THE MEGALOSCOPE

#4: DEC. 2022

First published in ANZAPA by David R. Grigg

I got through 11 books in the last two months, a little less than average, but then I read two very long books, each of which required a lot of concentration.

These were: *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt (629 pages) and *Psalms for the End of the World* by Cole Haddon (529 pages). Reading the latter was a particular struggle since I was only sent a PDF review copy, a less than ideal format for a long novel.

Still, they were both books which were rewarding to read.

Quick Summaries

Science Fiction

The High House by Jessie Greengrass

Elegaic post-apocalyptic novel focusing on a small number of characters after humanity begins to slip into climate disaster. Top quality writing, too.

Review here.

Psalms for the End of the World by Cole Haddon

Intriguing and complex, if very long, novel based around the concept that our everyday world is a simulation run on an unimaginably powerful alien computer.

Review here.

Crime/Thriller

Day's End by Garry Disher

Another great piece of "rural noir" featuring Disher's character Senior Constable Paul Hirschausen, posted to a small town in rural South Australia. Among dealing with his usual clutch of rural problems, in this book Hirch comes in contact with anti-vaxxers and far right-wing conspiracists.

Review here.

The Secret History by Donna Tartt

A long, beautifully written novel which probably belongs much more into the category of literary fiction than crime, despite the fact that the central story is all about murder.

Review here.

Clouds of Witness & Unnatural Death by Dorothy L. Sayers

Two classic 1920s mystery novels by Dorothy Sayers featuring her artistocratic detective Lord Peter Wimsey. Highly entertaining.

Reviews here.

Slow Horses by Mick Herron

Entertaining and sometimes very anusing. A refreshingly different look at the spy thriller. I won't review it here in *Megaloscope* because I already talked about the dramatisation of the book on Apple TV+, and the show follows the book closely.

The Unbelieved by Vikki Petraitis

Pretty good debut crime novel by an Australian author, focusing on crimes against women, their struggle to be believed and their abusers punished.

Review here.

Children's Fiction

The Good Thieves by Katherine Rundell

An adventure story set in the Prohibition Era in the United States, featuring a young girl who is determined to get back her grandfather's house after he is swindled out out of it by a crook.

Review here.

Non-Fiction

The Pitmen's Requiem by Peter Crookson

Interesting and moving account of the coal mining communities in the north of England and how they were devastated by the cruel policies of the Thatcher Government.

Review here.

The Ninth Life of a Diamond Miner by Grace Tame

This is both an autobiography and a furious polemic against sexual predators and those who cover up for them. Grace Tame was appointed as Australian of the Year in 2021 for her efforts in this regard, and her personal story is in turns moving and infuriating.

Review here.

Hits and Misses

Best book read since last issue?

No question: *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, an extraordinarily good debut novel. I'm keen to read her *The Goldfinch*, which won the Pulitzer Prize.

Second and third best?

The High House by Jessie Greengrass was an easy second-best.

In terms of reading enjoyment, third place is a toss-up between *Day's End* by Garry Disher and *Psalms for the End of the World* by Cole Haddon.

Most confronting read?

The Ninth Life of a Diamond Miner by Grace Tame is not an easy read, and Tame isn't a great writer, but it's a hard-hitting book addressing an extremely important topic. I didn't enjoy reading it, but I'm glad that I did.

Most disappointing book?

I don't think there was one this time, though I thought *The Good Thieves* was a bit heavy-going for a children's book, taking too long to get to the real action.

But the rest were all well worth reading. Having put behind me a fair bit of "required reading" for the podcast last issue, this time I've really only read books I *wanted* to read. Hooray!

THE MEGALOSCOPE

ISSUE #4

DECEMBER 2022

The Megaloscope is a fanzine from David R. Grigg, published first in ANZAPA and then available to anyone who is interested.

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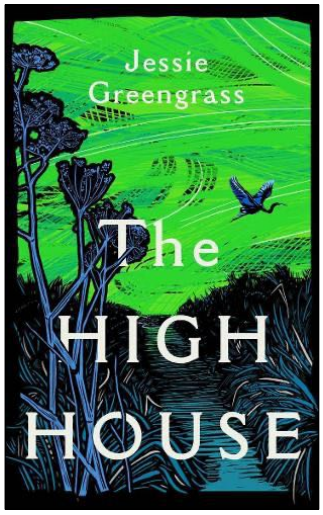
In this issue:

Science Fiction

The High House by Jessie Greengrass



This is a very sad, elegaic novel about the forthcoming climate disaster we are slipping into. And that sad, seemingly inevitable slipping is part of the whole point of this book. A slow-motion catastrophe is happening before our eyes because most of us humans can't quite imagine our comfortable lives really being under threat. Here for example is an early passage in the book, as one of the characters talks about how we react to climate disasters in other places:

> We had the habit of luck and power, and couldn't understand that they were not our right. We saw that the situation was bad, elsewhere, but surely things would work out, because didn't they always, for us? We were paralysed, unable to plan either for a future in which all was well, or one in which it wasn't.

This is heartbreaking because it's so true.

The book could be categorised simply as post-apocalyptic fiction, but unlike many such books, the apocalypse here is not a sudden, dramatic one, just a slow, steady decline into catastrophe, an all-too-likely scenario. It's about change and how we struggle to deal with it: change both slow and rapid, all too often very slow at first and then very rapid.

Published in late 2021, The High House is certainly up to date and prescient: one key event is the destruction of much of Florida by a powerful hurricane. Sound familiar?

The quality of Greengrass' writing is outstanding. I'm going to end up quoting a number of passages from the book in this review because it's such strikingly good prose.

The High House is narrated by three point-of-view characters: Caro and Sally, who are in their late teens as the story begins, and Pauly, a boy who is only a toddler at that point.

Caro (short for Caroline) is the daughter of a climate scientist. He and Caro's step-mother Francesca spend much of their time attending conferences and agitating for action about climate change. Francesca in particular is passionate and furious about the lack of action against the disaster she sees looming. Despite her fears for the future, she becomes pregnant. Others in the environmental movement criticise her harshly for this: "They think this baby is an admission of defeat". But Caro says:

> … but watching her I thought that it was not defeat at all. Rather, it was a kind of furious defiance that had led her to have a child, despite all she believed about the future—a kind of pact with the world that, having increased her stake in it, she should try to protect what she had found to love.

The birth is very difficult and the baby struggles for life during its early weeks. But once it's clear that Paul (or Pauly) will survive, Francesca makes plans for him. Over years she essentially builds an ark—not a ship, but a house. The High House.

The High House is an old house which Francesca has bought, set on a rise in a rural area near the coast of England. She spends a great deal of money and time, much of it kept secret from young Caro, to renovate the house and its surrounds to make it as resilient and self-contained as she can.

After Francesca and Caro's father are killed in Florida by a massive hurricane, Caro follows the instructions she has been given, leaves their apartment in London and takes Pauly to the High House. Things have already started to fall apart in England, making this a difficult and exhausting journey. At the end of it she has to abandon their bags and carry Pauly for miles on her back.

When Caro arrives at the High House, expecting it to be empty, she is disconcerted to find Sally and Sally's grandfather ("Grandy") already living there. They are there at Francesca's request. As Sally comments when she sees Caro's resentment of this:

> Francesca … needed me, too, and Grandy. What would Caro have done, in the high house, by herself? How would she have dug the garden, lived, looked after Pauly? It is not enough to have an ark, if you do not also have the skills to sail it.

Despite its important underlying environmental theme, the core of the book is about character: the interpersonal relationships between Caro and Sally and their mutual love of young Pauly, for whose affections they for a while jealously contend. Often we see a scene through Caro's eyes immediately followed by Sally's view of the same event, and vice-versa. Then we might get young Pauly's take. Each of these characters has considerable depth and interest.

Meanwhile, in the outer world, things are steadily getting worse. The sea is rising and storms bring flooding rains. Summer lasts now for nine months of the year. Winters are still cold, but rain much more frequent. Coastal cities are becoming uninhabitable and many people have become reluctant climate refugees. The High House is well away from regular roads and pathways, however, and can't be

seen from the road, otherwise Caro and Sally might find themselves having to make hard decisions about how many people their small plot can possibly support. Francesca has chosen its location well.

One day, Grandy tells the others about a historical event. A century ago, the river mouth and the fishing port was a few miles away down the coast. A long spit of sand and shingle created a natural harbour at the river mouth. The town grew and developed based on this shelter. But then came a terrible storm. The spit was washed away and the whole course of the river altered.

> The river was gone. The fishing fleet was sunk or wrecked. Ships due to land had to be diverted elsewhere, and merchants found themselves with goods they couldn't reach, or couldn't store, or had no way of moving. In the course of one bad night the whole system, which the day before had seemed inviolable, was brought to collapse.

The metaphor of the current fragility of our economic systems couldn't be clearer.

Life at the High House also becomes increasingly fragile, as the stores Francesca had gathered are slowly depleted as the years pass. Grandy, already an old man as the story opens, grows feeble and can't help the young women as they struggle to grow crops for themselves. There is no possible medical help, so they have to be doubly careful not to injure themselves, or let Pauly come to harm.

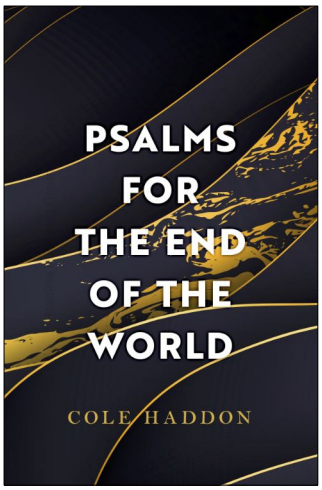
> This truth has been laid bare for us, now. We see it every time we fall—every time a knife slips, or a splinter finds its way beneath the skin—that we will either get better, or we won't. We need only let the time pass to see if, this time, we will heal.

There are still people eking out a living in the rest of England, but it's a hard endless struggle against cold and hunger. Caro, Sally and Pauly had been given a head start by the foresight of Francesca, but perhaps it only means they will take longer to die. Sally looks back, towards the end of the book:

> Somehow, while we had all been busy, while we had been doing those small things which added up to living, the future had slipped into the present—and, despite the fact that we had known that it would come, the overwhelming feeling, now that it was here, was of surprise, like waking up one morning to find that you had been young, and now, all at once, you weren't.

I thought this was a very impressive and moving book, sounding a grim warning and which doesn't give any easy answers. The quality of the author's prose, as I've said, is very good. Well worth reading. ◂

Psalms for the End of the World by Cole Haddon



My thanks to the author for providing me with a review copy of this book.

It's strange about this book. I'm finding that I'm enjoying it more having finished it and thinking back on it than while I was reading it. I'll try to explain this feeling later on.

This novel certainly has an intriguing concept, which I don't think I've seen as well explored anywhere else. The concept is that the everyday world we see around us, and all the people we meet and the events which happen to us, are all a part of a vast simulation run by an intelligent species on an unimaginably powerful computer. If such beings had the capability of simulating whole worlds, you could reasonably ask, why wouldn't they? And if they did, and you were part of such a simulation, how could you ever tell?

It takes a while, of course, for this underlying concept to become clear in the book. Instead, we start in the 1960s with a man called Jones in his apartment in Pasadena, listening to the account of the test of a hugely-powerful thermonuclear weapon by the Soviet Union. There are hints of something strange about Jones. He looks at himself in the mirror—he's extremely handsome—and his face "still startles him sometimes". He responds to the report of the nuclear explosion by thinking "none of this bullshit is real".

Jones puts on a suit and heads off in his car but takes a break in his journey to wherever he is going to drop in to a diner where it appears he's been a regular customer for months. The young waitress, Gracie, greets him warmly and serves him pie. Gracie keeps hoping Jones, who she calls "Bobby", will ask her out. But he tells her he won't be around for a while as there's something he has to do. He's away for several weeks, but when he returns to the diner, he doesn't appear to recognise Gracie at all, and has no recollection of ever eating pie there. She's beginning to get very upset when suddenly the FBI arrive, heavily armed and with a warrant to arrest Jones on a charge of setting off a bomb which

has killed 23 people at Pasadena City Hall. Jones protests that he knows nothing about this, but when the FBI agents move to handcuff him, he manages to escape. It takes a while before we figure out why Bobby behaved so strangely on his return to the diner, and who he really is.

The relationship between Bobby and Gracie is the heart of the book and eventually it turns into a tragic romance.

Along with this core story, however, we have many threads of other characters in different times and places; all of these eventually link together cleverly to shape a picture of what is going on. We have a David Bowie-like character who calls himself Damien Syco or "The Moonman", who sings songs challenging his listeners' perception of reality. We have a reclusive painter, Bertrand Lambriquet, in 18th Century France, who has locked himself away obsessively painting canvases which depict scenes so grotesque and alien they drive people crazy to look at them. We have Betrand's son, Xavier, who grows to adulthood and has his father locked away in an asylum before wandering across Europe to India and Tibet and trying to join a monastery there. We have Abdul Fattah, a teenage Muslim boy in Sydney in the year 2000 who has been commanded by Allah—in the form of a caged piebald rabbit—to blow up the Sydney Opera House. His journey takes a very strange turn indeed. We have several other characters who I won't attempt to ennumerate.

The picture this collage of characters eventually fills out is that this world really is a computer simulation, but it's not unique, there are hundreds of Earth simulations, all run by the equivalent of a corporation in the Outside—the world of the alien creatures running the simulation. Bobby is one of the alien software engineers who has "retired" in order to live inside his own creation, but who has become increasingly concerned by what it does to the humans living here, including particularly Gracie, with whom he's fallen in love. He decides to try to sabotage the control of the world from Outside. Because of his actions, he's being hunted by the Master Control, the operating system software, which also becomes embodied in the world and takes human form, the better to track Bobby down and stop him.

The key theme here is an important ethical one: if you had the ability to simulate a whole world populated by intelligent beings, you would surely be responsible for the sufferings of those beings. Even if these beings are simulated, their grief and pain *would be real to them* and you would be morally responsible.

It's an argument which is millennia-old in the form of the theological discussion of the problem of evil (how could a benevolent God create a world which includes so much suffering?), but it's given real point here in that those who created the simulation aren't omnipotent gods but mortal entities, however alien. And *Psalms for the End of the World* doesn't hold back from depicting terrible human suffering throughout history, some of it inflicted directly by Bobby and the Master Control as they contend for the fate of the simulation.

I said at the start that I'm actually enjoying this book more in retrospect than while I was reading it, which seems a strange thing to say. But it's a very long book (529 pages, some 165,000 words) and my review copy was in a PDF format which was rather awkward for me to read. So it took me a long while to get through it and at one stage I became rather exasperated by the sheer number of different threads the author throws at you, threads which at first appeared unconnected. It's only on finishing the book and thinking back on it that I can see how all these threads are very cleverly connected, and who certain characters in them turn out to be in the light of later revelations. I do think the book could have been shorter, but apparently it started out at over 600 pages long so perhaps I should be grateful!

My final conclusion: this is a very clever novel which isn't afraid to tackle interesting ideas and themes, and it certainly makes you think.

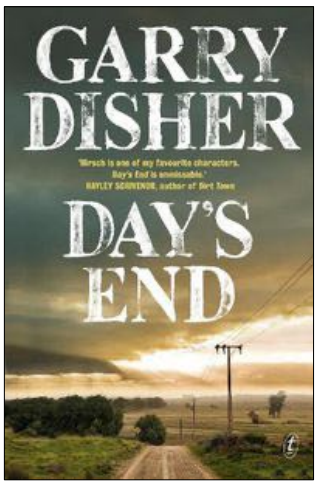
Cole Haddon is an Australian writer. This is his first novel, but he has a number of screenwriting credits on television series and movies, for example the 2013 series *Dracula*. It will certainly be interesting to see what he comes up with next.

And here's the author's response to my review:

> Thank you for taking the time to read my book and post such a thoughtful review. It's actually one of my favourites, because you describe something that I worked very hard on—which was a tone, a general vibe, that would haunt you after you stepped away from the book. I wanted the book to linger, which I have heard from many people now it does. Those connections you describe are far more complicated than they appear even upon a first reading, and multiply the more the book is considered and if I'm lucky enough to inspire someone to reread it. I think a wiser writer would've written something less challenging as their debut, but there you go. Heh.
>
> —*Cole Haddon*

Crime

Day's End by Garry Disher



This is the fourth book in Disher's series of crime novels featuring his protagonist Senior Constable Paul Hirschausen, stationed in a rural town in South Australia, a few hours drive north of Adelaide.

We follow Hirsch as he encounters a variety of different problems within the town of Tiverton and in the vast surrounding area for which he is responsible. Much of the strength of these books is the way Garrry Disher weaves together many disparate threads of story, each of which illuminates the life of a rural community, threads which in each book seem unrelated but eventually come together to reveal a bigger picture.

This one picks up on the topical issues of COVID pandemic, anti-vaxxers, Qanon believers and other conspiracy theorists.

It opens with Hirch accompanying a Dr. Jane Van Sant, a German academic who has come to Australia to try to find her son Willi, who has now been out of contact with her for an extended period. He had been on a working holiday to Australia and was last heard of working as a station hand at a sheep and cattle station called Dryden Downs. Hirch accompanies Dr. Van Sant to talk to the owners. It's worth noting here that the wife of the owner, Mrs Dryden is a prominent anti-vaxxer, with signs up at the entrance to the property saying unvaccinated visitors are welcome.

According to the owners, Willi left with his girlfriend to go on to Noosa a couple of months previously. They show Hirsch and Dr. Van Sant a postcard they say they received from Willi in Noosa. Following that lead, Dr. Van Sant decides to travel to Noosa to investigate further.

Hirsch goes on with his work, travelling around the town and the surrounding areas, making welfare visits, spotting suspicious activity and so on. After talking to one local who's been having problems, he leaves "realising yet again that he could never fully help people, never fully tackle or solve the headaches that came his way." That's Hirch's life.

A report of smoke seen in a paddock near the town leads to the discovery of a body in a suitcase; Hirch's girlfriend Wendy and her daughter Kate are targeted by a scam, a follow-up to Kate being bullied unmercifully on social media; Hirch has to deal with the gruesome attack on a baby by a savage dog; and so it goes on.

Then Dr. Van Sant returns from Noosa, having found out that her son was never there, and an ultralight plane taking photographs near Dryden downs is shot down and the pilot killed.

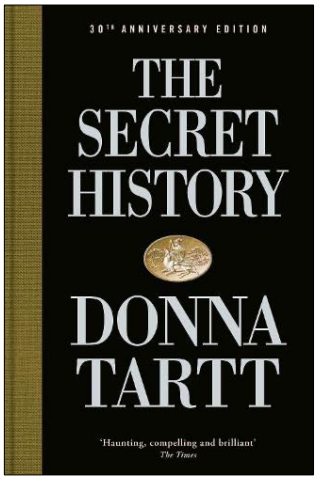
Hirch brings it all togther to reveal a plan by conspiracy theorists and ultra-rightwingers to build an armed forced to create mayhem.

Enjoyable and engaging, a book you don't want to put down. And, thankfully, despite the title, there seems no intent on Disher's behalf to end the series here.

While you're looking at books here, a reminder that I've written an SF novel myself, which you might care to have a look at.

Details here.

The Secret History by Donna Tartt



Donna Tartt is a curious author. She has only published three novels, spaced close to evenly, every ten years for the last thirty years. Every one of those novels received overwhelming praise when it came out and two of them won several prestigous awards. Her most recent book was *The Goldfinch*, published in 2013, so we can at least hope that we we're due for another one in the next few years.

The Secret History was her debut, published in 1992, and it is astonishingly good for a first novel. I started to read the book in a library copy, but I ran out of time and had to return it. But I had read enough by then to know that I wanted to own my own copy and so I bought a hardcover of the recently-released 30th Anniversary Edition pubished by Viking.

It's not an easy book to describe. One way might be to say that it's a highly literate crime novel, but there's no mystery involved. The prologue tells you immediately that the first-person protagonist and a group of friends killed someone called Bunny by pushing him off a cliff into a ravine in the mountains. Who these people are, what the lead-up to this situation was, why they killed Bunny, and what the consequences of the murder are, fill the rest of this very long book—it's 629 pages long in this edition. Yes, that's very long indeed, but there was never a moment when it flagged or I became tired of reading it.

It's certainly fits more into the category of literary fiction than genre crime fiction, not only because of the quality of the writing, which in my view is outstanding, but because of its high level of its concerns about society, about love, about education, about crime, shame and guilt; more than anything it's about young people trying to make sense of themselves and the world. It's just remarkably good all round.

The book is set in a small college in a town in Vermont in the United States, and the period must be around the early 1980s. Richard Papen, a 19-year old Californian, transfers to Hampden College after deciding that he isn't suited to becoming a doctor. In his pre-med course, he studied Ancient Greek and had done well in it. At Hampden, however, he finds that the Greek course is run by an eccentric tutor, Julian Morrow, who accepts only a very few students. The semester is well advanced and so far there are only five students studying under Julian. These are the twins Charles and Camilla; Francis; Henry and Edmund ("Bunny").

After some resistance from Julian, Richard is eventually accepted as a student and very slowly befriended by the other Greek students, who have formed a very tight group between themselves. The relationships between this group of six people and their tutor are the central focus of the book.

At a time when Richard is still something of an outsider, the others, seized by fascination with Julian's account of divine madness in Greek literature, try to invoke a Dionysian frenzy using drugs. During one such attempt, while Bunny is absent, they succeed in achieving that frenzied state, but in the process they accidentally kill the farmer on whose land they had strayed. From this one awful incident, the rest of the plot flows.

I've said that the quality of the writing is outstanding. There's some arresting prose, which I can't resist quoting. Here's a description of Charles and his twin sister Camilla:

> Side by side, they were very much alike, in similarity less in lineament than of manner and bearing, a correspondence in gesture which bounced and echoed between them so that a blink seemed to reverberate, moments later, in a twitch of the other eyelid.

Or this, as Richard is falling in love with Camilla:

> The light from the window was streaming directly into her face; in such strong light most people look somewhat washed out, but her clear, fine features were only illuminated until it was a shock to look at her, at her pale and radiant eyes with their sooty lashes, at the gold glimmer at her temple that blended gradually into her glossy hair, warm as honey.

Or this, late in the book after Bunny's body is discovered after the heavy snow-falls which had hidden it begin to melt:

> White sky. Trees fading at the skyline, the mountains gone. My hands dangled from the cuffs of my jacket as if they weren't my own. I never got used to the way the horizon there could just erase itself and leave you marooned, adrift, in an incomplete dreamscape that was like a sketch for the world you knew—the outline of a single tree standing in for a grove, lamp-posts and chimneys floating up out of context before the surrounding canvas was filled in—an amnesia-land, a kind of skewed Heaven where the old landmarks were recognizable but spaced too far apart, and disarranged, and made terrible by the emptiness around them.

Writing as good as this makes reading a joy.

I can't praise this book highly enough. Heartily recommended.

The following two books are productions I'm doing for Standard Ebooks. Our editions won't be released until 1 January 2023 when they will fall into the U.S. public domain.

Clouds of Witness by Dorothy L. Sayers

This book, published by Dorothy L. Sayers in 1926, is the second of her novels in the Lord Peter Wimsey series featuring a wealthy aristocrat who enjoys detective work as a hobby.

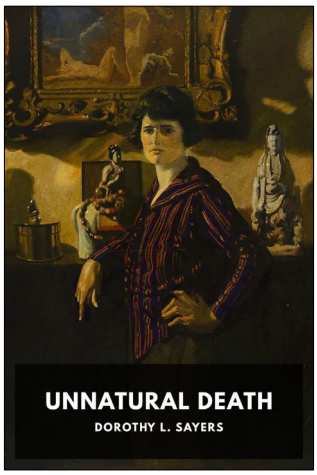
In this book, however, Wimsey's skills have an immediate and personal interest when his brother Gerald, the Duke of Denver, is arrested on a charge of murder. He is accused of shooting his sister's fiancé, Denis Cartcart, in a fit of rage after discovering that Cathcart was a man who made a living by cheating at cards. The Duke has no credible alibi for the time of Cathcart's death and refuses to clarify where he was. Despite this, Wimsey sets to work to solve the case alongside his friend, Detective Inspector Charles Parker, and exonerate his brother.

Wimsey finds his task made considerably harder by the fact that both his brother and his younger sister give accounts of Cathcart's death which don't tally with the observable facts, and the story takes some unexpected twists.

One interesting feature of the story is that the Duke, as a peer of the realm, must be tried before his other peers in the House of Lords, a major undertaking to organise. Another is the flight across the Atlantic undertaken by Wimsey to obtain vital evidence—a year before Charles Lindbergh first made this voyage in reality.

An intriguing case, and one whose resolution takes quite a while to be revealed, I enjoyed it a lot.

Unnatural Death by Dorothy L. Sayers



This is the third novel written by Dorothy L. Sayers featuring her artistocratic detective Lord Peter Wimsey.

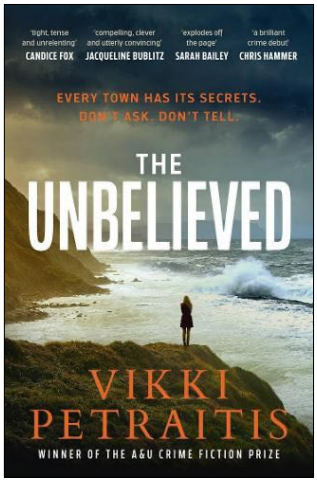
The story begins with a conversation in a restaurant between Wimsey, his friend Detective Inspector Charles Parker, and a doctor who tells them about a situation he was involved in: an elderly lady, suffering from a slow-acting cancer, died suddenly and unexpectedly with no obvious immediate cause of death. She died intestate but her great-niece, with whom she was living, was set to inherit the considerable estate. Suspecting something wrong, the doctor demanded an autopsy, which showed nothing unusual, but stirred up such local animosity that the doctor was forced to abandon his practice. Wimsey, sensing a mystery, decides to investigate. His investigations however trigger a series of deadly actions in response and a series of murders ensue.

One of the delights of the book is the introduction of a new character in Miss Alexandra Climpson, a middle-aged spinster who Wimsey employs as an investigative agent, and whose effusive reports of the gossip she picks up in the town are very amusing.

The book is notable for including one clearly lesbian character, which was unusual for detective fiction at the time, and also for the very sympathetic treatment by Wimsey of a black character (though offensively racist terms of him are used by others in the book).

One enduring mystery in the book is not so much *who* did it, or *why*, but *how* the murders were carried out without leaving any obvious cause of death. The solution that is highly dubious scientifically, but it doesn't matter much, you just go along for the ride, which is very entertaining.

The Unbelieved by Vikki Petraikis



Yet another debut novel by an Australian author. My goodness we're well-served with good crime writers, it's hard or impossible to keep up with them all.

This novel, a little like Disher's *Day's End,* features a police officer who has recently moved from a city location out to a rural community, a coastal town called Deception Bay. The officer is Detective Senior Constable Antigone Pollard, and she's transferred out of a station in Melboure after a distressing incident whose details we take a while to discover. The book is written from her first-person point of view. Deception Bay is where Antigone grew up and went to school. She's now living in her grandmother's house, the grandmother having moved into an assisted care facility.

We first meet Antigone in the bar of a pub where she is targeted by a much older man who aggressively tries to chat her up. She's "rescued" by a young bloke called Jack who buys her a drink and tries to guess her profession. In fact, he's spiked her drink and attacks her when she goes out alone to her car. However, she was expecting this whole scene and is only pretending to be influenced by the drug, and she headbutts him hard when he grabs her from behind, subdues him and has him in handcuffs when her backup turns up. She's been on the trail of a series of incidents in which young women in the area have been drugged, abducted and raped. Jack appears to be a very likely suspect.

Getting Jack convicted, however, is no simple matter and in fact Antigone's boss, Senior Sergeant Bill Wheeler, an obvious misogynist, is actively hostile to her and her investigation, as is the local magistrate.

Pollard and her partner "Wozza" persist, however, and eventually uncover a much wider series of related crimes.

The author keeps the focus on her main theme, of crimes against women either not being reported by the women themselves for fear of the reaction, or else reported but frequently dismissed either during investigation or when the rare case comes to trial.

A separate but important plot thread, however, concerns the apparent murder-suicide of a couple in the town about fifteen years previously. We're introduced to this story in the book's prologue.[1] This event is only discovered when the man's boss, a neighbouring farmer, gets his wife to ring up to see why the man hasn't turned up for work. His wife only manages to speak to the couple's child, a toddler, who says that her Mummy and Daddy are asleep and won't wake up.

Pollard begins to investigate this cold case after being involved with a shop-lifting incident by a teenage girl, who turns out to be the orphaned child of the couple who died. Something about the case strikes Pollard as not quite right. The investigation at the time was cursory. She, of course, begins to suspect murder.

It's all good stuff, and the author's main theme is a very important one.

I did feel, however, that the story was wrapped up rather too neatly, too completely and too quickly at the end, with just desserts being handed out right left and centre to the bad guys. There aren't really any shades of grey here. The bad guys are all really bad and the good guys all really good.

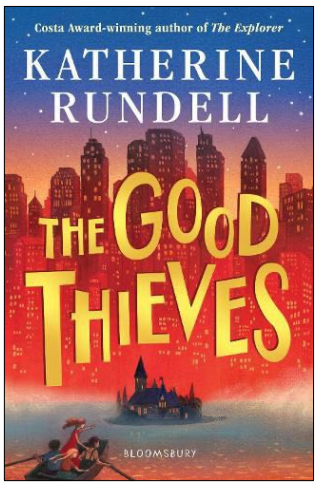
Finally, I thought that it was altogether too pat that Senior Sergeant Wheeler is brought down through not one but *two* very similar humiliations which occur only because of Pollard's past relationship with senior police officers .

Still, despite those reservations, this novel shows a lot of promise, and I'll be keeping an eye out for whatever Petraitis writes next.

[1] As an aside, I *really* don't understand people who refuse to read prologues.

Children's Fiction

The Good Thieves by Katherine Rundell



An adventure story aimed at middle-school readers (which doesn't stop me reading it, of course!). It features young Vita, who is arriving in New York with her mother from England. We discover that they are there to help her grandfather, who has been swindled out of possession of his home by a crook, Victor Sorrotore. We find that the story is set during the Prohibition Era in the United States, and among other crimes Sorrotore is involved in producing and selling moonshine (illegal liquor).

Vita is determined to get her grandfather's home back for him. It's Hudson Castle, re-built stone by stone from a real old castle, shipped to the United States from Ireland a few generations earlier. Sorrotore fooled Vita's grandfather by paying to rent the castle and then claiming that in fact he'd signed a contract to sell it.

Vita tries a direct appeal to Sorrotore in the middle of a party in his swanky suite in a fancy hotel, but he denies any wrongdoing and dismisses her. At the party, though, Vita comes in contact with Silk, a young woman acting as a waitress but in fact plying her trade as a pickpocket.

Later, Vita meets up with Arkady, the son of the owner of a Russian circus then performing at Carnegie Hall, and Samuel, an African-American boy also working at the circus. Arkady loves birds and animals and is able to quickly gain their trust; Sam's lifelong ambition is to become a trapeze artist and acrobat.

Vita manages to convince this group of young people, eventually also including Silk, to made a daring raid on Hudson Castle to retrieve an item of great value her grandfather left there.

One of the themes of the book is about fitting in and finding a place for yourself when the odds seem to be against you. Vita has had polio and one of her legs doesn't work properly. She is, however, a crack shot at throwing objects including knives, at which she's been taught by her grandfather. Each of the boys is not doing the job at the circus which they really want to do; Silk, an orphan, always living on the edge of crime, is really in need of companionship and a family. There are some reminders, too, through Sam, how badly people of colour were treated by the privileged whites of the time.

A lot of fun, but I did find it a bit slow going at times, taking rather too long to get to the action. And I'm not sure that today's young readers would readily understand that the novel is set in the 1920s, with the references to Prohibition and moonshine. But perhaps that doesn't matter, as the story would carry them along.

Don't forget to check out *Through the Biblioscope*, my fortnightly newsletter about my reading, as well as my monthly newsletter featuring my short fiction, *A Flash in the Pan*.

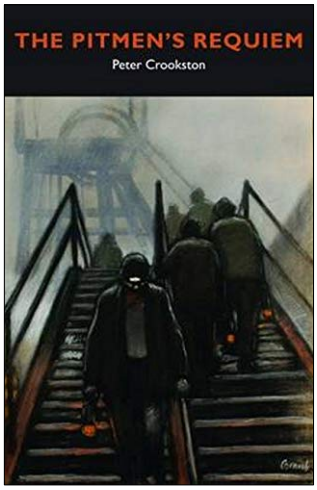
You can get both delivered to your email inbox, or view them in the Substack app.

Through the Biblioscope

A Flash in the Pan

Non Fiction

The Pitmen's Requiem by Peter Crookson



I have a deep personal interest here. My father, grandfather and all my uncles were Durham coal miners; my father went down the pit almost immediately after he left school at the age of 14.

When he first went to work, my father worked as a trapper boy, opening and closing ventilation doors, the only light from his miner's helmet. And from time to time a miner whose own helmet light had failed would come in and take my father's, leaving him to sit in utter darkness for a long while. Among other jobs he had to look after the poor pit ponies which dragged carts laden with coal through the tunnels. Sounds like something from the 19th Century? Dickensian? I was surprised to find out from *The Pitmen's Requiem* that they were still using ponies down the mines into the 1960s.

My father eventually graduated to be a coal hewer, and had it not been for the start of the Second World War, he would have spent his whole working life as a miner. But he and some friends volunteered to fight, and he picked up enough skills during the war to be able to find another job when he returned.

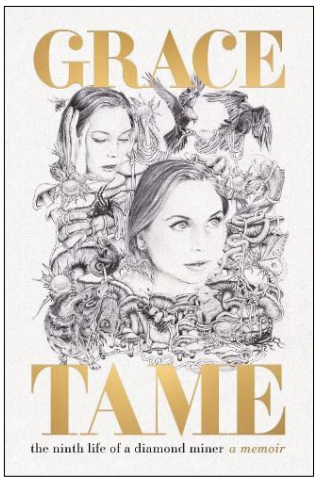
So much for my personal interest in this book, but I think even those without such an connection would find this book very interesting. Crookson centers the focus of the book on Robert Saint, an enigmatic figure who started out as a miner but who always had an interest in music. It was Saint who wrote "Gresham", a piece for brass band to act as a memorial to the 436 miners who died at Gresham Colliery in North Wales in 1934, because of a huge explosion of "firedamp"—methane gas generated by the coal seams. Saint's musical ode to this terrible tragedy became known as "The Pitmen's Requiem" and is still played today at the annual miner's Gala Day, still held even though all the coal mines of Durham have been closed for decades.

Those closures, under the direction of Margaret Thatcher, were largely politically driven to break the power of the unions. Reading this book however shows you why the miners needed to be backed by a strong union, because of the rapacious behaviour of the mine owners in the early part of the 20th Century, and the subsequent behaviour of the National Coal Board once the mines were nationalised. The conditions under which miners were forced to work and live were truly terrible, as this book documents very well.

My only criticism of the book is that I felt it was rather poorly structured. This may be partly because the author was unable to find very much documentation about Robert Saint's life, and so although Saint is a focus, much of the book comes from interviews with miners and their famiies. The switching between passages directly about Saint and those simply about the miner's experience seems rather *ad hoc*. However, it's in the course of these interviews that we learn a great deal about what working down the coal mines was like, and how strong the communities of miners were which formed in the colliery villages. It was the devastation of these communities which was the real tragedy of Thatcher's cruel policies.

Well worth reading.

The Ninth Life of a Diamond Miner by Grace Tame



This is not an easy book to read, for several reasons.

Grace Tame was appointed as Australian of the Year in 2021 for her "extraordinary courage, using her voice to push for legal reform and raise public awareness about the impacts of sexual violence". She was the first Tasmanian to receive this national award, and the first to be publicly known as the survivor of sexual assault.

"Sexual assault" is almost too gentle a description. As a 15-year-old schoolgirl, she was groomed and then repeatedly raped by her teacher Nicolaas Bester, a man then in his late fifties.

The Ninth Life of a Diamond Miner doesn't hold back from the painful details of how all this occurred. Tame was already vulnerable because of her neuro-diverse mental state and an earlier incident of abuse when she was much younger, and had initially responded to this man's overtures of sympathy and comfort, which was apparently his standard method of grooming. Tame wasn't the only girl at that school on which he used this technique. Tame however had the courage—as the award says, the extraordinary courage—to disclose what had occurred and to persist in trying to get justice for herself and other victims. It is very, very difficult for a woman's voice to be heard when seeking justice for abuse; and as Brittany Higgins and so many other women can attest, it is very rare for that justice to be achieved.

And Heaven help us if a woman should react in ways which are not socially approved. The confected outrage by sections of the media when Tame frowned rather than smiled when forced into a photo opportunity with Scott Morrison is good evidence of that.

All of this story, however, is scattered throughout Tame's book, and the reader has to piece it together slowly. The book is a kaleidoscope. Ranging back and forwards in time, it mixes Tame's social commentaries with her personal history, family history and relationships; her mental struggles; her freely-admitted drug-taking and alcohol abuse; her time in Tasmania, her time living in the United States; her appointment as Australian of the Year and the media scrum which followed. Partly this scattered structure is a reflection of Tame's mental condition. At one point she says:

> The memories I have are crystal clear and vivid but I struggle to hold them in place. Shards of thought, past and present, splinter off in all directions like a bone breaking inside a body, stretching skin and time. When this happens now, I have learned just to bend with my brain. I have to run forwards with the words that flow out of my head, because trying to retrace my steps is like walking on broken glass.

Tame's language throughout is blunt and sweary. Don't read it if you're shocked by the f-word! She's angry, and she has good reason to be angry.

So. I didn't enjoy reading this book, but I am nevertheless glad that I did, to gain a much better understanding into the issues, and a better insight into someone who, largely against her will, became a public figure and the target of controversy.

[**Update**: even as I prepared to publish this, Tame's disgusting abuser Nicolaas Bester is in court today because he is no longer in jail and is accused of continuing to abuse Tame on social media. What a low-life.]

Interview with Murray MacLachlan

This is a transcript of an interview I did with Murray for Episode 80 of our podcast.

David:

I'm joined now by Murray MacLachlan, who is, among many other things, the convener of the Nova Mob, which I'll get him to talk about in a little bit.

So Murray, I'm interested in exploring how you got involved in the whole science fiction reading world, and how you got involved in the science fiction fan world when it comes to that.

Did you grow up in a house full of books? I imagine you grew up in New Zealand, is that right?

Murray:

Yes, thanks for the invitation, and yes, I am a New Zealander by birth. I was born in 1963, so the next birthday is my 60th.

David:

Oh, you're a youngster.

Murray:

Well, it's good of you to say that. I felt the 40th heavily, the 50th just went right on by, the 60th already feels like the 40th reprised. I grew up in Dunedin, which has its own quirks and character. I left there when I was 20, spent about five years in Wellington, then took a transfer to Christchurch for a decade, then moved over here at the turn of the millennium. So been here all millennium, if that's the joke that you want to hear, but Melbourne has actually been very welcoming to us, Australia's been very welcoming. In that life, there's been science fiction as far back as I can remember. You're basically asking me the question, "why is it so?", to which I can only reply, "why not?"

David:

True, true.

Murray:

I'm speaking to you from our library. I've spent most of my life since the age of 14 or 15 encumbered by a large portion of all that you see behind me, which is books. And the usual question is: have you read all those books? To which the answer ought to be, "no, what's the point of a library otherwise?"

David:

The other answer, of course, is just simply "not yet".

Murray:

Yes.

Part of the thing is that the act of creating a library is an act of, I guess, self creation; another way of holding a diary. For today's purpose, that's exactly

how it's worked out. So I've grabbed a selection, to run through from my early days. If this was a Marvel comic, then it would be the origin story. Then there's the mind expansion, which is the typical age 14 mind expansion. As the world opens to you.

After which are the years of sorting and a narrowing of focus to the things that one sorts into, where you say "hey, this is gold". If you were to toss some grave goods in with me then these would be them. Or if I was on a desert island, these would be with me too.

Then there's an aspirational pile, and that's because the dilemma in science fiction is always between the gutter and the stars. And there are a few stars. I've managed to pick out what the stars are. But I always enjoy reading in the gutter.

David:

All right. Well, take us through your pile of books.

Murray:

David, I found my story was referred to in the Nova Mob when Ian McIntyre spoke to his *Dangerous Visions and New Worlds*, and told of his story growing up in Perth, and I found surprising correspondences with his path whereupon you suddenly find this literature, or this body of work, this genre, whatever the shape of it is, and it is a place of dangerous visions and new worlds, and from there he went on to discover underground comics and some of the quite alternative fictions. As did I. And you could do that even in a town of 120,000 people.

David:

So what were the books that started you off?

Murray:

Well, I'm going to tell you one of my earliest memories. Here is *Pooh Bear's Box* [holding up boxed collection of A. A. Milne]. Which you've read, I'm assuming? Everybody's read these.

David:

Well, not everybody these days, but *we* did.

Murray:

We lived in a two-storey house looking over Anderson's Bay in Dunedin, and I recall finishing this book at the right age to be reading it, at seven. And Mum had the vacuum cleaner at the top of the stairs, and I climbed up the stairs in tears. This is trauma as a child, and said, "Mum, he said that he's not going to write any more of these!"

And then in one of those moments, like the mistress cleaning the back of the cupboard in *Muriel's Wedding*, and blandly saying, "I never realized quite how grubby a cupboard could get," a statement which is cutting when you receive it, and I was told, "Oh, no, he hasn't written any more for years and years and years".

It was Michael Moorcock who said in "Epic Pooh" he believed a lot of science fiction or fantasy is just Pooh in the 100-acre wood being writ large. And you know, there's a lot to be said for that view.

David:

Yeah, I can imagine that.

Murray:

Moorcock underestimates the power of that, because there's always that child in us. If you reach and touch that child, that emotional response is still there. Therefore, a lot of fantasy can be very, very successful, even if it is just Christopher Robin and Winnie the Pooh saying goodbye to each other as Christopher Robin goes off to boarding school, or indeed, as the elves leave to go to the new land at the end of the Second Age in the *Lord of the Rings*.

Anderson's Bay was a half-acre property overlooking the high school built at the very bottom of the part of the Otago Peninsula where it meets the flat land of the isthmus that is just a sandbar between the hills of Dunedin and the hills of the Otago Peninsula. For those who haven't been to Dunedin, it's basically one volcano, then the middle collapsed and formed the Otago Harbour, and the peninsula protects the harbour. The harbour itself is actually very shallow.

My father told a story of a mate who said, after a night on the town, "look, I live straight over there, up on the suburbs of Waverley. I'm going to take the short cut and swim across." The distance fooled him and he was halfway across when he thought he was done for. He gave up, and sank to the bottom. He realised he could stand up and walked the rest of the way across!

Our outlook to Dunedin was between two cliffs, two knobs of hills, one of them was Waverley.

I want to divert here to Thomas Bracken. He wrote a poem called "Dunedin from the Bay". He also wrote the song "God Defend New Zealand", which is New Zealand's national song. The national anthem is "God Defend the King". In 1869 he arrived in Anderson's Bay, and this was a poem from his book *Musings in Maoriland*.

Go, trav'ler, unto others boast
Of Venice and of Rome;
Of saintly Mark's majestic pile,
And Peter's lofty dome;
Of Naples and her trellised bowers;
Of Rhineland far away :
These may be grand, but give to me
Dunedin from the Bay.

David:

Very nice.

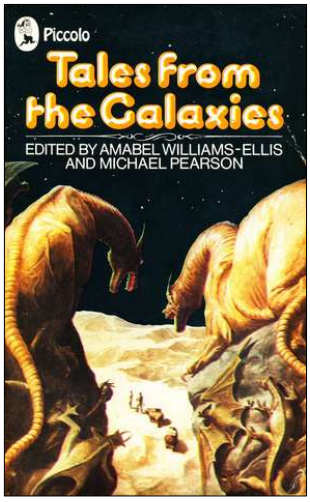
Murray:

It is, except he hadn't been to any of the other places, he had only ever been to Ireland and been shipped out to Australia where he had a miserable time and tried to make a go of it, and then believed his destiny lay for him in New Zealand.

Those cliffs were quarried. My bedroom looked out on a former quarry to the south and through to the hills beyond. In that bedroom I read many, many books. The bedroom was really my cave.

There was a cave in the quarry by the bay. We cycled past it as kids. We didn't know anything about it, but there's a sad story that only really came to light in my adult years. There's a place called Parihaka in Taranaki, and the Maori at Parihaka had set up a community on their land and were running it cooperatively. Because it was so successful, covetous European eyes were cast upon them, and the land was taken off them. They were swept up in the New Zealand Wars, even those who were pacifists, and many were shipped out south to Dunedin. They were first imprisoned on a prison hulk, from that base they dug a cave, more properly a long tunnel or adit. A metal door was put on that with a solid lock, and they were locked in there every night. Daily they hewed away at the hilly knobs of lava, creating the building blocks and rubble and fill which created the road which goes along the shores of the Otago Harbour for 40 kilometres. So we have that piece of history there, and of course, we were entirely ignorant of it. There's a kind of a metaphor there. When I met Cherry Wilder, that was her main concern about Australia, that there seemed to be exactly that sort of thing going on, a not knowing of the history that shaped the landscape. I should mention that notwithstanding that she's being filed as an Australian writer, Cherry did say that she identified as being a New Zealand writer, that's from interview.

While at Anderson's Bay Primary School, I got a book prize: *2000 Leagues Under the Sea* by Jules Verne. There's a news clipping here from 1973, and the bookplate says "Geoffrey Memorial Award" with my surname hilariously misspelled. We four winners were given five dollars and as an excursion a teacher took us to a vast central city bookshop where we could select our prize. My two fellow students bought encyclopedias with the $5, I bought *2000 Leagues Under the Sea* for $4.20, and with the remaining 80 cents *Tales from the Galaxies*, a collection edited by Amabel Williams-Ellis, an excellent



anthologist.

It turns out that this is one of the formative anthologies of Jo Walton, so I discovered by looking on the internet. It had in it Leinster's "Exploration Team" from 1956, which I thought was a ripper of a story, John Wyndham's "The Red Stuff", also Robert Sheckley's "The Odor of Thought", which inspires the cover, the cover's a great cover. It's got some dragons with no eyes listening for the Odor of Thought. That was 1973, I was coming up for 10 and about to go into what was called Intermediate School.

My parents were very good, and they had a view that we should have a comic as a subscription, and we should also have access to the public library. And the children's library in Dunedin was a strange thing in hindsight.

The adult library had, of course, grown, and that had been set up by an endowment from the Carnegie Foundation. Around the corner on Stuart Street in Dunedin, opposite the cathedral, there's a row of Victorian terraced houses, and the City Council bought two of those. Because they're on a hill, with the two of them, they knocked a hole in the wall between the two, and because of the hill, they then put in some steps to go to the hole in the wall from the lower house to the upper house.

So you climb up this very narrow Victorian flight of stairs, about 40 of them, you'd hand in your books at the window, and then there was all the picture books and all the kiddies books, and then, and a world of books to explore. And when you got a bit older, you went up the steps, and then you had all these other books to explore, and of course, the issue desk was before you went down the stairs on the second house, back out onto the street.

Roy Colbert's "Records, Records" was in one of those. Roy was instrumental in maintaining and encouraging the Dunedin sound of the 1980s, of which this is a treasured original, The Clean.

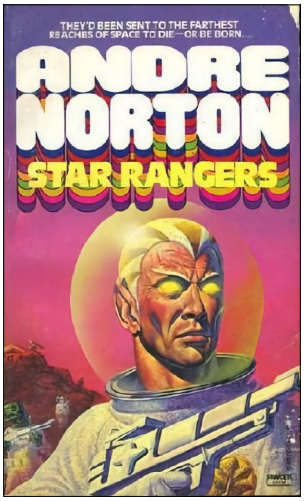
David:

The E.P., *Boodle, Boodle, Boodle*?

Murray:

Yes, a copy of which our Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, has received as a gift from Jacinda Ardern, about a month or so back. I hope he enjoys it because it's a ripper piece of music.

A couple of books from the Children's Library stand out. I discovered Andre Norton [holds up book].



David:

The Star Rangers, Andre Norton, yeah?

Murray:

She was an introduction to science fiction for so many, many people.

There was also before then a picture book in 1970 called *Wump World*, where a race called the Pollutians landed on a planet and take over from the harmless creatures on that planet. They're resorted to living in caves. Basically the world turns to a dire mess. Then having created the mess and shat on everything, they then leave to go on to do this to the next world.

David:

That sounds familiar.

Murray:

Yes. The author, Bill Peet, says there are interesting parallels between Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*, which was published a year later, after his book.

So it was that, and there was also the holiday reading [holds up book].

David:

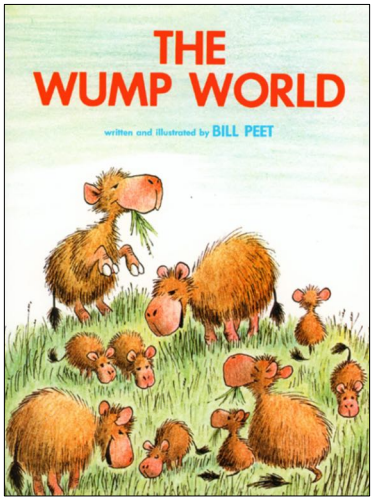
Tintin, yes. It was a graphic novel, as you call it these days.

Murray:

Also Asterix.

David:

Asterix was great.



Murray:

One of the few books that I was buying new at the book shops when I was foraging for second hand books. I ended up picking up a few first editions, and a few years back I priced them using bookfinder .com and they're all, you know, $100, $150 each to buy, because, of course, kids' books get munched. Unfortunately, doing the house clean out, my father is still embarrassed about this, he gave them to the local bowls club for a sale. Somebody in Christchurch has got a bargain there. [holds up another book]

David:

And the *Earth in Space*, was this a non-fiction book?

Murray:

It is a non-fiction book, and lots of astronaut pictures and rockets, yes. Basic science introduction. All of this was about learning about the world, and learning about the world through fiction, as well as through fact. Even then, I had reasonably good filters on it, because I ended up with a von Däniken book being given to me by my elderly Nana.

David:

What's the von Däniken book? I'm thinking of...

Murray:

Chariots of the Gods.

David:

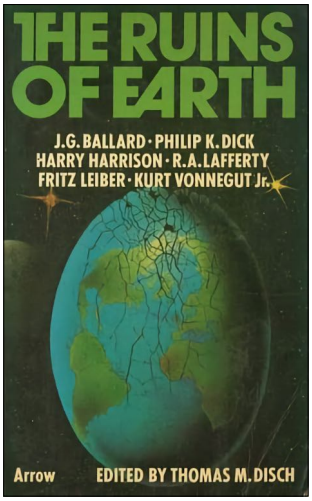
Oh, that's the *Chariots of the Gods*, that's right, I was thinking of Velikovsky, *Worlds in Collision*. But yes, von Däniken, yeah.

Murray:

I think what she had done, was to go into a bookshop and say, my grandson has got a birthday coming up, and he likes all this rockets and stars and things, and so on. Can you suggest anything for an eight-year-old or nine-year-old boy? And the helpful person behind the counter, dealing with my Highland Scots grandmother, said, "Oh, von Däniken might be your answer". "I'll take that one

then', and I knew enough from reading through that, that it just looked like crap to me. Already, there was some filters happening, which is a good thing.

The librarians are key. At the school library, there was primary school, a two-year intermediate school, and then you moved to high school. At the intermediate school, I encountered Thomas Disch's anthology, *The Ruins of Earth*. It's got stories by Kurt Vonnegut, Gene Wolfe, Norman Rush, Philip K. Dick, R. A. Lafferty, George Alec Effinger, J. G. Ballard, Tom Disch, of course, Fritz Lieber, and the companion anthology was *Bad Moon Rising*.



What I didn't realise at the time was that exploring and looking for the stuff in the mid-1970s, you had the accumulation of almost 100 years of science-fictional publication, call it 80 years, since Wells, really, Orwell, and all of the new stuff coming out. Questions between Old Guard and New Wave or that New Worlds was controversial, none of that counted. I hadn't encountered it and I didn't care anyway, because it was all part of the science fiction and fantasy branding. To me, it was just the most amazing, diverse presentation of stories one could possibly hope to encounter.

The main thing I got out of it, from a thematic point of view, is just the understanding of alternate realities, that there are alternatives to how we do things. And I found that amazingly helpful when dealing with the situations I had when growing up. I was the kid in class who was clever enough to put up their hand to answer every question, but dumb enough to not realise that answering every question wasn't really going to get you very far with your schoolmates, unfortunately. There's a fair history of bullying. I still bear physical and mental scars, and getting away from it with books was tremendously helpful.

David:

Yes, yes.

Murray:

In my class we had a teacher who had taught semi-literate or illiterate working class folk in the south of London, and he said our class was probably the worst that he'd ever taught. Well, we were in a co-ed school and we were divided by who did physics, far more boys than girls wanted to do physics in sixth form. We were an all male class in the middle of the co-ed school. Two of the school bullies, one in my class and one in my sister's class, both later killed themselves while in prison on murder charges. So what seemed on the outside to be a very normal middle class, comfortable suburban area to grow up in, was severely tainted by these very odd folk as part of the background.

David:

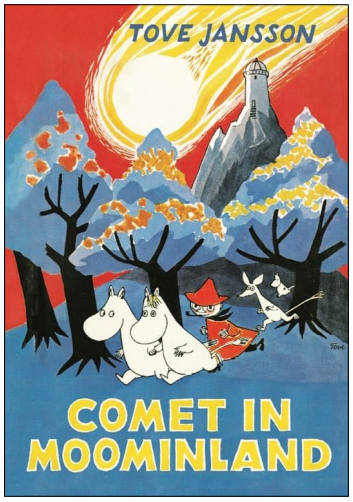
Yeah, that's very interesting. As in the sense of may you live in interesting times, not a good thing to live through.

Murray:

Here's one of the Moomin books, a *Comet in Moominland*. Mum went into hospital for a week and I got given that book to keep me occupied while we kids stayed with my aunt and uncle.

David:

Is that the first, I think it's the first one that was published by Puffin anyway, by Tove Jansson.

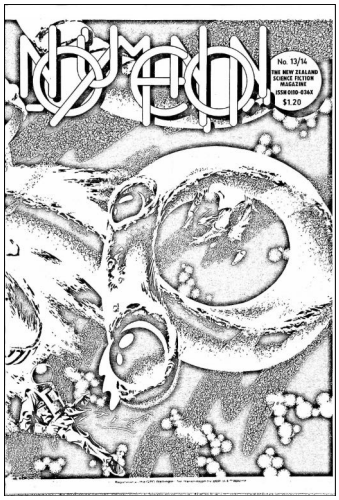


Murray:

Yes. Jansson is a delight. A friend, Peter Fagan, gave us the TV series, that's worth looking into as well.

Back to the library, for I am blaming the librarians. When you made it through the doors of the Carnegie Library, it was not wheelchair accessible, as these things are these days. You pushed open the door, were confronted by a wall, turned right, through another door and then a gallery past more of the issue desks to the science fiction section, which I discovered in 1977, 78. Beneath the bookshelves in that science fiction section, they had a zine called *Noumenon*.

Noumenon is New Zealand's first, and possibly with *Phlogiston* the premier science fiction fanzine of Zealand. Brian Thurogood of Waiheke Island, still involved in science fiction, put this out and very



attractively done too. From it I learned there was a fannish community in New Zealand. A regular contributor was somebody named Greg Hills, well-known over here in Australia. Also Nigel Rowe, now in Chicago (Perry on his travels has just met him for lunch). In 1976 Nigel set up the National Association of Science Fiction, in direct response to Aussiecon. I discovered there was a network, which was great, but these names all appeared to be far too exalted for me as a mere 14, 15, 16-year-old, which of course is not true.

David

That's how you feel when you're that age, I know it is.

Murray:

Yes. So there was a NASF, and it turns out that a friend of a school friend, his father was a member of NASF, a man named Dan McCarthy. Also about 1976 *Aotearapa* was formed. That was New Zealand's apazine. It went through to about 2000 before folding. Likewise NASF closed up with the rise of the internet (I closed it down). We knew of *Anzapa* but its claim in the title to include New Zealand always looked presumptuous.

David

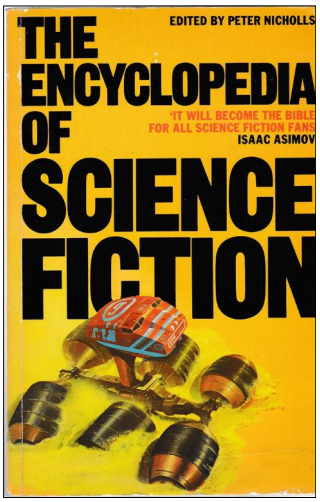
I think it was chosen for, because it sounded better than the original, which was Apa-A.

Murray:

Mellifluous, isn't that the right word? We felt in the position of Neil Young and Joni Mitchell being told that they're American or US artists rather than Canadians. Because Australia may as well have been the UK or England, as far as we were concerned.

Dan was a lovely man, he passed away in 2014 and I still miss him. He had a wonderful wicked sense of mischief. Dunedin had an annual procession where the businesses would put together their promotional floats, bands would march, the student association would have something from the university, and to mark the anniversary of the province of Otago these would go down Princess Street and along George Street, the two main streets of Dunedin connected by the Octagon. One year Dan to promote NASF dressed as a very very old man and sat in a wheelchair with spaceship accoutrements on it, to be wheeled that entire four kilometre length. He was Richard Pearse's older space-faring brother. Australians may not know of Richard Pearse, but in March 1903 he flew a powered aircraft. He beat the Wright brothers, they were November 1903, it has been accepted by the Smithsonian, but of course the Wright brothers were marketeers, whereas Pierce ended up in a hedge, he said, "Right, I've done that, oh well, I'll put that back in the barn". You take a photo, oh okay, and then it's all almost lost to history. To have the space-faring brother of Richard Pearse was quite a gag.

Late in the 1970s I discovered also, when reading through the adult science fiction shelves, an *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.



David

Peter Nichols, yes, edited by Peter Nichols, yeah.

Murray

I've loaned out my copy, and I'd like it back. It's since it's been superseded by the Clute, being the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, John Clute and Peter Nichols with Stableford and Grant. The first edition was great because it had lots of images in it to go with the insights; the second one was great because it continued that wonderful combination of scholarship and fannish enthusiasm, where they just get the blend just right.

From it I had a subscription to *Foundation* magazine for many years because *Foundation* also got it just right, and then they went too academic, overwhelmed by scholars seeking tenure-driven publishing credits.

The Clute third edition includes me on various aspects of New Zealand science fiction. One of my few publishing credits. Another is anonymously in the *MUP Encyclopedia of Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy*.

David

Edited by Paul Collins, yes.

Murray

With foreword by Peter Nichols. A lot of Sean McMullen's notes went into this. Philip Mann came to me and said he'd been asked to write a piece for it because Canada is obviously part of the United States, so therefore New Zealand must have a piece here. I drafted an overview, Phil added his perspective and insights, and there it is.

Philip Mann was a lovely, lovely guy, and I do recommend his works to anybody interested in New Zealand science fiction. A big-hearted generous man and writer. Elizabeth Knox achieved the popularity that Philip Mann never did, Mann however is closer to the pure quill. He does insert numinous science fantasy elements into his works, which I think sours the purists who accept faster than light travel but can't accept things that Andre Norton would write about, like telepathy or the Gaia hypothesis. Philip Mann does put those pieces into his work. He passed away in September 2022, very sad news.

When I moved to Wellington, he ran a workshop on the writers of science fiction, those who had influenced him, it was about eight weeks duration and I recall we dissected the first page of the *War of the Worlds*:

> No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own.

Wells wrote with care! Mann was a playwright and play producer, he really knew how words ought to sound. He had that very strong aural voice in his head when he was writing. That comes through in his prose, it's a pure delight.

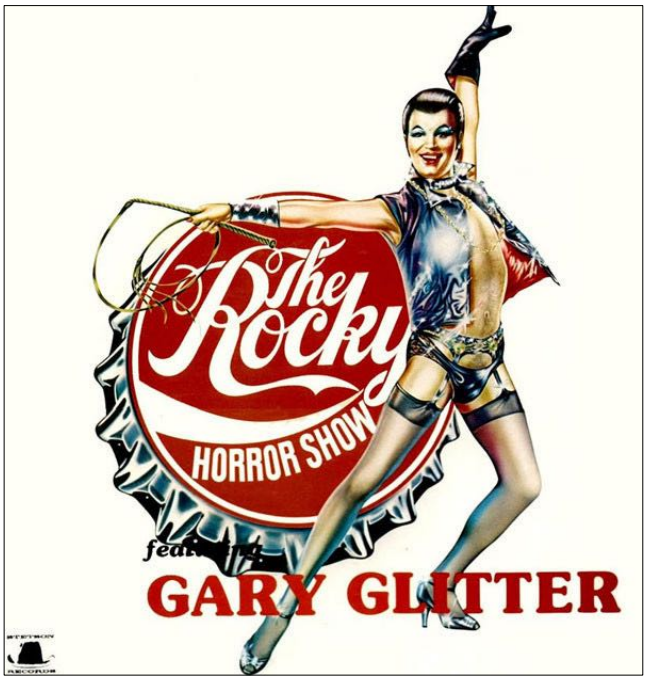
I had started to explore New Zealand science fiction in the 1970's, because if there was overseas stuff where was the local stuff? I learned it was hidden and was the unspoken stream in the braided river of New Zealand fiction. Many of New Zealand's realist writers had a science fiction or fantasy piece in their bibliographies, but you wouldn't know.

One of the earliest NZ SF references is in this anthology *Before Armageddon* edited by Michael Moorcock, which had someone called Tite Opkins in a story about somebody from New Zealand travelling back to England post-apocalypse. That's New Zealand In the Victorian era - a place far away from which to return, or a place far away where a utopia perhaps could be imagined, or a place far away where the alien exists.

The first New Zealand science fiction short story is in a collection published in Christchurch about 1863, it has a Samuel Butler story in it. Butler being the author of *Erewhon*, the anthology is highly collectible and very, very hard to track down. The first step in trying to track down New Zealand science fiction is a tough one.

When I was at university, I finally found a group of sympathetic friends, which included - Dan McCarthy's son; - my then girlfriend; - James Dignan, who's now the art critic for the *Otago Daily Times*, Dunedin's daily newspaper; and a wider group of NASF connections. We had nerd student parties; some were themed, mainly of a piece of New Zealand science fiction, the *Rocky Horror Show*. When I moved up to Wellington it was broadcast on TV and I could not watch it, the homesickness was too great.

The *Rocky Horror Show* toured New Zealand about 1975. It's well documented on the internet and a fascinating read, indicative of the times changing towards a more open society. Frankenfurter was played by Gary Glitter, whose fame has plummeted, deservedly so, for his child abuse. However, at that time, we didn't know about that. In my younger brother's class was a boy surnamed Gadd who was Gary Glitter's cousin. So while in Dunedin, Gary Glitter met his relatives. To show you the general weirdnesses about what it's like living in New Zealand, the narrator for the *Rocky Horror Show*, for part of that tour was Robert Muldoon, who also happened to be Prime Minister of the country. Can you imagine Tony Abbott being the narrator for the Rocky Horror Show?



So that was my connection with the National Association of Science Fiction through these people and fandom. As a result of that connection, we have met up with some wonderful people. Alan Robson is a treasure, but the friends are not just within New Zealand. Ian and Krin Pender Gunn stayed with us in 1994 when they were on the FFANZ tour of New Zealand, very rare that I've got on so very, very well with people so very quickly indeed. In this library here is *Space*Time Buccaneers*, the late Ian Gunn's magnum opus. One of the joys of fandom is that you do meet some quite wonderful people.

David:

Yes, you do.

Murray:

I've tallied the conventions that I went to. My first one was in Octocon in 1982, which was in Dunedin. Next wasn't until 1986, Halleycon. I pretty well finished my run of convention-going 1996 in Christchurch, when I helped organize that year's NatCon that year. Our guests there were Robert Sheckley, Wes Takahashi, and Margaret Mahy. All were absolutely superb.

Octocon's guest in 1982 was David Harvey. He had won Mastermind for his knowledge of the *Lord of the Rings* and later had a book published about the *Lord of the Rings* by Allen and Unwin. When the movies came out they were followed by a deluge of stuff out of the United States claiming that Tolkien was guided by Christianity and possessed a religious subtext in the way that C.S. Lewis did. And of course, years before, Harvey had dispelled anything along those lines and it was in a book published by Tolkien's own publisher.

David:

So you came to Australia?

Murray:

In 2000, complete with books, I said to my wife Natalie, just pack everything up and we've had a few garage sales and I don't want to know the final amount. Natalie had studied in Christchurch and after achieving her degree, her postgraduate qualification took her to Melbourne University. We came over here for that.

But I'd about done my day where I was working. It was Feltex Carpets. In my business, I deal with management systems for purposes of getting results in quality, safety, asset, and facility management. At the time I left the Board had brought in the re-engineering consultants, clearly they were re-aligning the business in order to sell it off. I mean, I've worked for private equity, I've seen it done well and I've seen it done badly. This was one of the really bad examples. I could smell the wind and it was time to get out and three years later, they had had several changes in management and had a $300 million corporate collapse or something.

I could see the writing on the wall, but I've been sensitive to this ever since I was about 16 years old and working in a factory and a guy flew in from Auckland and said, you don't have to worry about your jobs, we're just looking at a few things. And I thought that's a "no".

So as with the bullying, whether it's an institutionalised bully or at school or whatever, my approach has just been to say, thank you very much, but I'll just go away because I've learned that attempting any sort of engagement is just high risk. Yeah, so moved on.

Melbourne's been very, very welcoming and the one person who wasn't welcoming to us on arrival was fortunately a blow-in from Sydney, so we didn't need to reframe all of our Melbournian connections.

David

How did you get involved with the Nova Mob as the convener?

Murray

I knew of Lucy Sussex because of my interest in New Zealand science fiction. But credit to Ian Gunn and KRin Pender-Gunn. I went to the Melbourne Science Fiction Club within two weeks of arriving in Melbourne and I guess It was clear that I was more interested in the books, the Samuel Delany's and the Ursula Le Guin's and all of those who pose alternatives rather than say *Doctor Who* and other visual media, in conversation and I heard about this thing called the Nova Mob and was invited along. It was back when Lucy Sussex and Julian Warner had the Nova Mob at their house. They were coordinators for 25 years, it's a very long time. And I just found that I got on with both of them and I had been aware of the *Australian Science Fiction Review*, first and second series, so then I ended up in conversation with Bruce Gillespie and Elaine Cochrane, and the circle of common interest grew wider. The people behind these Worldcons and Encyclopedias and sercon zines were gods who walked upon the earth and I was absolutely delighted to actually put faces to names and to meet all of these people. And I'm so glad that we arrived in Melbourne with its active fan scene and active writing scene where Sydney just doesn't have that. I have very much have felt at home here.

The other key person for the Nova Mob was Justin Ackroyd because of Slow Glass Books. Justin and I went through this long dance where he wasn't sure what I was about and I wasn't sure what he was about and eventually we decided that we were reasonable enough people to get along with each other. Julian and Lucy are friends in common with Justin, and for a few years Justin and I were seeing the Nova Mob needing a bit of support or a bit of contingency. We were saying: if ever you need a hand we can help; eventually that came to pass.

Even so, I can't say that it's been handed over to me as convener fully. A large group of people come up with ideas for guests or talks. Lucy is one of those and is solid about the people that she suggests. That not only gives the Mob a sense of continuity but is essential in having women's voices heard.

David

Which is very important, yes, indeed.

Murray

Yes, and that was the thing that looking through the library here in preparation for this interview was finding that women's voices and alternative voices

weren't as well represented as I ought. That's part of my own coming of age as well. It reflects the times when I was buying. Much of my library was acquired in the early 1980's, when I worked part-time at a second-hand book and record shop while going through university.

Galaxy Books and its proprietor Burnet Brosnan was a tremendous influence on me. When I was looking around the second hand book shops of Dunedin for this stuff, I encountered Galaxy Books, which was a second hand book and record exchange. Nothing to do with the Galaxy Books in Sydney. It was run by a guy who was six years older than me, Bernard Brosnan. He passed away about five years ago. He had a glass jaw and enjoyed boxing when he was younger. Easy to describe a boxer as pugnacious but he was a really good guy, the older brother I never had. I hung around his bookshop and we chatted about science fiction because he seemed to know everything. He even had copies of *Noumenon* and *Strips*, an adult comic and like *Noumenon* published on Waiheke Island. He asked me to work for him and I ran the book shop on Friday nights and Saturday mornings. I learned how to run a small business, but I also got a whole bunch of stuff. And this is, if you like, the core me of science fiction, having grabbed books every Friday night that came in because I had first choice of the stock.

Names such as William Tenn, here is *The Square Root of Man*, I've collected the entire series of his short stories. I discovered R.A. Lafferty.

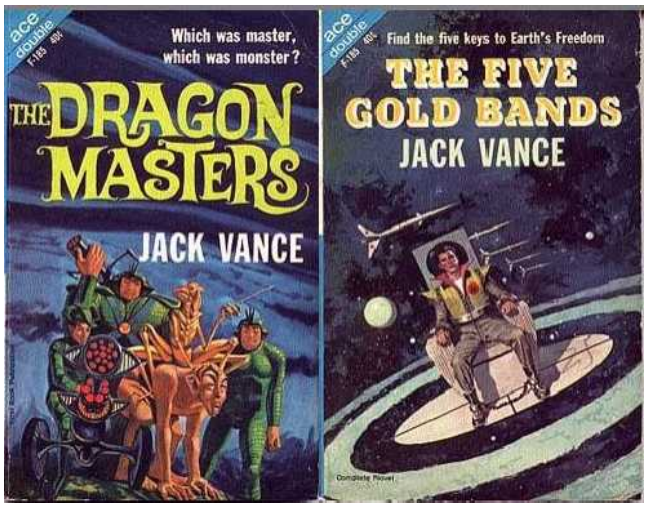
David

R.A. Lafferty, yes, that's a wonderful collection, *Nine Hundred Grandmothers*. I must say I find him better in short fiction than long fiction. I didn't like his novel length, *Past Master*, which I've just read, but never mind.

Murray

I agree with you.

I started collecting Ace Doubles. Here is the Jack Vance one with *The Dragon Masters* and the *Five Gold Bands*,



David

Yes, Vance, I'm a big Vance fan.

Murray

And again, this is this thing about knowing alternatives and finding alternatives. So, for somebody who was in this weird yet constrained Presbyterian city, this was a bit of a revelation. [Holds up two books].

David

Lem? Stanisław Lem, yes, *The Futurological Congress*. And Avram Davidson's collection, *What Strange Stars and Skies*.

Murray

Yes. *Stars and Skies*, which includes "All the Seas With Oysters". My favorite of Delany's: *Ballad of Beta 2* and *Empire Star*.

Here's the novel which upon reading most profoundly influenced the lens through which I perceived the world.

David

I don't know that title. J.G. Ballard, *The Unlimited Dream Company*.

Murray

I used to read Ballard's stories on the beach during our family holidays. All of the things he tries to achieve in his short fiction are achieved in this novel, and more powerfully. It is superb.

Through Galaxy Books, I also discovered the world of underground comics.

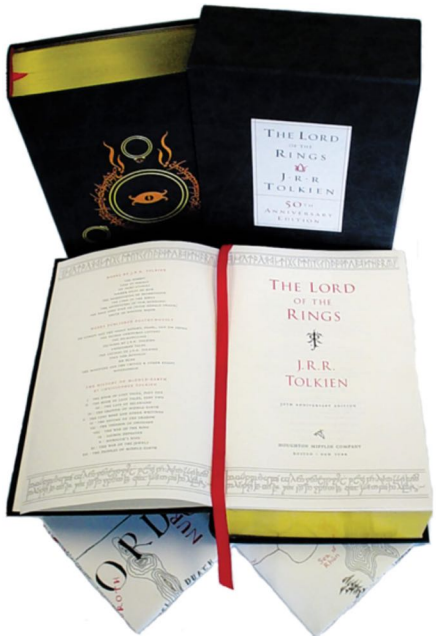
David

Yes, comics, yep, good stuff.

Murray

Robert Crumb, and in particular the French *Metal Hurlant* school, with *Moebius,* and Richard Corben, *New Tales of the Arabian Nights*, and Gal and Dionnet, *Conquering Armies*, and Angus McKie's superb but nowadays forgotten *So Beautiful and So Dangerous*. Also Dave Sim's *Cerebus*. The Marvel and DC comics at the book exchange held no appeal by comparison.

Burnet Brosnan gave me this rice paper edition of *The Lord of the Rings*. It's an absolute pleasure to read, and a treasured memory, probably the most glorious book to read in the collection. Dan McCarthy had told me what it was like waiting for that third book of *The Lord of the Rings* to be published, that interminable period of waiting from 1954 through to 1957. When leaving Dunedin I also left my first partner, a lovely person who I wasn't mature enough to create something enduring with. A footnote is that when we first met, she had read *The Lord of the Rings* three times and by the end of our four years together she had read it just over thirty times.



Now we come to the grave goods.

David

Oh, yes. Oh, hey, Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, I have a copy of that, and I refuse to lend it out to anybody.

Murray

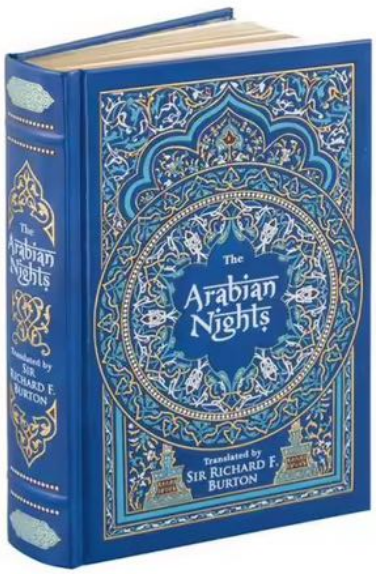
Yes. Well, after many years of collecting various editions and translations, there we are, *Dream Tigers*, *The Six Problems of Don Isidharal Paradi*, *Dr Brodie's Report*, *The Aleph, and Other Stories*, *Labyrinths*, of course. The best translation by far is Andrew Hurley's translation.

David

Yeah, I have a copy of that, and I think I've also got a collection of his prose, in the matching set.

Murray

The other grave good is the *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, this is the Richard Burton edition. It's a



consolidated one, but every so often I go back to that. Borges and Burton are friends in the same way *The Lord of the Rings* was to my former partner.

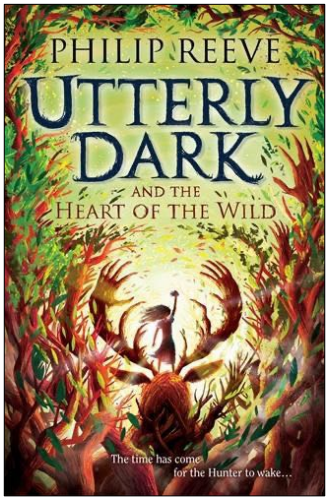
So it's about voices and relationships, and alternatives, and even with the huge diversity of alternatives, it's about finding a place. I think that's what fandom has done for me, and certainly the stories here, they've helped me to find a place in the world, and I was a long time coming to that, simply because I didn't fit well, and that's all there is to it.

David

Alright, Murray, well we've been talking for a while, so I think we might wind up here. Thanks so much for talking with me today.

Some new and upcoming books which appeal to my taste and which I'll almost certainly hunt up to buy or borrow.

Utterly Dark and the Heart of the Wild by Philip Reeve

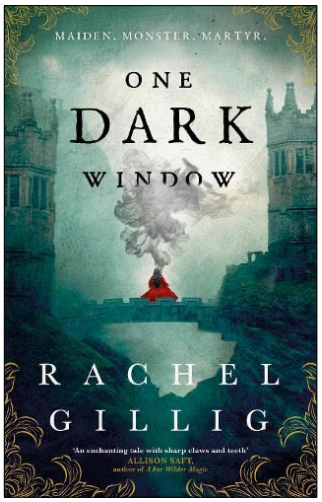


Released 1 September 2022.

> Accompanying her uncle as he explores mysterious Summertide, Utterly is witness to strange happenings in the woods. Deep, old magic abounds, and threatens to steal those she loves most. Utterly must face truths about what lies beneath the land, and in her own past, if she is to save anyone. And she must make a sacrifice to the sea ...

I really liked the first book in this series, Utterly Dark and the Face of the Deep, so I'm looking forward to getting hold of this one. I must have missed the announcement of its release.

One Dark Window by Rachel Gillig



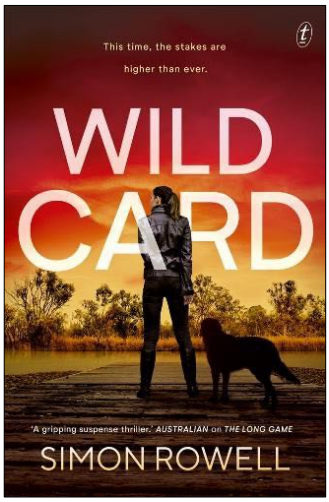
Published 25 October 2022

> Elspeth needs a Monster. The Monster might be her.
>
> An ancient, mercurial spirit is trapped inside Elspeth Spindle's head – she calls him the Nightmare. He protects her. He keeps her secrets.

But nothing comes for free, especially magic. When Elspeth meets a mysterious highwayman on the forest road, she is thrust into a world of shadow and deception. Together, they embark on a dangerous quest to cure the town of Blunder from the dark magic infecting it. As the stakes heighten and their undeniable attraction intensifies, Elspeth is forced to face her darkest secret yet: the Nightmare is slowly, darkly, taking over her mind. And she might not be able to stop him.

Sometimes, I confess, I just get sucked in by an interesting and attractive cover. That might be the case here. But the book itself sounds unusual and interesting.

Wild Card by Simon Rowell



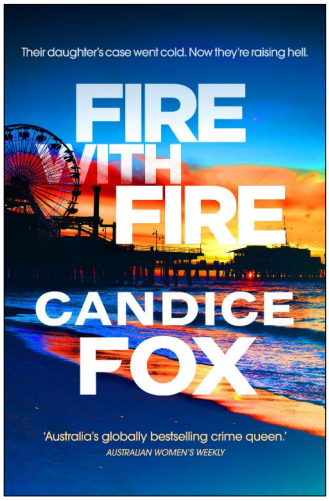
One foggy morning on the banks of the Murray River, a body is found in a burnt-out area of grassland. The heavily tattooed victim, who has suffered two bullet wounds to the head, is identified as Freddie Jones, a bikie from Moama.

I don't know this author's work, but this one looks like another interesting Australian crime novel. Due out from Text Publishing early next year.

Fire With Fire by Candice Fox

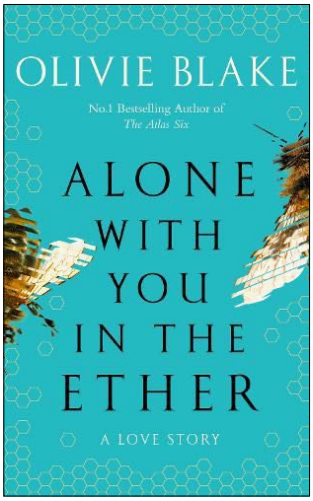
Due April 2023.

Candice Fox's latest heart-pounding thriller, as a couple hold the LAPD to ransom in a desperate attempt to find their missing daughter.



I'm very excited to see this announcement. Candice Fox is one of my "must-buy" authors and one of Australia's very best crime writers (and we have lots of very good ones).

Alone With You in the Ether by Olivie Blake



Two people meet in the armory of the Art Institute by chance. Prior to their encounter, he is a doctoral student who manages his destructive thoughts with compulsive calculations about time travel; she is a bipolar counterfeit artist undergoing court-ordered psychotherapy. After their meeting, those things do not change. Everything else, however, is slightly different.

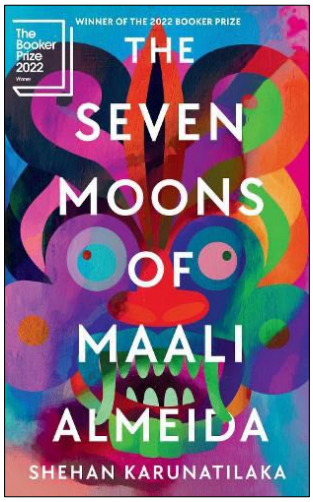
This one appeals to my sense of the wacky and intriguing.

Award Winners:

I also like to at least try to read some of the major award winners each year, even if I don't get to the shortlists, so the following are all on my "want to read" list.

Booker Prize 2022

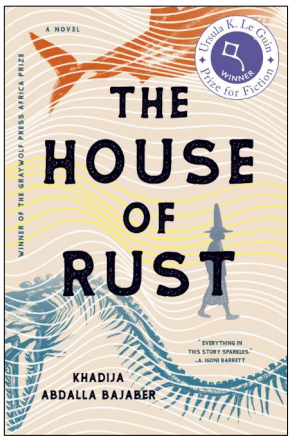
The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida by Shehan Karunatilaka



Shehan Karunatilaka's second novel is a searing, mordantly funny satire set amid the murderous mayhem of a Sri Lanka beset by civil war.

Ursula K. Le Guin Prize 2022

The House of Rust by Khadija Abdalla Bajaber



In Bajaber's debut novel, published by Graywolf Press, young Aisha sets out in the company of a talking cat and a boat made of bones to rescue her fisherman father.

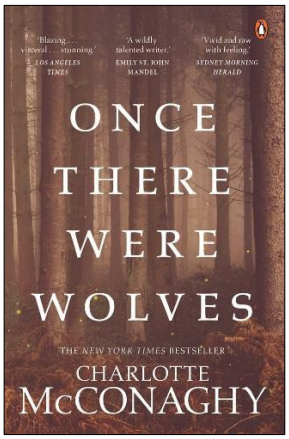
Sounds fabulous!

Davitt Award 2022

The Davitt Awards are presented by Sisters in Crime Australia for the best crime writing by Australian women.

This year's **Best Adult Novel** was:

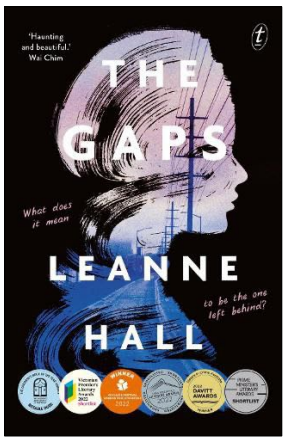
Once There Were Wolves by Charlotte McConaghy



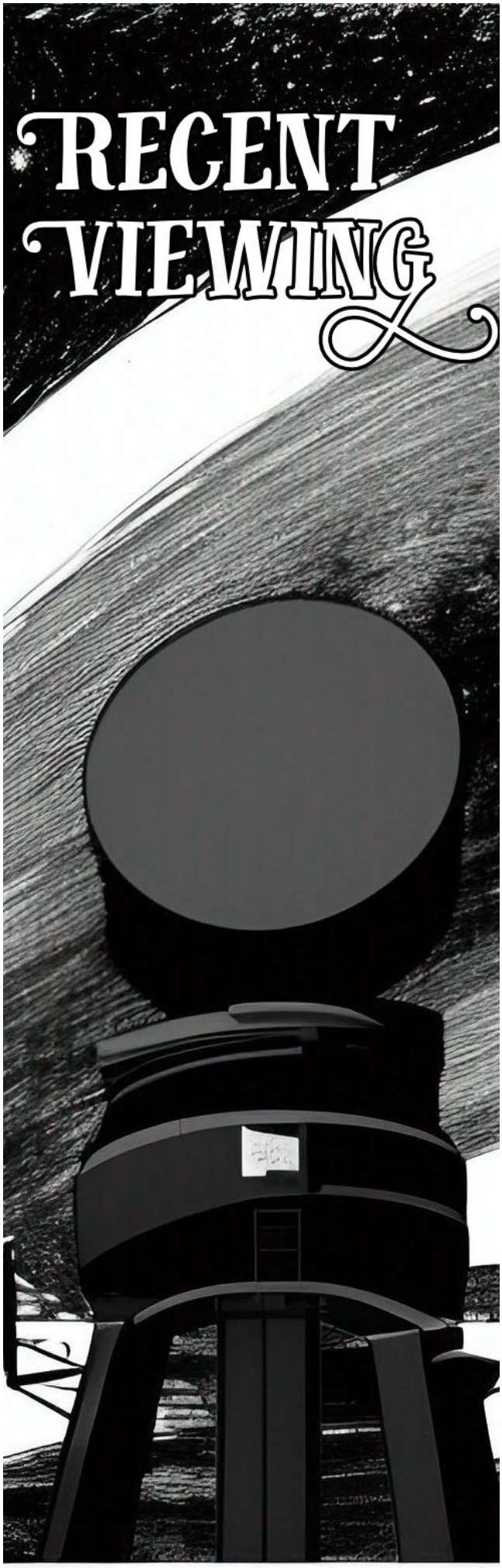
Propulsive and spellbinding, *Once There Were Wolves* is the unforgettable tale of a woman desperate to save the creatures she loves. Part thriller, part redemptive love story, Charlotte McConaghy's profoundly affecting novel will stay with you forever.

And the **Best Young Adult Novel** at the Davitt's was:

The Gaps by Leanne Hall



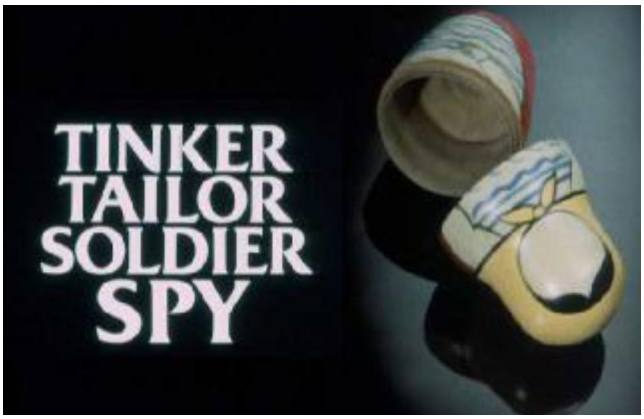
The Gaps is a powerful, searing psychological novel that explores teenage fear, anger and vulnerability. When a 16-year-old girl, Yin Mitchell from the Year 10 class at Balmoral Ladies College, is abducted from her home during the night, it is splashed all over the news and the whole community becomes consumed. [Readings review]



As usual, we haven't watched much on television over the last couple of months . There are literally weeks at a time when the TV set just never gets turned on in our house. And we never go to the movies because our hearing is poor and we can't do without subtitles.

We did re-watch, however:

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy (BBC, 1979)

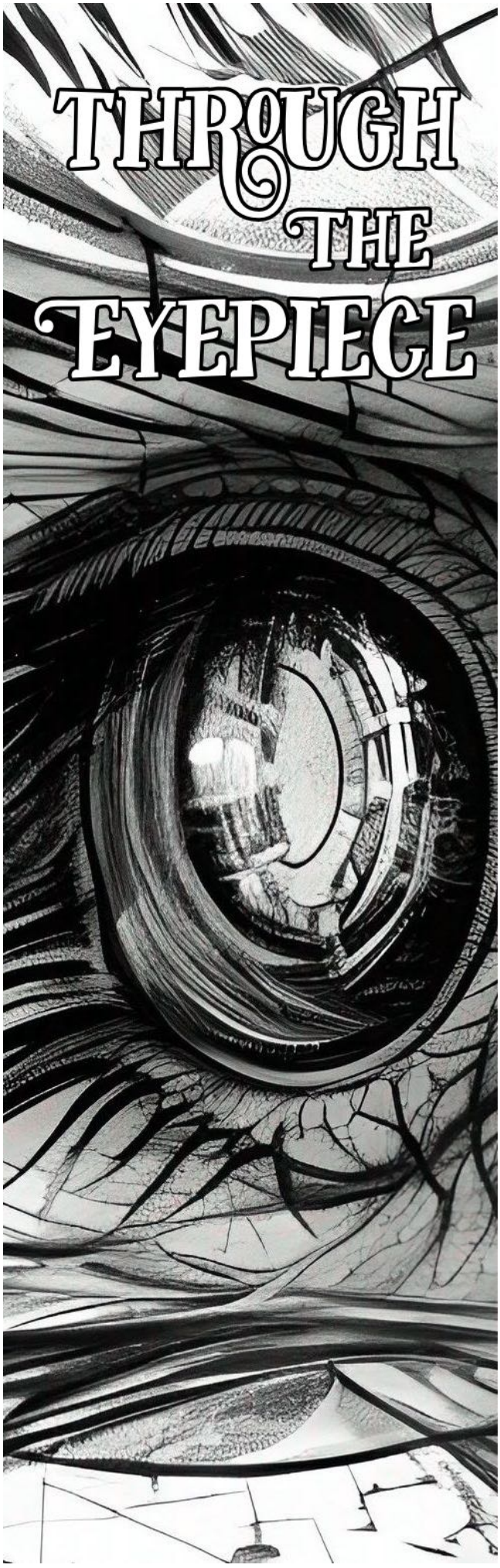


This is the version featuring Alec Guiness as the stolid, middle-aged George Smiley, and he is excellent in the role. Smiley is tasked by the aging Control to discover the mole amongst the senior ranks of "the Circus", Britain's spy agency.

Patrick Stewart has a minor, unspeaking role as Karla, the Soviet spymaster.

Smiley's People (BBC, 1982)

Alec Guiness reprises his role as George Smiley, now ostensibly retired, who is determined to track down a lead which an old Estonian émigré had tried to bring him, but was shot before he could get in touch. Good stuff!



Conversations With Readers

A reminder that this letter column combines responses made to my Substack newsletter *Through the Biblioscope,* together with comments directly on *The Megaloscope*, both by email and in ANZAPA.

Derrick Ashby (ANZAPA October 2022)

[Responding to The Megaloscope #2]

The one book in here that I have read any of at all is *Frostquake*, which I am interested in for the same reason you were—I migrated to Australia in 1964 largely because of the Fell Winter of 1962-63. The last straw for the Ashbys came when Dad was driving to church one Sunday after there had been a thaw followed by another freeze. As you'd probably remember this caused the roads to resemble rivers of glass. It was basically impossible to drive in a straight line. Months later we disembarked in Melbourne on January 10th, 1964. We were driven from the wharf to the house we stayed in for most of the next year by a family from the Glen Iris Methodist Church, which had sponsored us, in their FJ Holden. The guy, whose name I have unforgivably forgotten, demonstrated that the wheelbase of the FJ was the same as that of the W Class tram by driving down the tracks on Toorak Road. At least we went in a straight line… I agree that Frostquake is great. I had no idea that Wilfred Brambell was gay.

David:

Well, the only reason I knew about *Frostquake* is because you mentioned it some time back in ANZAPA, Derrick! So thanks for that.

Mark Plummer (ANZAPA October 2022)

[Responding to The Megaloscope #2]

…a small pedantic point that I think worth making especially as you have a wider distribution. I agree the Hugo voter packet is a great bargain but it doesn't necessarily give you 'ebook versions of all of the nominated fiction'. It may do, and will likely provide copies of most of them, but ultimately it's down to the finalists and their publishers and there's often something missing. In 2014—which seems in my mind more recent than I know it to be—three of the six novels were only provided in extract.

David:

There must be pressure to include them in the packet, though. In 2022 I think we got all of the Best Novel nominees, though the Andy Weir was only provided as a heavily watermarked PDF.

Bruce Gillespie (ANZAPA October 2022)

[Responding to The Megaloscope #2]

I must confess I'm a bit confused by your proliferation of fanzine titles. I'm having great trouble remembering the name *Megaloscope*. When I've typed it enough times I suppose I'll have it under

control. But why not continuing with the simple title *Biblioscope*? I like that a lot. (But then, people have forgotten my fanzine *Steam Engine* Time, although it was a better magazine of long reviews and critical articles than *SF Commentary*.)

David:

Well, I'm sorry that you are confused, but it's pretty simple really. *Through the Biblioscope* has always been and will continue as my fortnightly Substack email newsletter. The PDF version of that was just a kludged-together kind of thing which I put together as a favour to you, Carey and a couple of others who don't want to get it as an email.

The Megaloscope is much more like a regular fanzine in a form I'm happy to distribute widely both in ANZAPA and outside it. *Megaloscope* will include almost all the material which goes into the newsletter, but comes out at the much more relaxed pace of every two months.

Bruce:

You do seem to have a lot of bright shiny machines and desktop publishing programs, none of which I could afford or probably learn to use. But you do make effective use of those you own.

I've probably recommended Richard Powers' novels often in past issues of **brg**. My own favourite is *The Time of Our Singing*, recently reissued. You're one of the few ANZAPAns who might fully appreciate this book about music and musicians (and racism and changes in American society over 40 years). Most of Powers' books manage to combine music with science in intriguing ways, as in *Orfeo* and *The Gold Bug Variations*. *Generosity* is a nice little SF idea that doesn't quite work, but his latest books, *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment*, take their ideas about environmental disaster and human aspirations on a wild ride. I have five of his novels still unread.

Graham Greene has a strong clear style that I always enjoy reading—and he has never been afraid to step over genre boundaries. What we might call 'thrillers' he called 'entertainments', but many of his entertainments are also dead serious novels about dangerous situations (such as *The Comedians*). Many of his novels are very funny, or take the reader into deep emotional territory. The only other English writer of the twentieth century who compares with him for clarity of style is Evelyn Waugh (and George Orwell, of course, but I've read only *Nineteen Eighty Four* and *Animal Farm*).

David:

That's all of Orwell's fiction that I've read, too, but I've read quite a bit of his non-fiction like *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Down and Out in Paris and London.* I still haven't read any Graham Greene, but really must one of these days.

Bruce:

Garry Disher started by writing children's books, some of them rather solemn stories that I wouldn't have liked when I was a kid. He also wrote a unique novel, *Her*, about a child so far down the social scale in Victoria that her father doesn't even give her a name. That's not a children's book, but one of the greatest Australian books written about children. I'm looking forward to his new detective novel.

David:

Her sounds like a book I really should read. It seems to be out of print in paper format, but I was able to pick up an ebook version from Kobo at a low price. Thanks for the recommendation.

Bruce:

I'm not taking up the challenge offered by Perry's obsession with the Hugos, for the reason you give: 'I've come away mostly unimpressed by the current state of the genre, or at least represented by these nominees. Are these really the best works of fiction written in the genre during 2021?' I'd go further, and say that the Hugo nominees have rarely represented the best in the genre since the mid 1970s.

Thanks for your review of *Sea of Tranquility*. I must admit I hadn't remembered many of the details of the plot, as described by you; I just remember how much I enjoyed it. No wonder I'm doing 'shortish reviews', i.e. non-reviews, as Mark Plummer observed.

Thanks very much for your publication of the correspondence we had about reviewing. My comments show how very confused and contradictory are my opinions after 60 years of thinking about the reviewing task. When I started *SFC* I knew exactly what reviewing and criticism were all about (thanks to George Turner and John Foyster), and I plunged right in. I did extensive notes about each book I reviewed, wrote long reviews and longer articles, and enjoyed doing so. Now I just don't have the energy, and I find few books each year worth all that trouble. I leave most of the reviewing in *SFC* to Colin Steele, who covers books I'm likely to find in bookshops. Ironically, one of the few books I've read this year worth the trouble of a long review is St John Mandel's *Sea of Tranquility* (misspelt) — and you've done the job for me.

Jack Herman (ANZAPA October 2022):

[Responding to The Megaloscope #2]

An interesting Hugo run-down. Not many that I'm likely to read. I like the look of the Tschaikovsky that Claire also liked. And that story coincided with a meme doing the rounds, trying to distinguish SF from fantasy. Some of my favorites include:

Fantasy is when your large green lizards are dragons and Science Fiction is when your large green lizards are dinosaurs.

Fantasy is when you treat magic like science and

science fiction is when you treat science like magic.

Fantasy is when it's filmed in a forest on the outskirts of Vancouver. Science fiction is when it's filmed in a rock quarry on the outskirts of Vancouver.

I noticed that the nominations seem to be as much about authors as about the stories, with much repetition, e.g., Harrow, Valente, and McGuire. One of the problems with popularity awards is that people often nominate their favorite writer because that's who they read.

I'm fascinated by the timeline of *Frostquake*. The Profumo scandal surfaced in early 1963, but Macmillan held on until autumn 1963, and the election (with Tories led by Douglas-Home) was spring 1964. My own awakening to the world around me came earlier: first the Credit Squeeze and 1961 election here; then the Kennedy "Camelot" and the Cuban Missiles in the US; followed by Profumo, the Kennedy assassination, and the Bay of Tonkin incident. Yep, it was an interesting period.

It is possible to have realistic, even complex characters in fantasy. Two authors often mentioned here come to mind: Guy Gavriel Kay and Lois McMaster Bujold.

David:

People keep recommending Guy Gavriel Kay to me. I must take them up on it.

Jack:

Bruce got a list of potential recipients for his fanzines from Bangsund for *SFC*; some years later I got a similar list of overseas fans from Eric Lindsay for *WAHF-full*. We had very different aims with our respective 'zines and each soon found its level - his up, mine down but the starter kit of names must have helped both of us as we each had extensive lettercols.

She Who Became the Sun is definitely on the list. The medieval dynastic manoeuvres in China fascinate me. Guy Gavriel Kay did a couple (*Under Heaven* and *River of Stars*, in the Tang and Song, respectively). The Hongwu emperor and the founding of the Ming are matters that should entertain and enlighten.

Christina Lake (ANZAPA October 2022)

[Responding to Claire Brialey's contribution]

I have to say that I found Ryka Aoki's *Light from Uncommon Stars* a most remarkable book. It feels very non-genre, and I mean that in a good way. You could recommend it to a non-SF reader and so long as they don't mind fantastical elements in their work, then they'd enjoy it. In fact, I was about to recommend it to a non-SF friend until I realised I had no idea how she would be with trans characters, and that wasn't a conversation I wanted to get into with her over a Whatsapp group chat. I thought the book said so much about what it felt like to be trans, and the fears and prejudices they face that I certainly would recommend it to anyone with struggling to accept any element of the trans experience (which is usually my non-SF friends). I also felt it showed the ways in which while the media have focussed on the feminist backlash against trans women, a big part of the problem is misogyny and some men still seeing the feminine as inherently inferior, and therefore hating men for wanting to live as women. Maybe *Light from Uncommon Stars* is a surreal wish fulfilment story for one trans girl, but also so much more.

[Responding to The Megaloscope #2]

I listened to you and Perry talking about the novelettes and novellas after I read them, and was largely on the same page as you, except not as keen on *Colors of the Immortal Palette...* It was a combination of your podcast and *Octothorpe* that inspired me to read *Light from Uncommon Stars...* I will get to some of the others in due course. I'm sorry you now feel so out of step with the Hugo voters as I enjoy listening to your reviews.

I can almost remember the winter of 1962-3. At least, I remember a lot of snow. Juliet Nicolson's *Frostquake* sounds like it would be an interesting read, as does *The Perfect Summer*, her suddenly topical (for British readers) look at the "perfect" summer of 1911 which began with the death of a monarch and delivered record-breaking summer temperatures, industrial unrest and, of course, intimations of war.

Doug and I have enjoyed both seasons of *Outlaws*, and not just for the Bristol setting (which includes frequent shots of the exterior of Doug's office in the centre of town). It's warm-hearted enough that even the most irritating of characters become likeable and Stephen Merchant plays to his best dweeby strengths.

Fascinating correspondence between you and Bruce on realism and Realism. You both seem to agree on wanting something surprising, but not on what you relate to in a book. I know (from many years of book discussion) that I'm a strange reader who is left cold by a lot of beautiful prose, but sometimes amazed by writing that others don't much like (often described as too knowing). But on the whole I read for character and ideas as I think do you. At least you, Bruce and I can agree on Philip Pullman.

Roman Orszanski (ANZAPA October 2022):

[Responding to The Megaloscope #2]

Enjoyed the reviews, and agree with most of your comments on novelette and short story, though I was delighted with *Bots of the Lost Ark*, and picked it as the likely winner... I found *Master of Djinn* an

interesting read, but that may be because it filled out the setting from *A Dead Djinn in Cairo*.

Enjoyed the discussion about SF & realism between you and Bruce in the Conversations with Readers

section. I'm surprised that you've only read two of China Mieville's novels; *Perdido St Station*, *Kraken* and *The Last Days of New Paris* are all excellent and interesting reads, each surprisingly different in nature.

I found his history *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* a brilliant read to prepare for my visit to St Petersburg on the centenary of the revolution.

Mark Loney (Email 7/11/2022)

[Responding to The Megaloscope #3]

Thanks for the copy of Megaloscope, which I have been slowly making my way through.

The review of *Banjawarn* piqued my interest. I worked in the Goldfields in the early eighties, including Teutonic Bore in the northern Goldfields near Banjawarn Station (near in the Goldfields context anyway). Banjawarn Station gained some notoriety in the 1990s after apparently being used by the Aum Shinrikyo group to test the effectiveness of sarin ahead of the Toky subway attack in 1995. Judging from your review, that history isn't part of the novel, but I wonder if it had anything to do with Josh Kemp's decision to set the novel there.

David:

You are quite correct about Banjawarn's history, which does have a significant impact in the book and I'm sure it's why the author set the novel there. This is what I was alluding to when I said:

"The book comes to a shatteringly violent conclusion at Banjawarn station, which is apparently a real place with an astonishing but true past history which I won't reveal."

Though the Aum Shinrikyo events have an influence on events at the end of the book (left-over sarin poison, for one thing), they don't go to the heart of the plot, so I didn't feel the need to refer to it explicitly.

Mark:

I also enjoyed the Hugo Time Machine reviews for 1969, which made me think that it was time to reread *Stand on Zanzibar* and *Nova* (both of which I found initially challenging but ultimately worthwhile when I read them in the seventies as a teenager). Your comments about the other three novels sent me back to *Mission to the Stars* by A.E. van Vogt which I had started but had trouble finishing for similar reasons. Some works hold up but others, well, don't. Having finished *Mission to the Stars*, I've found more to enjoy in *Destination: Universe*, which is a short story collection. I can see why Philip K. Dick liked van Vogt so much.

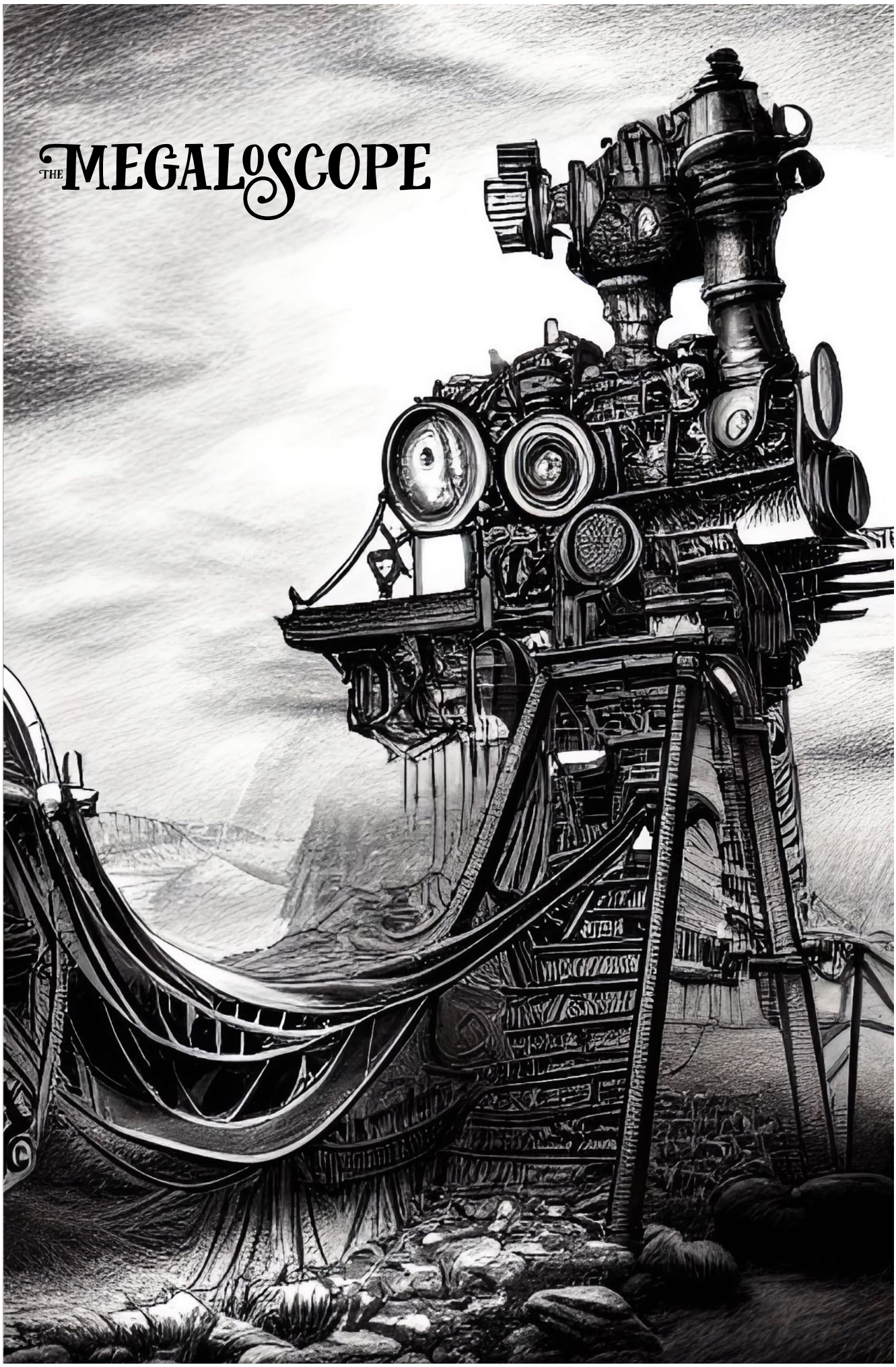
And that's it for another issue of *The Megaloscope.* I hope you enjoyed reading it. Please let me know what you thought, and if you have any comments about the books I've reviewed here.

You can email me at *david.grigg@gmail.com*.

Index of Reviews

Acknowledgement of Country

I acknowledge the members of the Wurunderi Willum Clan as the Traditional Owners of the land on which this publication is produced in Mill Park, Victoria, and I pay my respects to the Elders, past, present and emerging.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