honest. The Bloomsbury Good Reading Guide To Science Fiction And Fantasy is still around; nineteen OUSFG members will profit by tuppence each if you buy one. Makes an ideal Christmas present. The family will love it. Trust me; would I lie to you? (Yes — Ad)

SFINX

The ritual Sfinx plug: Jane McCarthy (St Hilda's) would love to hear from anyone who writes sf, and Wendy Prosser (St Hilda's) would be interested in any artwork related to sf and fantasy, for the next issue of Sfinx, the magazine of sf in Oxford.

OUTSIDE OXFORD

Large groups of science fiction fans get together quite frequently; the major places outside Oxford that you may find OUSFG at are:

THE 'TON : London fandom meets on the first Thursday of each month at the Wellington public house on Waterloo Road in London (Directions : Leave Waterloo station heading for the Union Jack Club, and you can't miss it. Better yet, go with those members of OUSFG who go.)

NOVACON : So called because it takes place in November, it's the second biggest convention of the year. It'll be in Birmingham, on 17-20 November, and will cost £15.00 on the door. Guest Of Honour Geoff Ryman. Ask to find out who's going; you may be able to find somewhere to sleep cheaply. Probably not a good first con, and after STLcon I don't think I can face another con with almost no programme.

PICOCON : sometime next February, ICSF (Imperial College, London) will hold their annual mini-convention. It only lasts one day, and has always been worth going to in the past. I can't remember who this year's guests of honour are; see next newsletter for full details. We expect a good turnout for this one, with somewhere around a dozen OUSFG people going.

EASTCON '90 : Advance warning of the 1990 Eastercon, Britain's biggest convention (roughly 1000 people). It's in Liverpool, at the Adelphi Hotel (I can vouch for this hotel — it's a nice place and they're used to sf fans), over the Easter weekend (13-16 April 1990). Attending membership £20.00. Guests of Honour: Iain Banks and Ken Campbell, among others. Should be much fun, although it has to go a long way to live up to last year's.

WORLDCON '90 (CONFICTION) : Yay! A five-day party! With 5000 or more people! Large numbers of OUSFG will be going to The Hague to attend this one; it's on 23-27 August 1990. Finding a place to sleep will not be a problem. Attending membership is £40.00, which sounds like a lot — but it should be worth it. Guests of Honour: Joe Haldeman, Wolfgang Jeschke, Harry Harrison.

SPAWN OF CONINE : Mid-December 1990. A truly superb con. One of the classics of our time. Honest. We're running it. It will be at Oxford Polytechnic, and the guests of honour will include Ramsey Campbell and whoever else we invite. Conine, this convention's predecessor, was a real success, so we have something to live up to. Anybody interested in getting involved with running this should talk to Adrian or Matt (and then go and get their head examined).

More details of these cons can be wheedled out of Matt or Adrian. If you want to know what a con is like, read the Yog's article which should be in here somewhere (blame ~~the /y/p/f/t/s/~~ society if you can't find it...)

Hold the MAYO & pass the COSMIC AWARENESS...

and the last half hour are the clearest and most moving parts of the plot. The same applies to the music, which tries to mirror the confusion in the first abduction; Glass' music is best when it's kept simple. The music is certainly not Glass' best; it's fairly nondescript for most of the piece. The staging is superb; all of the action takes place on an empty stage onto which the scenes are projected. This sounds tacky, but works exceptionally well.

So, it was fun. The opening was powerful and the ending was moving, but the half hour in the middle should have been expanded and made more comprehensible. It was worth seeing, and I'd go again, but I can't help but feel it could have been better.

Matt Bishop

BLAME IT ON THE CAFFEINE!

My baby's always caffing,
It wouldn't be a bad thing,
But I'm not really laughing,
Tell you why,
She won't use Coca-Cola,
She says it rots your molars,
She insists on Pro-Plus to get high:—

CHORUS:

Don't blame it on the sharking,
Don't blame it on the drinking,
Don't blame it on the working,
Blame it on the caffeine!

(Repeat chorus)

My hands are always twitching,
My body's always itching,
She thinks it's bewitching,
But I don't know,
I feel like I'm vibrating,
Sometimes it's nauseating,
But she says it's worse when you get low:—

(Repeat chorus twice)

I just can't

I just can't

I just can't control my twitch (x4)

(Repeat chorus twice)

Jason Stevens

Personal Ads

Young closet hippy with keyboard fetish seeks stylish compatible mouse for experimental interfacing (bundled software preferred).

Quiz Solution

In the last issue, I set the problem of getting from Borges to Dqc. Smith in the Good Reading Guide. The solution was given to me by Penny (our glorious president), and she has won a free issue of the Orifice.

Borges — Lem — Pohl — Dick — Asimov — Smith

Report On Planet Two

(OR: I HAVE SEEN THE LIGHT AND IT'S PINK AND COMES FROM VENUS)

On Thursday of 5th week, AstroSoc made a departure from its usual run of speaker meetings by inviting two speakers from the Aetherius Society to come and air their views. Since the Aetherius Society believe that UFOs exist, and are visitors from other planes of existence, and that said visitors 'live' on their other planes on the different planets of the solar system, the meeting managed to fill a room with people just itching to tear apart their arguments.

First, Alison spoke. She had the same disturbing quality as the Mormons who take you on guided tours of the temple in Salt Lake City; she smiled a lot and enthused even more. Unfortunately, she was talking rubbish, but you can't have everything. Her basic assumption was that UFO sightings are, by and large, genuine, and that we are being watched by aliens from other planes who have chosen not to interfere with our affairs. To support her argument, she produced cuttings from the National Enquirer and George Adamski's famous photograph of a flying storage-heater lid. Then she introduced us to Paul. Paul was reminiscent of a Thunderbirds puppet, which didn't help any of us to keep a straight face. He was also incapable of piecing together a coherent sentence, never mind a coherent argument, but this may just have been because he was nervous about speaking to a large cynical audience. Paul told us all about the CIA coverup, and how the Americans have captured a flying saucer. He told us that the Ministry Of Defence keep trying to make the Aetherians stop telephoning them and asking for information about flying saucers — obviously a conspiracy at the highest level. (Nobody felt inclined to suggest that the MoD may feel they have better ways to spend their time.) He told us about the wisdom of the ancients, a theme later reiterated by Alison, who linked the ancient Eastern notion of prana (a flux of energy from the sun) with the slightly more modern notion of a neutrino. Tim Adye later asked her if she knew the mass of a prana, but she declined to answer.

Verbal communication relies on the other party understanding the words you are using. So, the Aetherians, if they hope ever to convince scientists of their case, should be obliged to learn the real meanings of the words 'flux', 'energy', 'plane', 'force' and so on, and to stop using them any way they like. When I removed these words from what they were saying, interpreted them as best I could and attempted to replace them with an appropriate concept (or indeed any concept at all), I just got garbage. The words were coming through fine, but the sentences had no meaning behind them. The concept of actual concrete evidence was as alien as the flying saucers themselves. (One member of AstroSoc asked how they verified all the reports of flying saucers that they receive and catalogue, and was told 'We don't feel it's necessary — we believe they exist anyway. It's more like train-spotting, really.') I had been looking forward to attacking their arguments, but they didn't have any — it was all outright belief, justified with an outrageous barrage of allegations, ancient wisdom, misunderstandings and non sequiturs. In short, drivel. AstroSoc attempted to find some ludicrous piece of pseudoscience that their speakers didn't believe, and drew a blank.

You may think that this is all not terribly surprising, really. However, they opened the meeting with a plea for open-mindedness. If they had actually presented the evidence for the very few UFO sightings that can't easily be explained, I might have been swayed a little. If they had presented some reason for believing in beings from other planes and intelligent life elsewhere in the solar system, it would have been a bit more interesting. As it was, I had a good time and it was all hilariously funny, but underneath that I found their willingness to believe anything without requiring evidence extremely disturbing.

Matt Bishop

The Sadly Abbreviated McLeish Bit

(That is, the sadly abbreviated bit written by Simon McLeish, as opposed to the bit written by the sadly abbreviated Simon McLeish. But you probably guessed that already.)

TERRY JONES — ERIK THE VIKING

The film written and directed by Terry Jones — and not at all based on his children's book of the same name — is a great deal of fun, but not at all intellectual or innovative. It has a simple plot. It is the age of Ragnarok, when the wolf Fenring (? — I hate this handwriting (Me too! Even if I can't see it! — Ad)) has

swallowed the sun, and all men are engaged in killing each other off. Erik is a philosophical Viking, who finds himself unable to rape a woman while on a raid. He kills her by accident, but not before she makes him wonder exactly what is going on. After a visit to the witch Freya (played by Eartha Kitt) he sets out for the peaceful land of Hybrasil, to blow the Horn Resounding to wake the gods who will then make everything alright. Erik sets out, despite opposition from the smiths' guild (Ragnarok and swords being good for business) and local bad guy, Halldan the Black (John Cleese). Not surprisingly, good wins out in the end, boy meets and wins bimbo (Imogen Stubbs) and Terry Jones is drowned when Hydrasil sinks. A good cast, a fun script, and not much thought needed to appreciate it all. Recommended.

DOUGLAS ADAMS — THE LONG DARK TEATIME OF THE SOUL

On reading this book I couldn't understand two things. Firstly, whether it has no plot or a heck of a lot of totally incomprehensible plot. Is it just thirty-five chapters stuck together in an order which somebody presumably decided was chronological or did it have a complicated plot involving green furry things, Norse gods, Coke machines and malevolently lurking fridges? The other thing was whether it was really meant to be funny or not. If it was, it failed dismally, and if it was not, then those paragraphs that appeared to be rejected Hitchhikers' jokes were just to remind you that, yes, the author really is Douglas Adams. One thing I was sure about: at four quid it was definitely a waste of money. I'm reduced to thinking that (especially considering the design of the cover) Adams is published for the same reason the novelist Howard Bell is published...

Book Reviews

OCTAVIA BUTLER — KINDRED

Dana, a young black woman married to Kevin, an older white man, is abruptly whisked away from the present into the all too vivid reality of nineteenth century slavery. Her life is linked inexplicably with that of a young white, Rufus. Whenever he is in danger, she appears from the 20th century to rescue him, a guardian angel in denims. When her life is endangered she returns.

The time travel episodes are used to smoothly follow the growing traumas of Rufus, which change him from an almost innocent child into a state that would now be classified as insanity. He is a microcosm of the entire society, showing how inevitably the faults and neuroses of the parents are reflected in the child. Small improvement is, perhaps, made, but at a huge cost.

The primary focus of the book is, however, the psychology of slavery and racial abuse. We are shown the resilience of the slaves in brutal conditions, and the unfeeling cruelty of their masters. Invited to draw comparisons with our own time, we see how readily Dana, victim of joblessness, racial abuse and the sexist behaviour of her husband, fits in to the role of 'hard-working nigger'. From that time, our society has indeed changed greatly, but far too much still remains.

The characterisation is excellent, adding greatly to the effectiveness of the account, and making up for the occasional 'seventyism'. Particularly vivid, are Rufus, Dana, and Kevin, although many of the lesser characters are expertly drawn. The twentieth century episodes are used not only as transitions, but also to draw attention to the strains that are placed upon the young couples marriage by their long periods of absence and by the suspicions of neighbours.

Although this book lacks many of the traditional elements of Science Fiction, its depiction of the inhumanity of slavery, both historically, and today in South Africa, should not be ignored.

Chris Williamson

JOHN SLADEK — BUGS

The hero of this rather bizarre novel, Fred Jones, is a technical writer in Minnesota (as, indeed, is the author). He's English, having come to America to seek his fortune and become 'Like an American success story. Overcoming polio to become an Olympic pole-vault champion. Fighting dyslexia to become a Supreme Court Justice.' Unfortunately, he ends up broke in Minnesota, having left New York because he can't stand it there. So he applies for a job as a technical writer at VIMNUT industries — 'A World Leader in Artificial Intelligence and Plumbing Innovations'. This firm could have been designed by Kafka; they change their name

every fortnight or so, the staff get fired by computer error every few days, and then get rehired again with a promotion, and Jones' protests about an administrative cockup go totally unheeded when he is accidentally appointed to a software engineering post, from which he quickly becomes head of a project to build a robot.

There is one minor snag in the rapid rise to an important job. He's a technical writer. He has no idea about programming, so he goes off and buys 'The Dumb Child's Computer Dictionary' and 'Talk Good Software' and makes the best of it. This goes unnoticed, owing to the other members of the project being completely demented; Sladek has obviously spent some considerable time around programmers and it's worn off on him, with one character using increasingly improbable metaphor ('...we seek no less than the collision of the new ultra-crystalline giga-culture with the old gradient of exhaustion...') and another free-associating his way into occult insanity ('Cairo equals Cheiro equals Chi Rho, see?') before going for Fred with a meat-cleaver.

Even this wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the fact that all America is like this. Fred is unable to distinguish the secret agents offering him vast sums of money from the 'Reader's Digest' offering him vast sums of money. His boss' wife wants him to fulfil all her sexual fantasies. The television carries reports on the presidential sanity hearings ('...his attempt to fire the Secretary Of State and replace him with a hydrangea. and mass murders in fast-food outlets. Restaurants get dismantled around him while he eats. The father of late girlfriend starts selling bits of her cremated remains as good-luck charms. And, of course, there's Sladek's usual plot thread about intelligent machines, to hold all the other threads together.

There is an incredible amount of plot in this book, considering it's only a bit over 200 pages long. It combines the savage humour of 'Tik-Tok' and the insight into American life of 'The Muller-Fokker Effect', and while the ending is not as memorable as that of 'Tik-Tok' it is, at least in my opinion, a marginally funnier book. In other words, it is one of his best books so far, and further evidence that Sladek may well be the funniest sf writer around today. Read and enjoy.

Matt Bishop

NEAL STEPHENSON — ZODIAC

It calls itself an 'eco-thriller' and it is. It's not really very remarkable and the hero is almost Heinlein-esque in his infuriating, smug omniscience, which is a pity, as otherwise it would be a pleasantly mindless way of passing a boring journey. Recommended to those who like this sort of thing or have a fetish about PCBs; for my part, I found myself irresistibly drawn to the greater lure of the Clinical Research Centre Library Bulletin. It's probably overpriced as well, so try a library (or see if you can get a complimentary copy forced on you, it worked for me).

The Fluffy Yog

Music?

PHILIP GLASS & DAVID HWANG — 1000 AIRPLANES ON THE ROOF

Philip Glass' science-fictional drama with music finally reached Sadler's Wells not long ago. I'd had the record for some time, but the words aren't on the record, so I'd spent quite a while trying to work out exactly how this was science fiction. The performance explained all. The whole thing has a cast of one, a woman called M who lives in New York, and is performed in one 90-minute act.

The opening scene finds M on a city street, reminiscing about her first date with a man she met in the copy shop where she works ('Are you a psychopath?' he asked me. 'No,' I said, but I realised that's exactly what a psychopath would say...'). When they return to the building where M lives, it disappears in front of her and a hallucination-like episode starts. M remembers being abducted by aliens, and travelling in time. We get two such abduction scenes, the first of which is excessively garbled, before we find M back in the care of a psychiatrist who is asking her about her memories of the aliens. Wisely, she denies any knowledge, and is released to return home, with the memory of her experience beginning to fade even as she leaves.

The whole thing can be considered in three chunks: plot, music and staging. The plot is more coherent than it sounds when you try and express it in one short paragraph, but still more than a little bemusing. M played her part well, with every line completely audible. Even so, the first abduction scene, in which M travels in time as well as being abducted, is extremely confusing and could do with some more explanation. The first half hour

Stuck Outside of Southampton with the St Helier Blues Again

OR, 101 THINGS TO DO WITH A MAD DRIVER, A FAMOUS AUTHOR AND A FOUR-STAR HOTEL

Describing conventions to the uninitiated is, on the whole, an exercise in futility on a Lovecraftian scale. He was very keen on nameless, impossibilities; but then he always ended up trying to describe and name them, and who am I to break with tradition?

The thing to bear in mind is that the best way to find out what a convention is like is to go to one. I can't explain what's so great about crawling through miles of mud and freezing water hundreds of feet below the ground, or tearing my shoulder muscles to ribbons endeavouring not to come off a cliff I should never have been on in the first place, or wasting a Wednesday evening arguing irrelevant and unresolvable points of sf opinion with twenty people who would rather be at the bar, or role-playing myself into sleep deprivation and/or nervous breakdown, or wrestling with wildly abstract, obscure and highly inapplicable bits of higher mathematics, but I happen to enjoy them and it's the same with conventions. I mean, who'd pay fifteen pounds for the right to beg illegal and overpriced crash space off the one person who's booked a room, the opportunity to lose all of one's money with British Rail or one's sanity with Matt Bishop's driving, and the chance to pay double college bar prices for vaguely unpleasant beer or warm Coke, and then not even take advantage of the exciting programme (the same old panels, films and silly games) but instead spend all their time and money on second-hand books?

Who needs to stay up until dawn listening to off-key silly songs and repetitive guitar playing? Who wants to spend a whole weekend cuffling out in a hotel corridor playing "Spot the Famous Author"? (Or, if you are Illustrious OUSFG President Penny Heal - or, indeed, Maria Hamilton, for those of us with longer memories - playing "Spot Terry Pratchett's Tight Jeans". We name no names.) Who can really bear to *It's Alive* or *Q: The Winged Serpent* yet again? What sort of people are they that can enjoy themselves searching the centre of Birmingham for a fish and chip shop in the middle of the night? (Ask Marina about the sad fate of the pizza places.)

Think of a con as being like a three day distillation of two or three weeks of OUSFG. It's all there: the social side, the wild parties, the erudite discussions, the guest speaker, the awful films... the dress sense, the obscure in-jokes, the furtive passing of badly-duplicated documents of corruption (fanzines: you owe me an article, all of you), the astral pole, the Douglas Adams references... the dramatic productions...

You don't believe this is fun, do you?

The Fluffy Yog

And then we sat around for a while...

I apologise! I said STLCon would be fun, and it wasn't. Hell, it was an easy mistake. Anyway, what happened? Last year the Shoestringcon was great fun - a party lasting for the whole weekend. This time, it wasn't.

The price had been raised at the last minute from £5 to £10, as the Student Union insisted. When we arrived, there was nothing happening, so we went to the bar, which rapidly became crowded. So far, just like last year. Then, as the bar closed we went into the Ele House, the main con building, to have a party. The first surprise was to find officious Hatfield Poly S.U. security people on the door. It's a shame they weren't wearing red shirts...

When we'd finally got in, we proceeded to get drunk. This bit was fun, and apparently the events that I slept through were even more fun (though probably not for the ginger cake that bought the farm at 4am). In the morning we had breakfast, sneaked into the accommodation blocks to shower, then found there wasn't a programme. Nothing at all. Not even a bijoux programmette. We did a pizza run at lunchtime and came back to find no programme. By this point several people were pissed off enough to make 'Where's the fucking programme?' badges.

The entire con went on like this - even the partying wasn't as good as last year. We could have done the same thing with ICSF for half the price! Total rip off - I'm not going next year!

GRRRRRR!