

SF COMMENTARY 82

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I must be talking to my friends

Everybody needs a Lionel Logue

I rarely talk about films here. *SF Commentary* is a magazine about science fiction and fantasy literature, unless somebody sends me a very good article about SF films. But I can't help writing about *The King's Speech*, a non-SF film that gained so much word-of-mouth interest in Australia that it transferred from the arthouse cinemas to the multiplexes, then won several Academy Awards.

I did not expect *The King's Speech* to be my sort of film. It's about British royalty, in which I have little interest. I do not support people who claim to be more important than other people, especially if they make those claims based on mere heredity. But *The King's Speech* is mainly about a man, known throughout most of the film as 'Bertie' (Prince Albert, later King George VI, played by Colin Firth), who can't escape a job he never expected to take on, a job that he loathes. Apart from his overall shyness, he suffers from a stammer, a disability that became critically important during the 1920s and 1930s when for the first time monarchs and politicians had to speak to their nations via radio.

The King's Speech is not about stammering, or even about speaking on radio. It is about the way in which a person's personality is shaped (or warped) by the time he or she is five years old. Bertie cannot remember a time when he did not stammer. His therapist, Lionel Logue (played by Geoffrey Rush, in a performance that should have won the Oscar) perceives that he cannot effect a miracle cure for his patient, every aspect of whose life conspires to make public speaking a nightmare. Bertie's life has been oppressed by the attitudes of his father (King George V), his mother (Queen Mary), and his brother (David, briefly King Edward VIII), who would have stayed on as king if he had not been forced to abdicate. Bertie has been left with a boundless reservoir of self-doubt. Lionel Logue's mission is to give him a *voice* — the self-confidence to carry out a difficult PR job throughout an approaching long and destructive war.

I enjoyed this film because the plight of this man forced to be king somehow mirrors my own lifetime's experience. Not that I've ever stammered, but the obsession of my life has been my perception of the things I *cannot* do, not the things I *can* do. Given Bertie's problem, and the job that he sees before him, I probably would have committed suicide. Perhaps everybody needs a Lionel Logue.

I've always been obsessed by the fact that I cannot perform any action that other people would call 'sporting' or 'athletic'. I am incapable of catching or kicking balls, which seems to be the main distinguishing mark of a successful male in Australia. If I run, I become breathless very quickly, and always have done so. I have never been able to swim more than one length of a pool

without running out of puff. I have no appreciation of people who run round playing fields, or kicking footballs, or swimming faster than other people. To me their lives are quite barren, because they do not create anything.

I cannot sing or play a musical instrument of any kind. Fortunately, I can appreciate the work of those who do play well. I cannot sing like Roy Orbison, a handicap that really annoys me. I cannot commit to memory poetry or prose verbatim, which is also a handicap for someone who loves good poetry and prose. Indeed, I am no good at anything that Australians regard as 'practical' — carpentry, fixing things, driving a car or even changing a tyre. In the eyes of the average Australian, I'm handicapped.

I would have liked to have been creative in a practical way, but I don't seem to have the talent. I drew a lot during primary school, mainly self-written comic books, but lost my confidence when attempting to master oil painting in high school. I've written a few stories since childhood, but have never liked any fiction I've written. The only two people who ever liked my attempts at fiction were George Turner and Carey Handfield's father. To me, my stories sound inauthentic, and even worse, unoriginal. There seems no point to writing fiction unless you write something nobody else could possibly have written.

I've often wondered what my life — the life in my mind — *might* have been like. What if I had had the same inabilities, plus an ironcast sense of self-confidence? The science fiction world does seem to be full of such people: people who strut around conventions exuding ego, but produce nothing of value; or put years of effort into producing a stream of mediocre fiction. What if I had the abilities I craved, plus my current low levels of self-confidence — or simply a long stretch of bad luck? We all know people like that: brilliant writers who rarely publish, or whose published works are buried under the slurry of bestselling junk; brilliant musicians who spend 40 years playing coffee houses or small halls and whose only CD was nearly released by a company that failed the next day; inspiring artists who sell one painting an exhibition (I know several such people, and if I had money I would have bought their paintings, even though we have no walls to exhibit them).

The true direction of my life was set when I read an article during the early sixties. In *If* magazine Lin Carter published a column where he described various aspects of science fiction fandom. Most of what he described sounded fairly social. I had too little self-confidence to join a science fiction club, because I might have had to talk to new people. (I knew about the Melbourne SF



John Bangsund, Bruce Gillespie's Lionel Logue, awards Bruce Gillespie his first Ditmar Award, August 1972. Does John look just a bit like Geoffrey Rush? (Photo: Gary Hoff.)

Club, because in every book I bought at McGill's Newsagency in the city there was a little leaflet inviting people to attend meetings of the MSFC on Wednesday nights.) In one of his articles, Lin Carter described 'fanzines', magazines in which people wrote and published exactly what they wanted, and sent them to other science fiction fans. Fanzine publishers did not have to send their scribblings into New York editors only to have them rejected. No, they just published them, and sent them out to people who were interested. From that moment, I knew what I wanted to do. And although I had no idea how I would ever publish a fanzine, I knew that eventually I would publish one: a good one.

The rest of the story will be familiar to most readers of *SF Commentary*. In late 1967 I did get in touch with other science fiction fans, and even had some articles published in fanzines before I began publishing one myself. My Lionel Logues were people like John Bangsund, Lee Harding, and George Turner, who said they liked my writing. John Bangsund showed me how to operate a duplicator, and I bought one in 1969. He also gave me the mailing list for fanzine fandom as it then

was. I realised from the beginning that nobody makes money from publishing fanzines, so I did not start publishing *SF Commentary* until 1969, the first year in which I earned a real salary. Since then, my life has been a constant tussle between having the money to publish (therefore not having the time to publish) or having the time to publish (underemployed, therefore with not enough money to publish). But at least I've kept going.

Rising postage rates stopped publication of most of my favourite fanzines from the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Their editors would have disappeared from sight if it had not been for the wholly unexpected intervention of something called the Internet. Nothing in science fiction literature prepared us for the internet, because it works the way fans do, by roundabout interconnections, not connections based on a central authority. Suddenly in 1998 I was back in touch with many fans who, like

me, had stopped writing letters. As various forms of publishing software became available, the internet lowered the cost of publishing fanzines. The Internet produced its own Superfan, Bill Burns. This resourceful English bloke who has lived in America for more than 30 years did what nobody else thought of doing: he gained access to what seems like an infinite amount of computer storage, which he offers free to any fanzine publisher who uses Adobe Acrobat or similar software to produce their magazines as PDF files. Any reader with Adobe Acrobat Reader (which is free) now has access to thousands of great fanzines.

Not that everything about the world of internet fanzines is ideal. I refuse to read anything much longer than a paragraph on a computer screen. I have to print it out. This can be very expensive, if you print a fanzine with coloured illustrations on an inkjet printer (less expensive on a laser printer — but still inconvenient). I prefer to receive my fanzines as paper magazines. I am far more likely to read a magazine I receive through the mail than one that I download. Because of the way the computer industry keeps changing its storage protocols, I don't expect that many of today's computer-stored fanzines will be available for reference in 10 years' time, let alone 40 years' time, but any fanzines I receive in the mail will stay with me.

The golden age of fanzines is now

I have stored most of the paper fanzines I've ever received, because they are personal documents produced by people who take a lot of trouble to do something well. People choose to publish about a wide variety of subjects, which has led to a traditional but specious dividing line

between fanzines that actually talk about the world of science fiction (and/or fantasy and horror), and those that talk about the activities and interests of fans, not necessarily about SF or fantasy.

I regard this dividing line as specious, because it's not

what separates us from other types of magazines. Most magazines are published in order to make a profit or at least not lose money, and therefore are aimed at audiences — that is, consumers. Fanzines are published for the pleasure of publishing, often lose a lot of money, and are aimed at participants. They are personal documents, not official documents or commercial enterprises. To keep receiving a fanzine, you need to send a letter of comment or other written or artistic contribution, or publish your own magazine as trade. If you are really desperate, you might send a subscription, thus making yourself into merely a reader, but then lose much of the enjoyment of reading fanzines.

It's many years since I've reviewed fanzines in *SF Commentary*, because there are far too many good ones to discuss them properly. I thought I would reduce the length of the following by limiting myself to the fanzines I receive in the mail. Two of them (*Banana Wings* and *Sense of Wonder Stories*) are available only by mail. The others can be downloadable as PDF documents from <http://efanzines.com>, but I am very happy that I receive them by post.

In talking about only a small number of my favourites, probably I will insult dozens, even hundreds, of other fanzine publishers. Sorry about that. Now I've started looking at fanzines in a systematic way, I might spread my wings. Or I might continue to leave regular fanzine reviewing to the few people who still do it, such as Guy Lillian (in *Zine Dump*) and Keith Walker (in *Fanzine Fanatique*).

Also, I am not 'reviewing' the following, as if I were an outsider commenting from an adversarial or disinterested position. In talking about these fanzines, I really am talking about and to my friends.

***Banana Wings* 44 (November 2010) and 45 (February 2011)**

Claire Brailey and Mark Plummer, 59 Shirley Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 7ES, England.

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'Essentially available on editorial whim, which most likely to be satisfied by the fannish usual: a response to this issue, a fanzine in trade, or some other appropriate action on your part. Sending UK postage stamps is always good, and frankly we wouldn't say no to hard cash either.'

Claire and Mark are great friends of ours. They visit Australia as often as possible, most recently in September last year for Aussiecon 4 (the 68th World SF Convention, held in Melbourne). They usually find the time to visit Elaine and me in Greensborough when they visit Melbourne. They are great conversationalists, warm human beings. Yet probably I would never have met them if it had not published fanzines. In 1995 I joined an apa (amateur publishing association, an organisation for exchanging fanzines among its members) called Acnes-tis, edited and organised by Maureen Kincaid Speller in Britain. To my perpetual sorrow, Maureen lost interest in her own apa in 2005, but meanwhile the connection had been made between Mark and Claire, between Mark, Claire, and fanzine publishing, and between them and Australian fandom. You never know where fanzine publishing will lead.

When Claire and Mark joined forces in publishing *Banana Wings*, they put together a publishing model that includes the strengths of both of them, and attracts the writing talents of many other people. Claire's writing style has made the greater impact in fandom, leading to her winning several FAAN and Nova Awards for her





Susan Wood, early 1970s or perhaps at Aussiecon 1. I can't remember who took the photo.

writing, and several Hugo nominations. I prefer Mark's dryer humour, but I note that he won a Nova Award recently for his writing. Together, they produce a magazine that wins awards, and should have won the Hugo Award for Best Fanzine last year.

In *Banana Wings 44*, Mark examines some matters of great importance to fandom itself, and talks about the imbalance between women and men in winning science fiction awards. Claire talks about many of the issues that arose out Aussiecon 4, which they had just attended before publishing this issue. Elsewhere in the issue, Claire and Mark write articles about visiting Adelaide during their Aussiecon trip. Unfortunately they do not mention visiting Greensborough in Victoria, but they have often mentioned visiting us in other issues of other fanzines. (My only beef about their Adelaide articles is that they give the impression that Damien and Juliette, their hosts, are vigorous members of Australian fandom, whereas in fact they seem to participate in very little.)

It might worry some people that not many of the articles in *Banana Wings* are about science fiction. But the essence of a fanzine is that it is about what SF fans are really interested in.

James Bacon, a Londoner, talks about Octocon, a British convention held in 2010.

Taral Wayne, a Canadian who was Fan Guest of Honour at the world convention in Montreal in 2009, is interested in a vast range of topics. His 'Bird Lady of

Parkdale' is the best article of his I've read. He begins talking about the apartment he lives in, then about the pigeons around the building, then about the little old lady who fed the pigeons, which led to the placing of wire over the windows of the apartments in his building to protect them from pigeon poo, thus spoiling the view, which leads back to Annie Ross, the 'bird lady', who died recently. She had written books and was interested in Roman history. Taral didn't know that while he was alive. He would just like his view back, but it is rather wonderful the way in which he gathers these threads into one article.

Banana Wings 45 covers an even wider range of material than *BW 44*.

Dave Langford writes about perhaps the most interesting science fiction fan I've never met, Geri Sullivan. She wasn't able to attend the Corflu I went to in 2005, and as far as I know has never been to an Australian world convention.

James Shields begins his GUFF report, again by praising the wonders of Adelaide, which I haven't visited since 1980. I hope James writes later about Aussiecon, and the New Zealand national convention he attended before that, because he's a good writer, and I enjoyed meeting him right at the end of his trip.

For those people (especially *SF Commentary* readers) whose main interest is science fiction, Claire riffs on the idea of series novels in SF. I'm opposed to them. But wasn't my first experience of written SF the 'Mars' novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs? The first four books are really one novel, with each of the first three ending with cliffhangers to the next book. I enjoy crime and thriller series more than SF series. Perhaps it's because a crime novel works well only if it has one or more outstanding characters, and those leading characters usually beg to be written about more than once.

Tony Keen inquires why women's names are used far less frequently in the covers of SF anthologies than men's names, even when there are equal numbers of men and women writers in an anthology.

David Redd's report on Novacon 40, 'Forty Years On', is one of the most amusing SF convention reports I've read. (John Bangsund wrote some that were even better.) Most of the humour comes from running jokes, rather than wham-bang one-liners. It's encouraging to read that Brian Aldiss, at 86, 'was up and about on time at 9.30 to read his party piece "Better Morphosis", about the cockroach which turned into Franz Kafka'.

Catherine Pickersgill, mentioned approvingly by David Redd, contributes a nice little article about collecting pens. (It could be worse. Her even more famous husband Greg Pickersgill collects battle helmets. I, of course, don't collect; I accumulate.)

Taral Wayne writes an entertaining celestial shaggy dog story. Taral finds that there is no paying market Out There for well-written essays that are written just for the enjoyment of writing them, so where better to send such an essay than to *Banana Wings*?

Mark's editorial is a fine example of the discursive fanzine article, seemingly disorganised yet fully thought through. It mentions me. (Did I say that I really like *Banana Wings* because it mentions Bruce Gillespie a

lot?). It also mentions a list that British fan Mike Meara made of his favourite SF novels of the seventies and eighties. Since I am held up as somebody else who makes many long lists, this part of the editorial connects to Mark's acquiring a bundle of fanzines recently from Greg Pickersgill. This leads Mark to a confession that he is actually trying to concoct a 'definitive bibliography of Bruce Gillespie fanzines'. This sounds like a worthy but fruitless occupation. Even I could never put together such a bibliography, because I no longer have some of my fanzines, such as the issues of *Norstrilian News* I edited in 1971 and 1972. A list of my APA-45 fanzines (1972–1974) could be obtained only by burrowing through my APA-45 mailings, which are buried at the bottom of a large grey cupboard in Greensborough.

Indeed, Mark's whole exercise of fanzine burrowing might have proved sterile had he not found some issues of Susan Wood's *Amor de Cosmos People's Memorial Quiet Revolutionary Susanzine*. Mere mention of Susan Wood and her contribution to fannish life in general, and mine in particular, produces a sense of grief in me. Mark, who joined fandom five years after Susan died in 1980, manages to bring to life, after reading the few Susanzines he's seen, the whole spirit of her life and enterprise. I was very moved, particularly by Mark's account of *Amor 8*, which talks about Aussiecon 1 in 1975, where Susan was one of the two Fan Guests of Honour. (The other, Mike Glicksohn, was married to her when we asked them to be our guests of honour; they kept their commitment although they had split up. Mike died recently, but I will write about him elsewhere.) The title of Susan's article, when Ted White reprinted it in *Amazing*, was 'Will Somebody Please Tell Bruce Gillespie I Really Am Sane?' In writing about Susan's article, Mark is able to divine the spirit of 1970s fandom:

The trip's full of references to strange fannish monsters of the not-so-recent past: Doug Barbour, Anna-Jo and Frank Denton, Grant Canfield, George Barr, Alicia Austin, Bob Tucker — and that's before she gets to Australia. But it's not just these now-mostly-vanished fans or the duplicated quartet that makes *Amor 8* feel like the product of an earlier age. I really don't think that it's the after-knowledge that Susan would be dead in five years makes me see *desperate fun* everywhere, well before the term was coined to describe that feeling towards the end of the convention when you know it'll soon be over and you want to cram as much convention-time as possible into the last few hours before the return to normal life. Nowadays it's normally mitigated by the knowledge that there'll be another convention in a few months ... But I think with something like that first Aussiecon thirty-five years ago, just as with the early TAFF trips before that, the experience was heightened by the knowledge that this long-anticipated and never-to-be-repeated coming together of fannish fellow travellers actually wasn't going to happen again for years, perhaps ever. And so I love *Amor*, and I especially love *Amor 8* because it talks about going to an Australian Worldcon and I think it describes some of my feelings about the third Aussiecon in 1999. And I was reading it again over breakfast the other day and it made me

think of Australia and in-person contact and our places in fandom.

There you have it. Mark manages to say everything I would ever want to say about what fanzines and fandom mean to me.

Trap Door 26 (December 2009) and 27 (December 2010)

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Available 'by Editorial Whim for The Usual (letters, contributions, both written and artistic, and accepted trades), or \$5.00 per issue'.

This is often regarded as the Rolls Royce of fanzines, as I wrote to Ian Mond. (But is Rolls Royce still the Rolls Royce of cars?) Robert Lichtman, who seems to have divine powers when it comes to fanzine publishing, combines impeccable layout and text editing skills with a choice collection of fannish art by the cartoonists we know and trust, such as Steve Stiles, Brad Foster, Dan Steffan, Harry Bell, and even some dead people, such as ATom and William Rotsler.

Yet, of course, none of the skills that Robert shows here would fit him for editing professional magazines these days. No eye-blistering swatches of colour obliterating the text. No punch-you-in-the-mouth text grabs. Just deep literacy and an even deeper love of fandom and all the people who sail here.

In the last ten years *Trap Door* has acquired a reputation as the place where great old fans go to die. The great passing parade of fans has been known by Robert Lichtman and his writers, so he and they produce the finest obituaries in the field. In *Trap Door 26* Robert pays tribute to 'our' Paul Williams, the multiskilled journalist and fan writer, onetime executor of Philip Dick's estate, whose brain was damaged some years ago, so severely that he has been affected by an 'early, gradual onset of dementia (not Alzheimer's ...), and just this year he had to be moved to a nursing home'. At various times Robert and he have seen life together. Robert tells how Paul Williams reclaimed him for fandom after he had been away for some years.

Trap Door 26 is almost entirely dominated by the kind of writing you now cannot find anywhere but in great fanzines: personal, emotional, but also very funny. Gordon Eklund's 'The Great Gafia of 1967' is a rare example of a true piece of fan fiction, that is, a piece of fiction that has its main characters some famous fans, however well disguised. All the names have been changed to protect the defamed, but no doubt some of *Trap Door's* readers can pick them. Here Eklund has also written a nice bit of science fiction. (Eklund's few science fiction novels, published in the 1970s, are favourites of mine.)

Dave Langford's 'South Wales Alphabet' is not so much based on fandom as on his own life. Dave suffers from having a slightly more famous younger brother, Jon Langford the 'rock star' (or alt.country star), who is planning a book about South Wales, where the two of

them grew up. Dave writes: 'For my contribution, to be scattered through the book as text sidebars, I tried to scrape up some mostly 1950s/1960s memories of Newport.' Lots of good memories seen through the uniquely amusing eyes of Dave Langford, whose childhood seemed to be devoted to a special hobby: 'It is not true that my experiments with home-made explosives left Newport High School as an insurance write-off that wasn't worth repairing.' But very nearly. This story could have been called 'Experiments and Explosions'.

Dave seems to have come through his many adventures unscathed, which is more than Robert Lichtman's wife Carol Carr did when 'There I was, blithely coming out of the bathroom on my way to where the food was, when I forgot to remember the step down into the sunken living room. Just a tiny lapse of memory. What I do remember, all too clearly, is an almost horizontal flight and, just before I landed, trying to protect my head from bashing into the side of a coffee table'. In her highly entertaining article 'Thanksgiving is the Cruellest Month', Carol tells what it was like to go through a year of pain, misery, irritation, and loving support from Robert before being able to walk again without a limp. Her tibial plateau fracture has left her 'with very little cartilage', so that 'my knee hurt with more or less intensity depending on nothing I can figure out'. Few of us can make something so shiny from an experience so dark.

Just as emotionally involving is an article by one of my favourite writers, William Breiding. For reasons I cannot claim to guess, William moves house, city, and state every now and again, and seems to lead a very solitary life. He

writes 'The Larry Chronicles', about his 'sixty-year-old neighbor Larry' who 'rang my doorbell on Father's Day'. Despite William's own reticence, he allows Larry to drive him out to do some hiking. What start out as very tentative walks develop into explorations of the high countryside around where he lived at the time. (Tucson, I think.) Larry somehow gives back to William a self-confidence and emotional charge that he felt he was missing. It's not clear what Larry gained from the relationship. William becomes more drawn into Larry's life than he wants to be. When Larry knocked at the door, he was living a life painfully between wives. When Larry finds a new girlfriend, he just disappears, but William says, 'I will always remember Larry fondly. We had a deep soul bond that wasn't dictated by language. And, as Larry might say, I wish him Godspeed.'

Trap Door 27 is dominated by a sparkling article by John Baxter. John has written about his book-hunting pal Martin Stone in his book *A Pound of Paper*. In this article, 'The Wendigo in the Woods', John and Martin tackle the west coast of America. They expect to find vast numbers of undiscovered book treasures in the more obscure secondhand book shops, especially between Seattle and Vancouver. Despite what sounds like an enjoyable road trip, reminding me of the equally well-written journey of Walt and Madeleine Willis along the same road in 1962, they find few books. The internet has destroyed the secondhand trade in America, as it has in Australia. Those shops still open price their books unrealistically according to lists on the internet. Otherwise, they don't display their books. A sparkling article with a melancholy



undertheme.

Robert Lichtman is expert at linking his articles thematically. Gordon Eklund's fine article 'Second Trip' is about *Warhoon* 28, the 600-page hardback fanzine, published by Richard Bergeron, that collects all the fanzine articles of Walt Willis, including the fannish Bible *The Enchanted Duplicator*, plus his account of this two journeys to America (paid for by fans), in 1952 and 1962. Eklund quotes enough of Willis to remind us that not only was he one of the great Irish writers, but that he had little interest in selling his work professionally. His whole enterprise was for fandom, except for the book he published as 'Walter Bryan', *The Improbable Irish* (one of my most valued books). Willis's ability to explore character and place in something as seemingly simple as a convention or trip report can only be matched (in my opinion) by the best work of Australia's own John Bangsund (or even Australia's own John Baxter; see his *A Pound of Paper* or his recent *Immoveable Feast*).

Gregg Calkins was a name famous in fandom when I began publishing in 1969, but these days he seems to be out of touch with everybody but Robert Lichtman. That's Robert's real secret: he's the fan with whom everybody wants to stay in touch. Calkins' 'Cheap Bourbon and Injun Talk' is an enjoyable personal piece about his 'memorable non-fannish summer' that 'I spent helping create the State of Utah's first-ever statewide geologic map'. The piece is basically about getting to know his professor, Dr Bronson Stringham, who taught a callow youth, Gregg, many things apart from how to do surveying. Lots of great stuff about climbing around in high mountains, drinking, and other things.

In the great fanzines of the 1970s we told about our love affairs and unexpected adventures. Today all too often we tell tales of the terrible things that happen to us as we reach middle age. Gary Hubbard's 'The Cracked Eye' is just as involving as Carol Carr's article. In Gary's case, angina caught up with him when he least expected it. Eventually he couldn't ignore those chest pains. He had to put himself in the hands of the medical profession. Friends of mine who have had the same experience talk lightly of 'stents put into the arteries to keep them open'. Gary Hubbard shows just how painful is this procedure. Also, it guarantees nothing. Today's stents will probably have to be replaced within five years. 'Looking back on it, I realize that what happened to me is nothing, nothing at all — just a bump on the road to Oblivion'.

When Roy Kettle won the FAAN Award for Best Fan Writer in 2011, I was puzzled. I couldn't recall reading anything by him since the days when he was part of Ratfandom in Britain in the 1970s. Suddenly I see his work all over the place. His 'Quite Dazed in Cliché' is a bit laboured (because the article's idea, 'what if you put into practice some of the common clichés?', is hardly original), but his letter of comment (p. 39) is a model of how to write such letters.

So are most of the other letters in both issues of *Trap Door*. The editing of a letter column is the ultimate touchstone of the quality of a fanzine, because the letter of comment is the currency that fan editors crave (not money). Great stuff here from such people as Lenny Kaye (yes, the rock star who started out as a fan, and yes,

he writes only to *Trap Door*), Peter Weston, Mike Meara, and Australia's own Chris Nelson and John Baxter. This aspect of *Trap Door* that makes me even more insanely jealous than any other.

***Sense of Wonder Stories* 4 (August 2010) and 5 (February 2011).**

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'Available for trade, contributions, letters of comment, and whim. May appear online someday.'

Sense of Wonder Stories is the kind of fanzine that would seem to appeal more to *SF Commentary* readers than the others I've mentioned. In the first issue, Rich Coad claimed that it was inspired by my *Steam Engine Time* (at that time coedited with Paul Kincaid and Maureen Kincaid Speller), which made my head swell up and go kind of fuzzy. (But then, Claire and Mark claim that *Banana Wings* was inspired by my *Metaphysical Review*, but today you would be struggling to find the resemblances.)

However, if you look at its Contents list, you will find many of the names to be found in other major American (non-SF-based) fanzines, and you will find a similar tone to that in *Trap Door*. In other words, *Sense of Wonder Stories* offers us personal tales of people's adventures in science fiction and fantasy. The result is very enjoyable.

Rich Coad has Good Taste — it is very like mine. His editorial in *SoWS4* covers several books that I've enjoyed very much, Christopher Evans' *Omega* and George Saunders' *Civilwarland in Bad Decline*, and offers some reservations about a book by Alastair Reynolds, whose fiction usually I find unreadable (except in his novellas).

Randy Byers, in his article 'When Life Hands You Lemurs, Make Lemuria', writes the kind of idiosyncratic and fanciful article that *SoWS* specialises in. Randy wanders from speculations about legendary continent of Lemuria, between Africa and Asia, to the speculations of Madam Blavatsky, to the early twentieth-century SF novels that seem to have been based on Blavatsky's ideas. 'So where does science fiction get its crazy ideas? Sober-minded proponents like to promote science fiction as a serious exploration of scientific ideas, but the history of the field is littered with as much pseudo-science as real science.'

In their nice bit of fan fiction/speculative criticism 'Several Conversations on the Matter of the Zoromes', Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer (with prompting from Gregory Pickersgill) take a lighthearted look at some really obscure science fiction books by Neil R. Jones. There seems no other justification for reading this obscure author than to produce this amusing article. It takes a while to find out what Zoromes are (in the work of Neil R. Jones), but having done that, 46MP-852, one of the two conversationalists in this story, asks 'Let me just be clear about this ... in addition to the gigers, the otters, the pandas, the platypus, the snow leopards, the badgers, the quokkas, the llamas, the bees and the airships — you now want to have Zoromes?'

A much more substantial but also obscure SF author

is Pauline Ashwell, who also wrote as Paul Ash. Roy Kettle tells of how he not only found out who these two authors are (Pauline Whitby), but travelled to the small English town of Ashwell in order to interview her. Now in her eighties, she received him warmly, and filled in the story of her long but often interrupted career. Her first SF short story appeared in 1943. She had 20 short stories published in *Astounding/Analog*, the last in 2001, as well as a novel and four linked short stories. But she published her first story when she was 12, in 1941! Roy's search for the author and the tale of why she took so long to publish is one of the best SF-based fanzine articles I've ever read.

Frank R. Paul is much better known to SF readers in general, but usually loved only by readers who collect SF magazines from the 1920s and 1930s. Paul did much else beside SF covers, and Bruce Townley, in his regular column 'BEMs, Babes, and Brushes', does a fairly comprehensive job of looking at Paul's talents. The two page-wide examples reproduced are very good indeed, full of that good old sense of wonder, befitting their appearance in this fanzine.

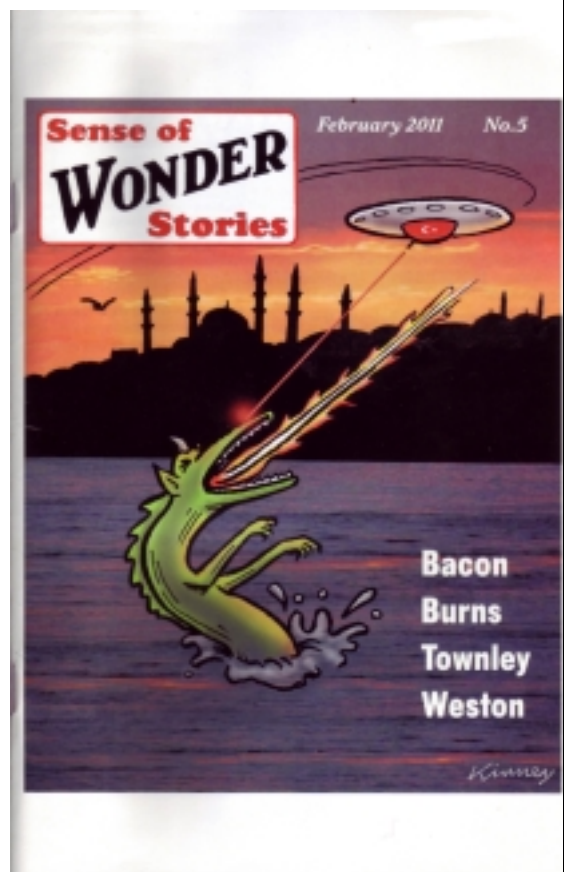
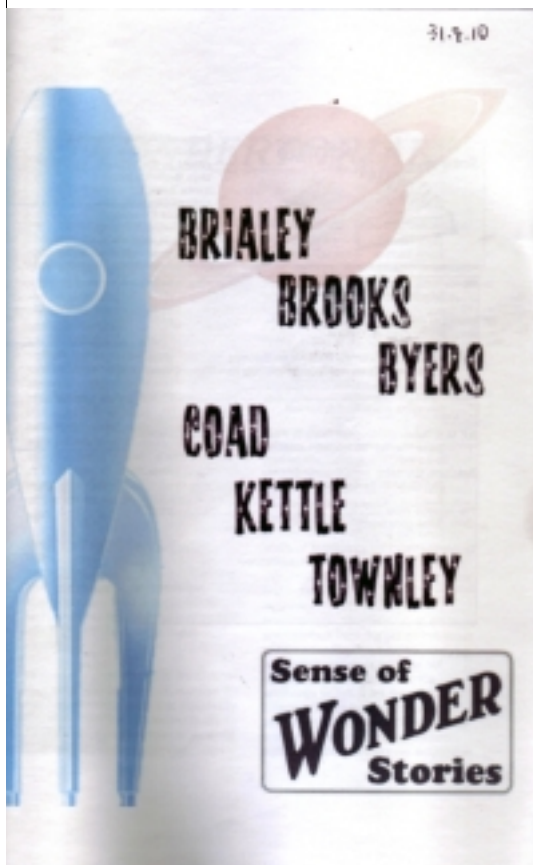
I discovered Barrington Bayley's fiction well before Rich Coad did. His article is 'Zen Guns, Garments, and Chronotic Empires: The Amazing Worlds of Barrington J. Bayley'. When I first began reading Ted Carnell's English magazines in the early sixties, the authors who impressed me were John Brunner, J. G. Ballard ... and P. F. Woods. The Nicholls/Clute *Encyclopedia* tells me that Bayley published 10 stories as Woods, before turning to writing novels as Barrington Bayley (Rich discusses *The Fall of Chronopolis* in detail). Woods was excellent at turning standard SF ideas on their head and inside out. Bayley continued in like manner. Rich Coad does not

explore why Bayley did not become as admired as Philip Dick; perhaps it was just because he was English, and he never found the right American market. As Rich writes: 'this is one author that really should not be overlooked', even though it is hard to find his books these days.

Rich is fond of sneaking in a little gem of an article right at the end of the issue, just after the letter column. In No 4, Ned Brooks, who I know only as a fine fanzine editor and writer about obscure books and magazines, tells us about the only job he held before he retired some years ago. He stress-tested machines and people for NASA. Beginning in hydrodynamics, he also tested the heat tiles for the Space Shuttle craft and worked with supersonic wind tunnels. Brooks is one of those unexpected quiet geniuses one can meet only in fandom.

In his editorial for *SoWS* 5, Rich shows that he is one of the few American SF readers who is fully aware of the SF riches appearing from Britain these days. Many of the best books appear only from British small publishers, which is why I find it hard to discover that they exist. Rich talks three books from major British publishers: Ian McDonald's *The Dervish House*, a major new novel from Gollancz, Iain Banks's *Surface Detail* (Orbit Books), which sits staring at me from the bookcase, and M. J. Engh's *Arslan*, which I have been writing about since it first appeared in 1976, most recently in *Steam Engine Time* 1. Rich says that *Arslan* has appeared recently in Gollancz's SF Masterworks series, but no copies of that edition have arrived in Australia. Buy it if you see it — it's the best SF novel of the last 40 years.

SoWS continues its tradition of pointing the spotlight on really obscure writers who inspire enthusiasm from his writers. However, when James Bacon writes about



best-selling Irish writer Réics Carló, I do rather wonder whether he is pulling our legs. Not so; James includes some of Carló's book covers. Unlike Germany's Perry Rhodan, this SF author famous in his own land has not yet arrived in English-language consciousness.

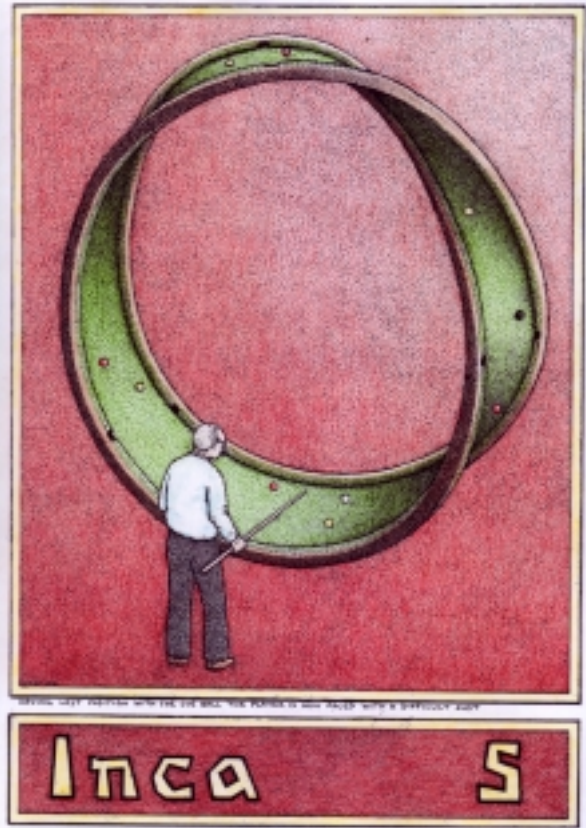
Bruce Townley, in his latest 'B.E.M.s, Babes and Brushes' column, concentrates on Ed Emshwiller, who, unlike Frank R. Paul, has covers and illustrations in magazines I own (especially *Galaxy*). Emsh (as he signed his artwork) was, along with Virgil Finlay, the most interesting illustrator of SF magazines in the fifties and sixties. He died young, but his wife Carol Emshwiller has during the last 40 years become an honoured SF writer.

The only irritating item in these two issues of *Sense of Wonder Stories* is a forum compiled from an e-list discussion about *They'd Rather Be Right*. This novel by Mark Clifton and Frank Riley won the very first Hugo Award for Best Novel, then sank without trace, except as a reminder of how completely wrong Hugo voters can be. Attempts to find a copy now would be fruitless, so it's not clear why the participants in the forum, such as Greg Pickersgill, Peter Weston, Sarah Bond, and Dave Langford, spend far too many pages talking a lot about an uninteresting novel and two uninteresting authors.

A stimulating letter column is followed by another tail-end treasure: technology historian Bill Burns discusses the life and career of 'Henry Clifford: Cable Engineer'. Laying cables under the sea was a major operation in the nineteenth century. Henry Clifford, as the article's title suggests, was one of the people who ensured that the cable was laid — but he also took out his pen and brush and provided us with a pictorial record of the great enterprise. I'm very grateful that Rich can afford colour printing (I can't), because his reproductions of some of these fine maritime paintings are splendid (if a bit small; Rich might easily have left out that e-list discussion and printed a few of these as full-page illustrations).

Bash on regardless

Rich Coad will recognise the above heading. It's a road sign that he saw when he was visiting Hyderabad, India in 2009. His article, 'Hyderabad Daze', about his experience, appears in *Inca 5* (December 2009), edited by **Rob Jackson, Chinthay, Nightingale Lane, Hambrook, Chichester, West Sussex PO18 8UH, England**. Rich's vivid



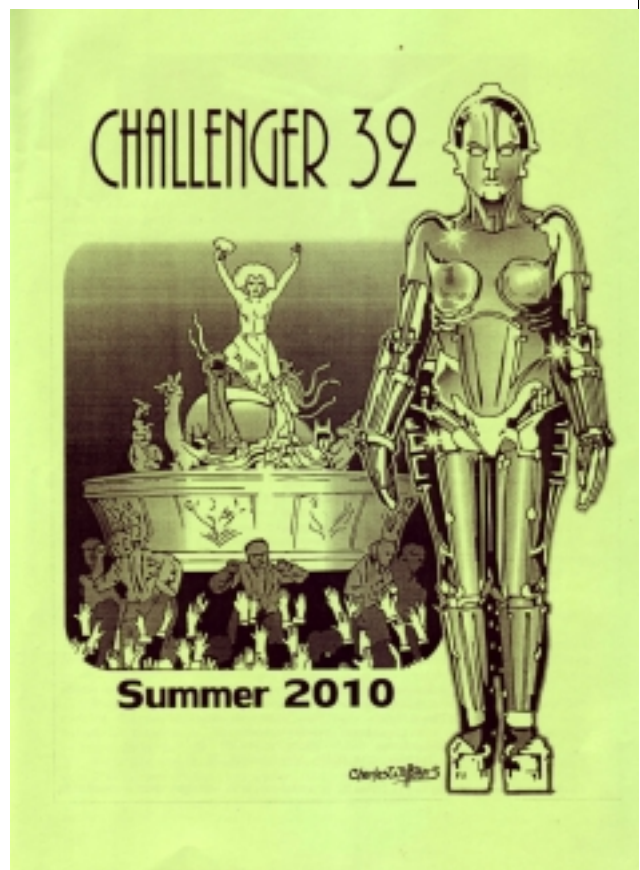
article, with colour photos (how do these other fanzine editors afford colour illos?), is one of the most interesting fanzine articles I've read in recent weeks. It's not about fandom, or science fiction, but it is an article filled with well-observed personal experience, and tells me a lot more about India today than any of the journalism that I find in today's newspapers or standard magazines.

The same issue includes Rob Jackson's entertaining and enlightening report on his trip to Seattle in 2009 for Corflu Zed, again with lots of vivid photos; and Sue Williams' transcript of Kevin Williams' recording of 'Alfred Bester and Fred Pohl: The Conversation' from a recording made in June 1978. The letter writers in *Inca 6 (November 2010)* liked this piece better than anything else in the issue, but I didn't.

I had hoped I would have time and room to talk about a whole lot of other fanzines. For instance, I hoped to write much more about Peter Weston's *Relapse 19 (Spring 2011)* (53 Wyvern Road, Sutton Coldfield B74 2PS, England). Like Rob Jackson, Peter Weston published fanzines first during the heroic days of great British fanzines at the end of the sixties and through the seventies (*Zenith*, then *Speculation*), then disappeared from the sight of fanzine readers, seemingly forever. It's only because of the Internet, and especially the Trufen and InTheBar e-lists, that either he or Rob decided to see if they could still mix the old magic. Peter Weston's achievement has been astonishing in *Relapse* (which started out as *Prolapse*, the sputtering to renewed life of an old and tired fan). He has taken the world of British fan history to a new level of achievement. The best fanzines have always included some fan history and re-

vived great articles from the past, but Peter Weston has asked older fans for their memoirs, prompted the discovery of vast unsuspected stores of photos, and set down the stories of great British fans and pros that had never been told before. Many of these people are only names to me, especially from a period in the seventies when many British editors did not send their fanzines overseas. Peter has created for me a whole world I knew nothing about. However, he can hardly complain if I do not send him letters of comment: he doesn't seem much interested in Australian fan history of the same period, and I have little to say about the people who have featured in his magazine. (For instance, I met John Brunner once, but when Peter's correspondents raised the name of Brunner, many previously unsuspected Brunner-watchers sent their pieces, and much enjoyable and scurrilous information was put about.) *Relapse* appears more regularly than most of the other major fanzines. Highly recommended.

Guy Lillian III's *Challenger (PO Box 163, Benton, Louisiana 71006, USA)* appears regularly on the Hugo Best Fanzine nomination list, but as several people reminded me, it hasn't actually won. Only a change to the current rules would give it a chance. Guy reaches out to a whole group of fanzine readers whose names are rarely seen in the colophons of the other fanzines I've mentioned. Guy, living in or near New Orleans for many years, taps into the 'Southern fandom' consciousness that has largely eluded my reach. Such readers are interested in some types of material that I would never run in my own fanzines, such as Joseph Major's very weak 'Two Jokey Stories', and they tend to be more interested in alternative media than I am. James Bacon writes a lively sports





James Bacon (left) and Chris Garcia (Photo: Mary Jo Kare.)

report, but my interest dipped because of the subject matter. However, *Challenger 32* (Summer 2010, 80 pp.) contains several pieces that inspire envy in me, especially Chris Impey's interview with Greg Benford (from 2008), with insights about the Benford viewpoint that I had not found elsewhere, and Joseph Green's tribute to Ray Lafferty, one of my favourite short story writers.

Challenger 33 (Winter 2011) is at, 96 pages, even more of a monster than No 32. I would suspect that Guy is trying to out-Gillespie Gillespie, but at least doesn't run long lists. James Bacon, the British fan who seems determined to take over the pages of the American fanzines, has four articles in this issue! There is a wide variety of articles on fans' experiences of war. Our own Ian Nichols provides a meaty article about SF war novels: 'What Did You Do in the War, Daddy?'. Lots of photos and cartoons and letters. This is, I suspect, the sort of package that I provided when I was editing *The Metaphysical Review*, the fanzine I wish I could afford to revive.

Where's Chris Garcia?

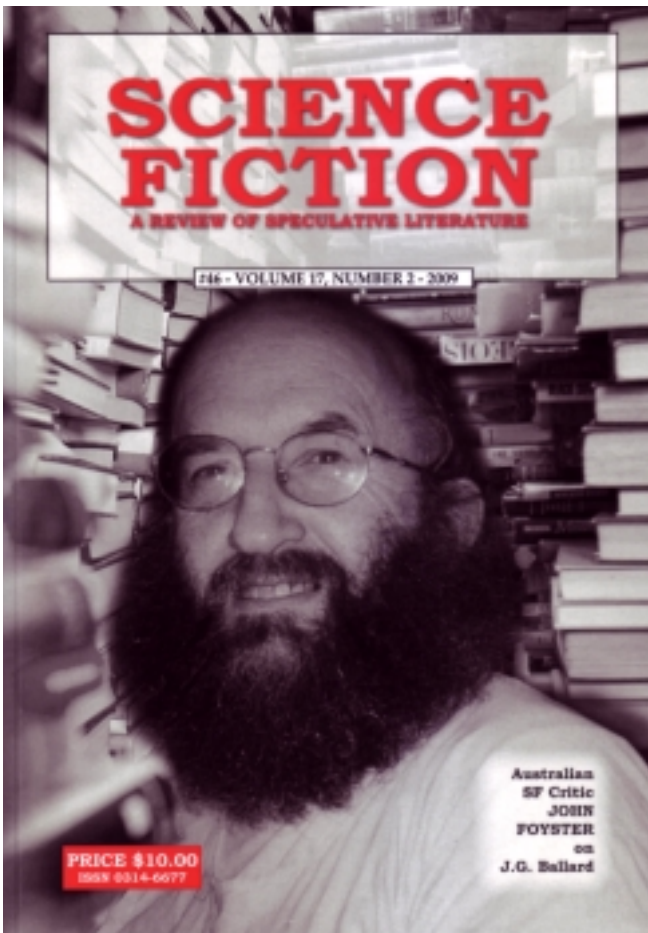
I've run out of room and time to write about the many enjoyable print fanzines I've read recently, and the vast number of great fanzines that I download each month from <http://efanzines.com>. But I must mention **Chris Garcia**, because he has become fandom's own source of renewable energy. He seems to post two fanzines a week to efanzines.com. They have set high standards in visual layout. He explores everything the SF person might want to know about (recent issues have focused on individual SF writers and movements, but my favourite is an entire issue about model railway fandom). Although he seems to spend 24 hours a day producing fanzines, Chris also seems to live an active social life of personal relationships, conventions, and club meetings. He also coedits a print fanzine (*Journey Planet*) with **James Bacon**, 55 Cromwell Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 2JZ, UK.

And wottabout Australia?

The easiest way in which anyone can become involved in fanzine fandom in Australia is to join **ANZAPA (the Australian and New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association)**. I'm the official editor, and you can find my details at the beginning of this issue of *SF Commentary*. At the moment we have 24 members, although we could have as many as 30 if you want to join us. To participate, contribute at least six pages of fanzine every six months — once every three bimonthly mailings. ANZAPA members have a very high enthusiasm level. Very few members stick to the minimum participation qualification, so we average 240 to 260 pages of material every mailing. If anybody tries to tell you that fanzine fandom is dead in Australia, point to that activity statistic. The elephant in the apa, though, is Australia Post. We have to charge fairly high membership rates these days to compensate for Australia's exorbitant postage rates: local hand-delivered: \$A20 per annum; mailed within Australia: \$A50; and the overseas rate will have to rise to \$US100. Melbourne residents who want to save a bit on their membership fees give me their contributions at the Australia Food Hall once every two months, then pick up their mailings a week later.

For some years it seemed as if **Van Ikin's Science Fiction** might take over from *SF Commentary* as Australia's most distinguished journal about SF literature. Unfortunately, Van faces problems similar to mine — not that he has an income so low that it's untaxable, but that to keep body and fanzine together he has to work really really hard at

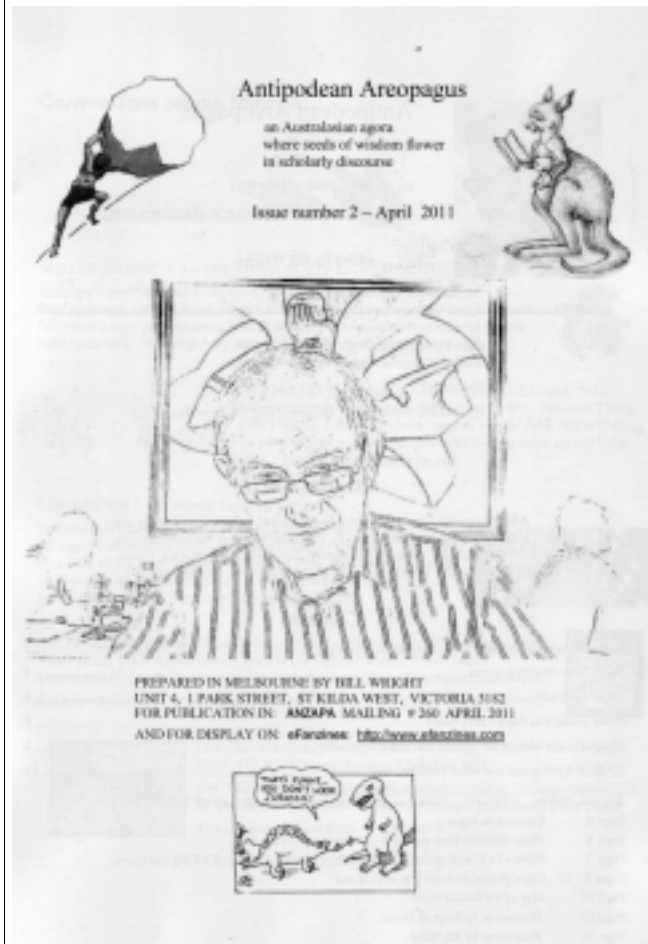




the University of Western Australia, thus losing all his free time. New *Science Fictions* have become rare in the last ten years, but the most recent issue, **No 46 (Vol. 17, No 2)** is his best ever. It's the John Foyster issue. John, who died in 2003, contributed more to Australian fandom and SF criticism than anybody else except John Bangsund and George Turner. His work remains largely uncollected, and can be found only in fanzines from the 1960s and 1970s. Van Ikin has collected here eight articles by John Foyster, two pieces about him (including one by me), and the transcript of John Foyster's funeral, which gives unique insights into his multilayered personality. Send \$32 (marking your cheque 'Van Ikin') to **Van Ikin, English and Cultural Studies (M202), University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley WA 6009, Australia.**

Bill Wright's *Australian Areopagus* (Flat 4, 1 Park Street, St Kilda West, VIC 3182; also available on **eFanzines.com**), is a unique combination of fannish concerns and amusing columnists (especially Stefan, who really should send his comic essays to *The Age*). If you want to gain access to *AA* by joining ANZAPA, you can also read Bill's remarkable mailing comments. In the efanazines.com version, they are deleted.

Mumblings from Munchkinland, edited and mainly written by **Chris Nelson** (the only Western Australian fanzine that has in recent years been published in Tasmania, Fiji, Samoa, and now Canberra: 25 Fuhrman Street, Evatt ACT 2617; also available on **efanzines.com**). Chris Nelson has become the historian of Australian fandom.





In the last 10 years or more he has met and interviewed many of Australia's pioneering fans before they died. **No 29**, his tribute to the recently late Don Tuck, for instance, fills in much information that was new to most of us. The layout of his fanzine is elegant and imaginative, and Chris's writing style is delightful.

The other fanzines

Only in recent years did we realise that our wheel had been reinvented. Somewhere in the 1960s, fanzines crossed over into the comics and music fields. Somewhere in the 1980s, punk music fans rediscovered or reinvented fanzines all by themselves. Today they sell their zines (or 'zeens', as they are now often spelt) at a shop in Melbourne called the **Sticky Institute**, Degraes Street Basement, Flinders Street Railway Station. People who publish these zines seem to know nothing of the grand history of fanzines, but their products, which **Tim Train** and his wife **Lexie Harley** showed me, are my kind of fanzines. They and their pub-

lishers are witty and irreverent, with diverse interests — and even better, most zinesters use typewriters, collage, and other forms of retro repro instead of computers.

Tim is a performance poet with a zany but well-read sense of humour. His guest writers also take a bent view of the world. Tim has finally settled on a name for his zine, *Badger's Dozen*, and **No 6** appeared recently. My favourite contribution is the anonymous comic-strip page 'The Amazing Adventures of Chester Drawers', whose style reminds me of Leunig in his early days, and 'Badgers of Note', which I assume was written by Tim.

Email Tim at timhtrain@yahoo.com.au to ask very politely if he might send you a copy. Read more of his poems and perambulations on his blog <http://willtype-forfood.blogspot.com>. Or look in on the Sticky Institute (Tim tells me it's open only from Wednesday to Saturday, but it might be open at other times as well.)

The rest is silence ...


... for now. Yes, I am aware that I have insulted many of you by not mentioning your fanzines here. I haven't even started on those that appear only on **eFanzines.com**, such as Earl Kemp's mighty enterprise *eI*. Apologies to Randy, Carl, and Andy (*Chunga*); to David and Kate (*Bento*); and to many others. I've so enjoyed so much of what I've read recently that I will continue reviewing fanzines in some fashion, perhaps even resorting to a fanzine reviewzine.

The mighty three-volume Fortieth Anniversary Issue has finished at last ... a few months after SF Commentary's forty-second anniversary. I don't know where we go from here. It depends on the volume and depth of the response to SFCs 80, 81, and 82, continuing enthusiasm for Steam Engine Time, the possibilities for publishing a Meta-physical Review-type magazine, and much else besides. If I had an assured income, I could produce an 80-page magazine every month. Reality dictates otherwise.

Keep sending those fanzines, letters, and other contributions. Keep the conversation going.

— Bruce Gillespie, 4 June 2011

Help Save Science Fiction!



Meteor Incorporated was formed in 2007 with encouragement and support from the Australian Science Fiction Foundation to raise funds to acquire premises for a science fiction institution and research collection in Australia.

The aim is to conserve the sf treasures in private collections whose owners are aging and facing the prospect of downsizing their possessions.

Who will look after *your* collection when you can no longer do so?

The purpose of the Meteor Fund is to allow fans to unconditionally gift or bequeath all or part of their collections to the Meteor Incorporated Public Fund so that they can be properly managed for the benefit of this and future generations of science fiction fans. We need funds for this important project and rely on the generosity of fans. An additional short term objective is to assist local fans to save significant items in 'at risk' collections in collaboration with local sf clubs and associations.

Visit www.meteor.org.au for more information, including how to donate to the fund, and learn how to remember the Meteor Fund in your will: see www.meteor.org.au/contributions/bequests/. Donations of \$2 or more are tax deductible (for Australian taxpayers only).

The Meteor Fund – preserving science fiction

Authorised by Bill Wright, Secretary of Meteor Incorporated
Unit 4, 1 Park Street, St Kilda West VIC 3181 e-mail: meteorinc@iprimus.com.au

Ditmar (Dick Jensen)

Cover story: A new reality

Recent developments in fundamental physics and cosmology, both theoretical and hypothetical, strongly suggest that what we call *the Universe* may not be all that there is (Notes 1, 2, 3). Much that exists could lie beyond our purview, perhaps beyond our senses, so that the possibility of other ‘universes’ is neither negligible nor fanciful. For some people the word ‘universes’ is anathema, and if so, then simply replace it by ‘multiverse’. As the books in the notes indicate, however, ‘universes’ raises no conceptual or etymological qualms in the scientists exploring these questions. The ideas underlying the Big Bang neither necessarily nor sufficiently require that event to be unique — in fact, the theory indicates that *inflation* could be an ever-recurring phenomenon, with universes budding off continually from existing ones (Note 4). The mathematics of string theory support the concept of an enormous number of universes (of the order of 10^{500}) coexisting with ours (Note 5). Furthermore, string theory now allows for macroscopic hidden dimensions, not only the fundamental microscopic ones, some of which — the n-dimensional *branes* — are universes in their own rights, invisible to us, even though they may be close, extremely close, neighbours (Note 6).

As I have reported previously (Note 7), recent developments at the Large Hadron Collider, specifically experiments designed to test, and employ, the ideas discussed in the publications listed in the notes below, have given scientists *glimpses* into some of these existing, parallel universes. These brief sightings are fragmentary and discontinuous, both in space and time, and are so ephemeral and frangible that, like quantum decoherence, they cannot be captured for more than a few seconds. It is still unclear as to whether these evanescent views are those of nearby universes in the cosmic landscape, or of vicinal branes, or of freshly budded universes, or of universes in the *many-worlds interpretation* of Hugh Everett, or of some, as yet, theoretically unknown universe.

Whatever the case may be, the majority of such peeks into other existences seem to be of the same universe, perhaps even of the same planet. It would appear, as the current cover photo might confirm, that scientists have peered into a civilisation in which technology is of a quite sophisticated level, but which uses metals in a much more fundamental manner than we do, and in which energy is most often supplied to the machines through the intermediary of large, coiled strips of metal.

As far as can be judged, the cover depicts what could be some sort of exploratory flight, or, which seems ever more likely as more aspects of this civilisation are uncovered, simply a pleasure cruise in the early evening. For other scenes of this neighbouring universe, see Note 6 again.

Technical note

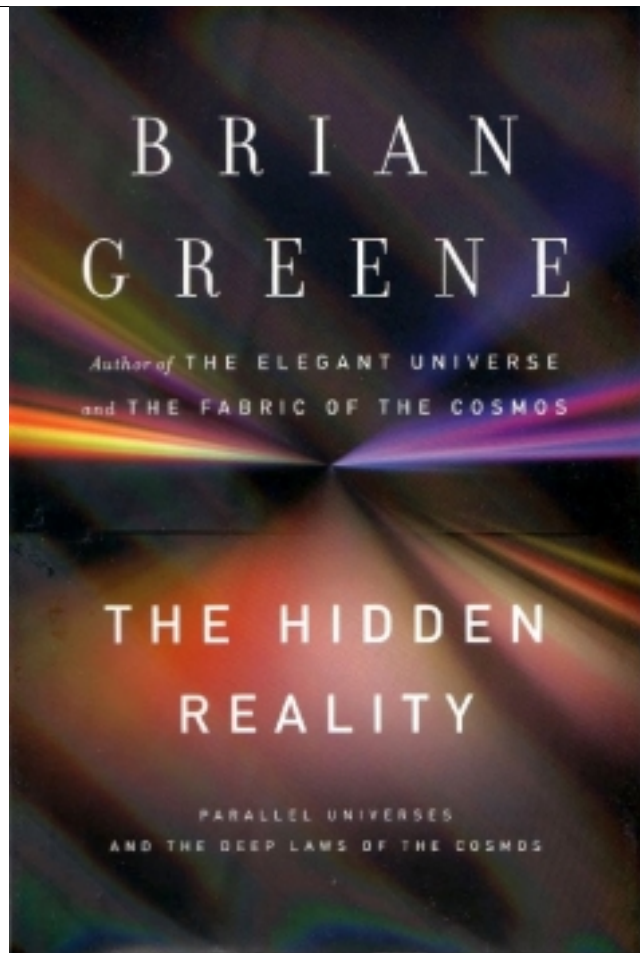
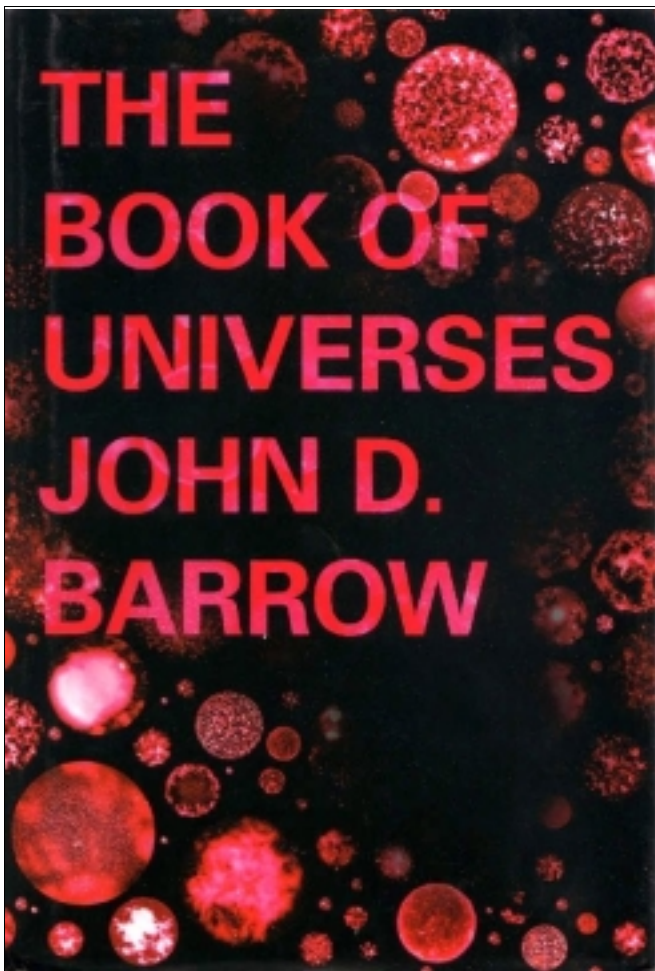
The cover was created using the Eon software package *Vue 9 Complete*. E-on provide a range of their products, at prices ranging from *free* (yes, *free*) to many thousands of dollars — visit <http://www.e-onsoftware.com/>. The flyer was bought from Cornucopia <http://www.cornucopia3d.com/>. Everything else is part of the Vue environment — including the spectacular sky. This is what Vue calls *Godrays*, and while wonderful to see, is tremendously computationally intensive. A ‘standard’ atmosphere essentially is computed by just sending a light ray into the scene and finding what it hits. For the more complex ‘Spectral’ atmospheres, *Vue* evaluates the density of all the components of the atmosphere (humidity, gases) along the ray, and calculates the corresponding scattering of light for each ray of light that it processes. These results are then integrated to produce such realistic effects as the reddening of sunlight close to the horizon. And for *Godrays*, *Vue* takes into account the shadowing produced by clouds — and only by clouds. *Godrays* are only possible when using the Spectral atmosphere model.

A standard atmosphere for a 600 x 800 pixel image might take about 15 seconds: the same-sized image for *Godrays* could take 40 minutes.

But the *Godray* sky *does*, in my opinion, make the cover graphic somewhat mysterious and very much more atmospheric.

Notes

- 1 ***Visions of the Multiverse* by Steven Manly**
New Page Books, 2011
This is a very general, painless, introduction to the ideas behind multiverses. If you find that the articles in *New Scientist* require more thinking and time than you’d care to expend, this is a good introduction.
- 2 ***The Book of Universes* by John Barrow**



Almost all the books which Barrow writes are extremely readable, and present fact, theory and hypotheticals (even if highly speculative) in a very understandable and digestible form. This volume is no exception. If you are a keen reader of *New Scientist* or *Scientific American*, then this is recommended. The background to the many theories of the multiverse treated is given prime importance. As a result, the *actual* multiverses are discussed in less detail, but there is enough to allow one to see just how bizarre some of these ideas are — in fact, here is another instance of science being more wonder-full than science fiction. Just expand the real physics and cosmology with your imagination, and to Hell with *Captain Future*. Well, maybe not. His adventures may not have been scientifically plausible even when written, but, my goodness, they still are quite breathless and exhilarating to read. Just put your mind into neutral and enjoy.

3 ***The Hidden Reality* by Brian Greene**

Brian Greene's previous books *The Elegant Universe* and *The Fabric of the Cosmos* were two books which, like many of Barrow's are on my bookshelves, permanently. *The Elegant Universe* is one of the finest popular science books of the past decade or so.

The Hidden Reality assumes that either his two previous books have been read, or that the reader is familiar with a deal of the *basic* con-

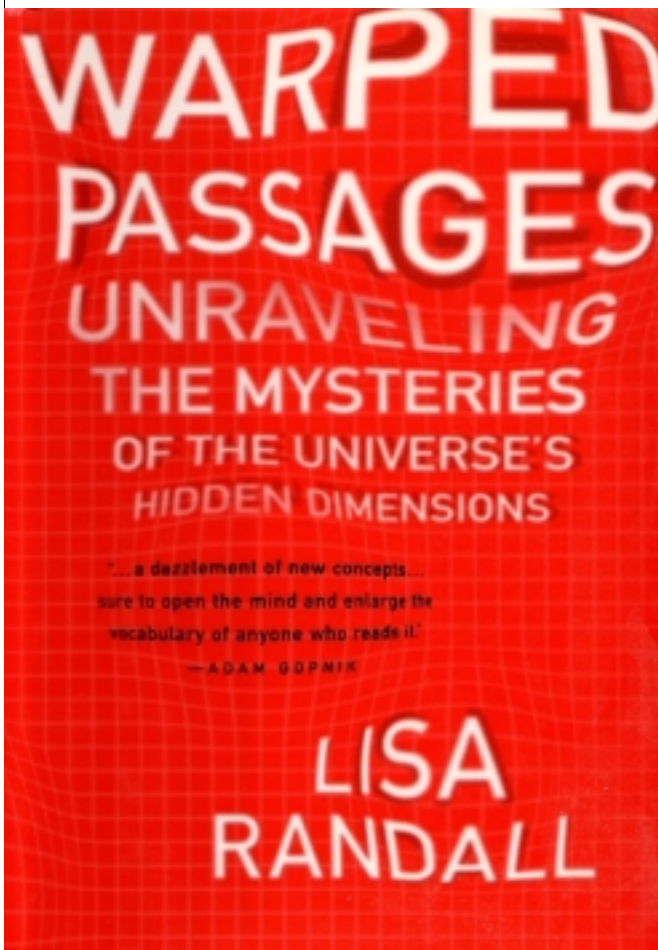
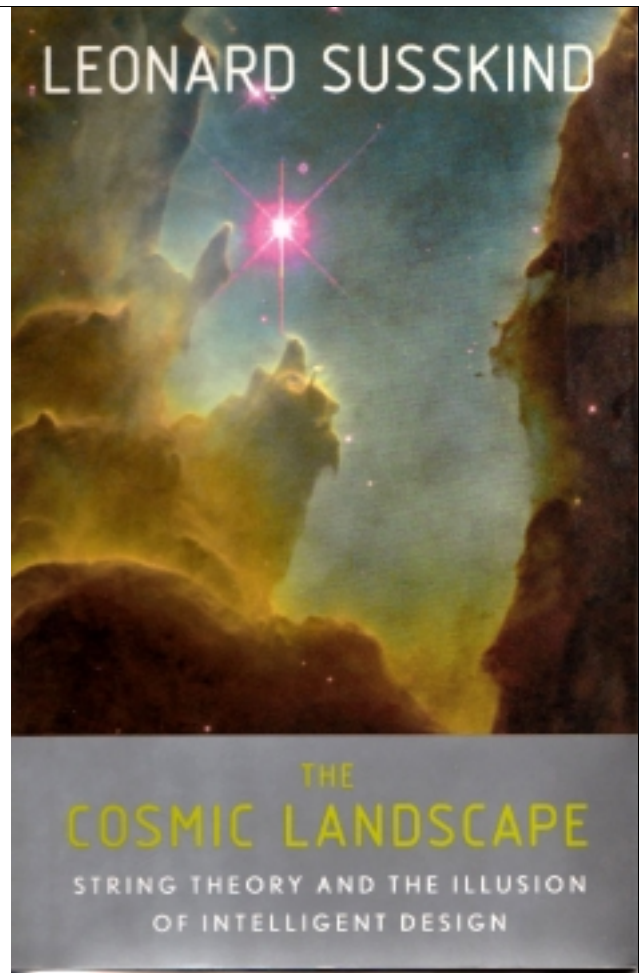
cepts of quantum theory — unlike Barrow, who treats these fundamentals in more detail. Consequently, *The Hidden Reality* is not the fluent read that the Barrow book is, and it *does* require more care, and a pause every so often for thought and mental digestion. It is well worth the extra effort, though, because of the more detailed discussion of the *many* universes postulated by contemporary theory. The level of exposition is akin to some of the articles in the *Sigma Xi* journal *American Scientist*.

4 ***Many Worlds in One* by Alex Vilenkin**

Vilenkin discusses the Big Bang to show how universes may be continually budding off an existing universe. And there is much more here. Highly readable.

5 ***The Cosmic Landscape* by Leonard Susskind**

Susskind is one of the founders of string theory, in fact he is often described as its 'father', and here he discusses how and why string theory suggests that there be as many as 10^{500} other universes existing in what he calls the *cosmic landscape*. Each of these universes may have, almost certainly will have, different physical constants and laws to those that hold in our universe. Brian Greene, in his book mentioned above, explains just how the enormous number of 10^{500} arises. This involves Calabi-Yau manifolds, and if you'd like more information on those (these are where, it is thought, the hidden



- dimensions of string theory reside), then I recommend *The Shape of Inner Space* by Shing-Tung Yau (the Yau of Calabi-Yau).
- 6 ***Warped Passages* by Lisa Randall**
 Another readable, and thought-provoking book on *string theory* in which it explained that the hidden dimensions required need not be confined to microscopic Calabi-Yau manifolds, but could be large enough to constitute entire universes.
- 7 See Bill Wright's *Interstellar Ramjet Scoop (IRS)* for October 2010: the cover, and pages 2–5. See also *IRS* for December 2010: the cover, and page 5.
 You will find these issues of *IRS*, and others, at <http://efanzines.com/IRS/index.htm>

—Ditmar (Dick Jenssen), May 2011

In 2010, Connie Willis published a novel that appeared in two volumes a few months apart: *Blackout* and *All Clear*. The following discussion is not a review intended to help readers decide whether they might enjoy that novel. Instead, it is intended for people who have already read *Blackout/All Clear* — and whose numbers will increase as time goes by. It will also do no harm to those who intend never to read the novel.

Unfortunately, to inspect this discussion before embarking on a first reading of the novel would mean robbing oneself of several shocks and of many chances to decipher clues and otherwise exercise one's ingenuity. However, once the deciphering has been done, readers will want to compare notes on the function of some of the surprises, the nature of time-travel in the Willis universe, the fortunes of several characters, and which of the novel's anomalies are simple mistakes — as when the 21st-century historian Gerald Phipps is arrayed to visit the 1940s in 'thread-bare tweed flannels' (B32). A man may choose flannel for his trousers, or he may choose tweed — but not the horrible hybrid, 'tweed flannels'.

Some anomalies, in a different novel, might have been planted as deliberate clues. Noticing that a member of Fortitude South (a British wartime 'Special Means' unit) has used the word 'disinformation' in April 1944 (AC422), a reader might cry: 'Ha! He's one of those historians from the 21st century!' — since etymologists place the first use of this word in 1955. Thus, there is nothing anomalous in 21st-century time traveller Polly Churchill's thinking in 1940 about 'V-1 and V-2 rocket disinformation campaigns' as part of the 'intelligence war' (AC5). On the other hand, it is anomalous for the head of Fortitude South to specify in June 1944 'disinformation regarding the location of the Third Army' (AC512).

Readers might also suspect a change in human history when Colin Templer (normally an excellent researcher) asks Polly about a part of her multi-time project that she has not yet done: 'the zeppelin attacks. How long will you be in 1914?' (B69). In our chronology, the first Zeppelin raid against England happened on the night of 19 January 1915. This discrepancy seems to be a simple oversight. Yet time travellers in *Blackout/All Clear* have become increasingly nervous about the implications of such changes.

Decades of an Oxford monopoly of time travel

The first of Willis's publications about her 21st-century time-travelling Oxford historians appeared in 1982: the short story 'Fire Watch.' However, this adventure (where John Bartholomew undertakes his 'History Practicum 401') occurred later than his room-mate Kivrin Engle's expedition of 22 December 2054, described in the subsequent *Doomsday Book* (1992).

The remaining novels visited the 21st-century

Oxford time-travelling laboratory in chronological order. *To Say Nothing of the Dog* (1998) described Ned Henry and Verity Kindle setting out from 2057. *Blackout/All Clear* (2010) then began in April 2060 — with at least another three years added on before its ending.

Thus, there are less than five and a half years between the events of 'Fire Watch' and the beginning of *Blackout/All Clear*, published 28 years later. In all of these works, the Oxford don, James Dunworthy, is prominent — and in all of them a pinpoint bomb demolished London's St Paul's cathedral in the 21st century. In *Blackout* it happened 'one September morning in 2015' (B150), but in 'Fire Watch' it occurred in 2007 ('Enola had lived until 2006, the year before they blew up St Paul's' (FW44)).

By the time of *Blackout/All Clear*, time travel from Oxford has been going on for more than 40 years. There is no evidence of time travellers in 2060 setting off from anywhere in the world other than Oxford — from which the time-travelling 'net' allows historians to create remote 'drop sites' as far afield as ancient Troy (in the vicinity of the Dardanelles) and Singapore. A remote 'drop' that is scheduled to open will signify its presence by a glow on the ground or whatever other surface it covers. The historian seeking to return to 21st-century Oxford should step into the centre of the glow, while the air above the site begins to shimmer. There will then be a flare of light as the net opens and the historian reappears in the laboratory in 21st-century Oxford.

The net site at Oxford is enfolded in protective shields — transparent gauzy veils — that lift out of the way again in obedience to a computer instruction. Similarly, when the 'tech' in *To Say Nothing of the Dog* is called away at the last moment, Ned Henry finds that in order to depart from the 21st century he needs only to press a final keyboard button: the console screen reads 'Ready. Hit "send"' (Dog54). Ned also inadvertently visits the Oxford site as it was in 2018, when the veils above the net 'were dusty dark-red velvet' which 'descended with a thunk', and when (as in demon lore) the net was 'a chalked circle' where time travellers disappeared or suddenly materialised (Dog379). In *Blackout/All Clear*, this has been refined into 'the draped folds of the net' (AC132). Willis also describes how Badri, the 21st-century technician, 'adjusted the folds of the net around' a time traveller (B56).

In the course of her writing, Willis has obviously changed her mind about several aspects of 21st-century time travel. 'Fire Watch' is set no earlier than 2055 — when Kivrin has returned from her *Doomsday Book* expedition. But, instead of departing from Oxford, John Bartholomew is both sent out and later retrieved (by 'Dunworthy's flunkies') from the London suburb of St John's Wood (FW7, 40). In *Blackout/All Clear*, Willis attempts to incorporate this anomaly into the plot. When an historian (Michael Davies) is stranded in World War II, he remembers: 'St John's Wood. The lab had had a permanent drop

there in the early days of time travel, before they'd found out how to set up remotes' (AC 108). Another historian (Polly Churchill) recalls not only 'a remote drop in St John's Wood, which [the lab had] used for a number of years' but also a London drop at Hampstead Heath which 'earlier historians had used' and which she had used herself when returning from 1945 to 2060 (AC 152). But when Michael Davies counts back from 2060, he places Bartholomew's return from late 1940 as happening 'Six years ago' (AC 236): not in the 'early days of time travel'.

Meanwhile, Willis never explains how Oxford has succeeded in monopolising the world's time travel for more than 40 years. *To Say Nothing of the Dog* merely observes that 'there was no money to be got from the multinationals, who'd lost interest in time travel forty years ago, when they found out they couldn't rape and pillage the past' (Dog 79). In *Blackout/All Clear*, Polly reflects on the necessity for Hitler to be defeated in order for Ira Feldman to be born and to invent time travel — for which Oxford then 'built the net' (B477).

In all of these works, Willis's love for Oxford and for British idiosyncrasies is obvious. Nevertheless — like some other Anglophilic American novelists — she continues committing the kind of *faux pas* that critics of her earlier novels have deplored. In *Blackout/All Clear*, I found myself disproportionately annoyed by one such inconsequential error: that Polly Churchill, spending six weeks visiting the Blitz, bafflingly (and with Mr Dunworthy's approval) intends to 'let' a room (B 63, 64). In fact, Polly rents a room, which is let to her by an unrivalled practitioner of bad British cookery — Mrs Rickett.

Trouble with titles

In the following paragraph, two spoilers are lurking. More will appear in subsequent paragraphs.

When Lord Denewell's wife is miscalled 'Lady Caroline' in *Blackout/All Clear*, this is probably a mixture of attempting an Agatha-Christie surprise and making a mistake about titles. Readers are meant to feel surprised that the credit-grabbing and indolent Lady Caroline who employed time traveller Merope Ward as a servant in 1940 is the same woman as the efficient and attentive Major, Lady Denewell, who commanded time traveller Polly Churchill in her ambulance unit in 1944.

Willis is perhaps confused by references to the extremely famous Lady Caroline Lamb, who was born Lady Caroline Ponsonby, daughter of an earl. She retained the title of 'Lady Caroline' when she married a commoner, William Lamb (who was elevated to the peerage as 2nd Viscount Melbourne only in the year of Lady Caroline's death).

By contrast, the occupant of 'Denewell Manor' married a peer, Lord Denewell. Thereafter, she became Lady Denewell, taking on her husband's rank (whether higher or lower than her original rank). In this she resembled Lady Jersey (contemporary with

Lady Caroline Lamb) who was born Lady Sarah Sophia Fane, the daughter of an earl. She married a viscount and became Lady Jersey when her husband inherited the title and became 5th Earl of Jersey.

Even if Lord Denewell did not inherit his title until very late in their marriage, this would not explain why the local vicar refers to Lady Denewell as 'Lady Caroline' even after Lord Denewell's death (AC 114). The most probable reason for using these incompatible titles is merely to surprise readers by the change in the lady's character brought about by the salutary wartime loss of both husband and son within less than a fortnight. There seems to be no deeper significance and no attempt to integrate the lady's two personalities.

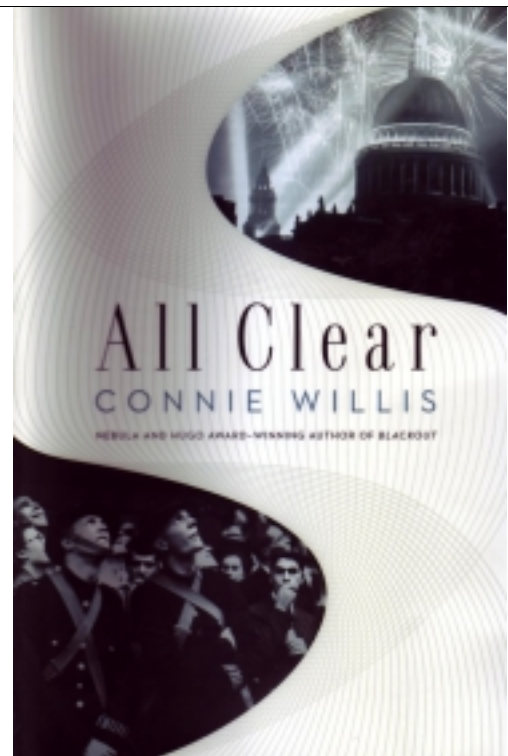
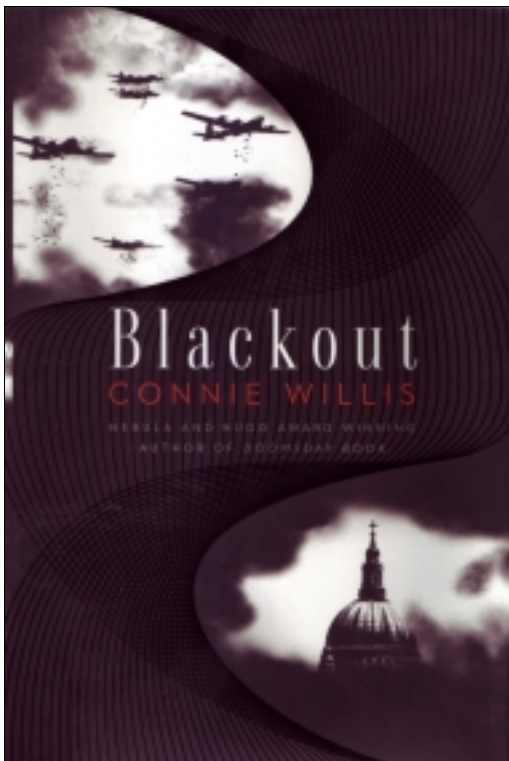
Agatha Christie supplies a possible inspiration for this surprise in her own *Dead Man's Folly* (1956), where the same character appears at one time as a languorous exotic with a childlike mind, and at another as a shrewd and energetic outdoor type. In the same novel, Christie assigns to the crime writer Mrs Ariadne Oliver an apposite observation: "It's never difficult to think of things," said Mrs Oliver. "The trouble is that you think of too many, and then it all becomes too complicated, so you have to relinquish some of them and that is rather agony." Indeed, Willis herself may have found that it was too much agony to relinquish Agatha Christie's *Murder in the Calais Coach* — a title very useful for hinting to various characters in the novel that England is planning an invasion by way of Calais.

Unfortunately, although Agatha Christie's *Murder in the Calais Coach* is a tantalisingly useful title for Willis's purposes, and although it was first published in 1934, it was not available from London libraries and bookshops in the 1940s. This was the American title for a mystery whose solution, according to Raymond Chandler, 'only a half-wit could guess'. In Britain, it was published as *Murder on the Orient Express*.

Whether or not Willis found out that the 'Calais' title was inappropriate, she seems aware that alternative titles exist. Merope quotes the British title of Christie's 1937 novel *Dumb Witness* (AC 44), instead of its American title, *Poirot Loses a Client*. She receives (AC 223) the British edition of *Three Act Tragedy* (1935) — not the American title, *Murder in Three Acts*. On the other hand, when Merope refers to *Unnatural Death* by Dorothy L. Sayers, published in Britain in 1927, she inexplicably uses its American title: *The Dawson Pedigree* (AC 52).

Slippages and chaos theory

When 'Fire Watch' dispatches an historian from St John's Wood as late as 2055 and demolishes St Paul's as early as 2007, the reader may wonder whether these anomalies qualify as the kind of 'discrepancy' or 'incongruity' that the time-travelling historians anxiously look out for, lest their own intrusion has significantly altered history. In 'Fire Watch', John



Bartholomew asks himself: ‘Is there a tough, immutable past? Or is there a new past every day and do we, the historians, make it?’ (*FW*13). Time-travel theorists argue with one another about whether the space-time continuum simply refuses to allow itself to be significantly altered, or whether it has already coped with a certain amount of alteration (having ‘been able to cancel out the changes’ (*B*7)) but will break down if historians continue to interfere with it.

According to ‘chaos theory’, the net protects the continuum by introducing ‘slippages’ — opening at times or even localities different from what the laboratory has programmed. This is supposed to prevent ‘nearly all potential incongruities by removing the time traveller from the area of potential danger’ — and the net has accordingly been ‘modified to automatically shut down whenever the slippage reaches dangerous levels’ (*Dog* 46). In *Blackout/All Clear*, Michael Davies consoles himself that ‘if his presence at Dunkirk would have altered events and caused a paradox, then the net would never have let him through (*B* 187).’ However, as Mr Dunworthy reflects in *Doomsday Book*, nobody knows exactly which moments of history are ‘critical’ (*Doom* 31).

Another protection is the net’s refusal to open if contemporaries are near enough to detect its shimmering. This safeguard was first mentioned in *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, where Verity found that the net would not open for her return from the 19th century, although the drop intermittently shimmered to signify its presence. Trying to explain the net’s refusal, Ned asked her: ‘Could someone have been there? Someone who might have seen you?’ (*Dog* 368).

By contrast, in *Doomsday Book*, it is regarded as a matter of chance whether contemporaries witness the time-traveller’s arrival. When Mr Dunworthy is about

to travel to the 14th century, the youthful Colin Templer asks him: ‘Shouldn’t you take your spectacles off? In case someone sees you come through?’ (*Doom* 592). When Kivrin arrived in the 14th century, the opening of the net was witnessed by the contemporary Father Roche and his ass. This did not cause Kivrin to worry about a discrepancy when she eventually realised that the priest ‘had seen her come through, had come and stood over her as she lay there with her eyes closed’ (*Doom* 602) — and had accordingly identified her as Saint Catherine, descended from Heaven to help his community in the ‘last days’ of the Black Death.

As readers of *Blackout/All Clear* will know, Polly Churchill eventually receives the kind of revelation about time-travel theory that an Agatha-Christie plot delivers: that they have ‘been looking at the entire situation the wrong way round, that something else entirely is going on’ (*AC* 541). This discovery is vital, impressive, and emotional — whereas there is something more mechanical in the novel’s method of telling its story by constant switching from one viewpoint to another and from one time to another. The deciphering may seem like an unrewarding exercise in extracting a straightforward chronology or in identifying the same character under different names. As in Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), a character may fail to mention quite all that he has been doing and thinking. Yet in the first sections of *All Clear* (rather too full of historians increasing their sense of personal guilt by telling lies in order to spare one another from frightful realisations), Willis risks the kind of objection expressed in the title of Edmund Wilson’s article of 1945: ‘Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?’

A temptation to be too clever by half

For my part, I enjoyed pitting my wits (sometimes successfully) against Willis's guile. From clues in *Blackout*, 'Mary Kent' was easily identified as one of Polly Churchill's names. Polly had told her colleague Merope Ward (*B* 44) that on assignment she always used her own Christian name or one of its nicknames. Teasingly, Willis later causes Merope to list less than all of the nicknames for people called Mary: 'Mamie, and Molly and —' (*B* 229). In addition, Polly always selects Shakespearean names for her surnames. Having identified 'Kent' as chosen from *King Lear*, I fell into a trap and identified 'Douglas' as a surname from *Henry IV, Part 1*.

In fact, I was correct in identifying 'Douglas' as Polly, but incorrect in supposing that she was then on a different assignment from Mary Kent's (driving ambulances during the V-1 and V-2 bombings). I assumed that the three companions on their way to Trafalgar Square on VE-Day eve were being referred to by their surnames – Douglas, Paige, and Reardon (*B* 157–61). However, Paige later emerges as the Christian name of Mary's ambulance-unit colleague, Lieutenant Fairchild (*AC* 326), and 'Douglas' is a nickname assigned to Mary because she mistook the sound of a motorcycle engine for the approach of a V-1 flying bomb. In addition to 'Triumph', Mary answers to 'DeHavilland and Norton': 'every motorcycle they can think of, in fact' (*AC* 145). However, it is not until she is being rescued from a bomb-site in Croydon that another ambulance driver (Cynthia Camberley) calls Mary by the name 'Douglas' — crying out, 'It's Fairchild and Douglas!' (*AC* 353).

This telescoping of Polly's assignments was by no means the only shock lurking at the bombsite in Croydon — but my own surprise made me wonder how intelligible *All Clear* would be to a reader who had not already worked out that Polly Churchill was both 'Mary Kent' and 'Douglas'. Teasingly, the name 'Douglas' is first applied to a motorcycle many pages later, when the time-travelling historian Michael Davies 'reached Dover in mid-afternoon, on the back of an army corporal's Douglas motorcycle' (*AC* 425).

Oxford dons and confusion of chronologies

Traditional 'absent-minded' Oxford dons were supposed to think so profoundly that they had almost no attention to spare for self-preservation (as in looking where they were going) or self-promotion (the projection of tirelessly eloquent efficiency). In Willis's account of how James Dunworthy muddles through in his management of Oxford's time-travel, a superficial impression of the donnish manner seems to have been mistaken for the deeper workings of the donnish mind.

Among the Oxford inefficiencies that seem intended to be amusing, the ignorance and lack of clothes and expertise in the historical project's 'Wardrobe' department ('those idiot techs in Wardrobe', as Polly thinks of them (*AC* 15)) seem both incredible and inconsistent. Perhaps, by the late 21st century, there would be no black dye with which to transform a navy-blue skirt. But it's hard to believe that Wardrobe would stock only two vaguely 20th-century black skirts — one from the 1960s and the other from the 21st century (*B* 65–6). By contrast, as 'Mary Kent', Polly obviously had a choice of evening wear for the same period, emerging with frocks that are judged 'heavenly' by Londoners in 1944: 'When she'd got them from Wardrobe, she'd purposely chosen ones that looked worn so she wouldn't stand out here' (*B* 178).

In 'Fire Watch', John Bartholomew becomes the victim of a seemingly arbitrary change. He has spent four years preparing for an Oxford 'practicum' in which he will travel with the Apostle Saint Paul. Then, because 'some computer adds an "s"' (*FW* 3), he is instead given two days to prepare for a practicum at St Paul's Cathedral during the London Blitz.

In what seems at first a similar spirit, 21st-century historians in *Blackout/All Clear* find that the sequence of their multitime assignments has been shifted without notice. Michael Davies is especially discontented, because he has prepared for Pearl Harbor by getting an 'American L-and-A implant' (*B* 26), which causes him to have an American accent and to say 'flashlights' and 'elevators' instead of 'torches' and 'lifts' (*AC* 107). Now he finds that he will be visiting Devon first (observing the boats returning from the Dunkirk evacuation in May 1940) — and will have to pretend to be an American reporter.

Dunworthy has changed these schedules in order to place each person's assignments in chronological order. If slippages on the net increase until they are years long, he is worried that a person arriving for an assignment in December 1943 might overlap with herself in a visit that took place later in her own personal biography but earlier in calendar time. This seems likely to happen to Polly, when she visits England in 1940, having already returned from another visit that began in 1943. When the net becomes inaccessible to 21st-century historians visiting England in 1940, they all face the prospect of living through the 1940s, year by year. However, Polly is in danger that the space-time continuum will annihilate her by late December 1943: the 'deadline' when she would otherwise manifest the paradox of a twin presence.

In April 2060, Dunworthy realises that Polly has already returned from 1945 and has not been heard of during the two days since her subsequent setting off for 1940. He insists on instantly following and retrieving her himself. Given his anxieties about increased slippage, Dunworthy is rash indeed to plan an arrival at the 'St Paul's drop' (*AC* 129) on 10 September 1940 — knowing of his own former visit to the

nearby St Paul's Station (AC 402) at the age of seventeen, on 17 September 1940. Although the tech, Badri, also knows of that visit and utters a protest, he allows his objection to be arbitrarily overborne.

Even without the danger of coinciding with oneself, it seems absurd for Mr Dunworthy ever to approve Polly's going first to 1943 and then to 1940. Completely apart from slippage dangers, she is far too likely in her second visit to meet with someone who knew her in 1940 — an experience that still awaits her in her own future. Indeed, she fears that this has happened in July 1944, when she is 'Mary Kent' of the FANYs (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry) and is chauffeuring Flight Officer Stephen Lang, who dashingly woos her with the assurance that they have 'met before' (AC 33).

Having invented these confusing chronologies to exercise the reader's wits, the author herself becomes slightly confused by them. Thus, in December 1940, the shopgirl 'Polly Sebastian' has no reason to avoid encountering FANYs. They will not be getting to know her until 1944. Meanwhile, Polly keeps trying to conceal the fact of her 1943–45 visit from her equally stranded colleagues, Merope Ward and Michael Davies — in order not to worry them. But Merope deduces that Polly 'turned and ran from a group of FANYs' because 'she knew them from her assignment' in 1944. She also accuses Polly (AC 188) of being 'afraid someone in Bethnal Green would recognize you. You were attached to the ambulance unit there, weren't you?' But there is no danger that contemporaries meeting Polly in 1943–45 will be able to remember that experience in 1940.

Flash-time and birthday celebrations

In *Doomsday Book*, Colin Templer was a resourceful and energetic 12-year-old who illicitly visited the 14th century and thus saved the lives of Kivrin Engle and Mr Dunworthy. In *Blackout/All Clear*, Colin is 17 years old, in his final year at Eton, and in love with the 25-year-old Polly Churchill. Colin wags school not only in order to see Polly and do research for her, but also in the hope of persuading Mr Dunworthy to send him immediately on 'flash-time' assignments. His aim is to have his age coincide with Polly's by the end of her six-week 'real-time' assignment in the Blitz — before she has time to fall in love with somebody else.

Using flash-time, Polly has spent a little over 16 months in the past as 'Mary Kent' — arriving on 29 December 1943 (AC 332) and leaving just before midnight on 7 May 1945 (AC 152). In 2060, this excursion occupies 'a month' (AC 128). Her Blitz assignment will be 'real-time' (with a drop set for 'half hour on-and-off' (B71)) and is intended to occupy six weeks. If Colin takes four flash-time assignments of two years each, he will be 25 when they meet again and no longer 'illegal' (B70) as a marriage partner.

He assures Polly that he plans 'to be devastatingly handsome and charming' (B72) at the age of 25 — or at 30 if that is the age she prefers.

Colin's plan implies that time-travelling historians have developed some procedure for registering not only their age as calculated from their birth certificate but also the actual number of years they have lived. Meanwhile, observers in other centuries may find that 21st-century historians age rather quickly — thanks to their habit of making lengthy excursions to the 21st century during their assignments, and then reappearing (older and wiser) almost immediately after their departure. In *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, Verity spends 'hours' in the 21st century while five minutes elapse in the 19th century — to which she returns 'starving' (Dog201). In *Blackout/All Clear*, Merope similarly visits April 2060 for 'two days' (B42) (although she hoped to spend more) without being absent more than a few minutes from her drop site in February 1940.

Because the net shuts down unexpectedly after Polly's arrival in the Blitz, Polly lives through seven months there instead of her intended six weeks. Having set off in April 2060, she afterwards loses the 'real-time' connection with the 21st century and returns to it years later than November 2060.

Meanwhile, I feel that Willis intends readers to wonder (as I did) whether Colin has accidentally stranded himself in the persona of Sir Godfrey Kingsman, a famous Shakespearean actor unrecorded in our histories but 70 years old when Polly encounters him during the Blitz. If so, Colin might have become stranded in about 1887, and spent 53 years in real time: growing from 17 to 70. In 1940, Sir Godfrey laments that he is not 'forty years younger' (B205) — in which case Polly 'would not be safe' with him. Secretly agreeing that a 30-year-old Sir Godfrey would have been 'truly dangerous', Polly thinks 'suddenly of Colin' and his willingness to be 30 for her, but not 70. Similarly, when Polly first arrives in the Blitz, Sir Godfrey rescues her from general disapproval just as she is wishing that Colin could keep his promise to 'come rescue' her when needed (B101).

Sir Godfrey later tells Polly that she restored his faith in life by being the 'embodiment of everything I thought the war had destroyed' (AC 558). Her eloquent face — her inability 'to dissemble' (AC 478) — is her own distinctive virtue on stage. In addition: 'you knew all your lines' (AC 499). Shakespeare's plays had been 'implanted' in Polly (B44) for a 16th-century assignment. This implant leads me to diagnose a simple misprint in *Blackout/All Clear* when Sir Godfrey mutters that 'Shakespeare never put children in his plays' (AC 583) and Polly tells him he is 'forgetting the little princess.' Surely this should be the 'little princes.' (On the other hand, Sir Godfrey retorts 'Whom he had the good sense to murder in the second act' — whereas it's in the fourth, not the second, act of *Richard III* that the princes are murdered.)

A rose by any other name

When Polly Churchill, Merope Ward, and Michael Davies meet together in London on 25 October 1940, they have become stranded in the Blitz under the identities of Polly Sebastian, Eileen O'Reilly, and Mike Davis. Polly has been unable to get the net to open ever since her arrival on 14 September 1940. The other two have found their drop sites closed off from them.

Merope has missed her intended departure date of 2 May 1940 because of quarantine for measles at Denewell Manor. Her intervention has preserved the lives of two urchins, Binnie and Alf Hodbin, who are so destructive and infuriating that in February 1940 she contemplated throttling them: 'History would so clearly be a better place without them' (B 31).

Michael ought to have stayed only 'a few days' (B 35) – departing in June 1940. Instead, he was injured and spent months in hospital after accidentally joining Commander Harold in the leaky *Lady Jane* and performing rescues at Dunkirk. (He had intended merely to observe the subsequent arrivals in Devon.) To 20th-century observers, he appears to have lost his right foot, whereas Michael himself believes it can be restored by 21st-century expertise.

Willis perhaps aims at British colloquial speech when the vicar, Mr Goode, asks Merope: 'What all's happening tomorrow, do you know?' (AC 628) or Commander Harold wants to know from Michael, 'what all's happened to you since we saw you last' (AC 437). However, these 'what all's' are more plausible as the characters' sportive attempt at imitating the speech of American soldiers — especially considering that the Commander believes Michael to be American, and has nicknamed him 'Kansas' — thus causing me a great shock when in April 1944 he identifies 'Ernest Worthing' as 'Kansas' (AC 426).

Reading *Blackout*, I had been irritated by characters with code names from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* who were blowing up tanks — in the sense of inflating rubber models of tanks — in order to mislead German reconnaissance pilots. 'Ernest Worthing' was easily identified as the 21st-century historian among them — but I had no idea that the others thought him to be American. Thus, a joke went unnoticed when 'Cess' asked 'Ernest': 'Do you think you can manage an American accent?' (AC 93). By 1944, although Michael's implant 'had long since worn out', his ability to produce an American accent had become 'permanently a part of him' (AC 441).

In an attempt at sarcasm, I noted (before reading *All Clear*) that the 'Ernest' episodes would probably turn out to be crucial to the plot — which indeed they did. Michael is assured by Fortitude South's leader, Tensing, that he probably won the war: mostly by convincing Colonel von Sprecht (a prisoner of war being invalided home) that Britain was planning an invasion at Calais, but also by devising misleading newspaper reports (some of which are private coded

messages designed to bring 21st-century historians to the rescue).

Commander Harold's life was saved by 'Mike' at Dunkirk. The Commander was then assigned to collect the spinally injured Tensing from Ostende (in a boat sufficiently unseaworthy to be a very unlikely choice). Tensing then observed Michael's initiative and guile when they were patients at the same hospital. He was therefore inspired to recruit Michael to Fortitude South after they met again at Bletchley.

When Michael faked his own death on 11 January 1941, Merope (like me) refused to believe that he was dead. But nobody expressed surprise that his 'identity card and ration book and the reporter's notebook he'd carried' were only slightly charred, while his corpse (at the same site) was supposedly disintegrated into 'fragments too small for the rescue squad to have collected' (AC 341). In the character of 'Ernest', Michael eventually contrives a message which leads the time-travelling Colin to locate him at the bombed office of the Croydon *Clarion Call* newspaper in October 1944. Polly (in her character of 'Mary Kent') had applied vital tourniquets to the injured Michael, but had herself been removed (injured by a second bomb) before Colin could glimpse her.

Ships that pass in the night

In Willis's novel *Passage* (2001), Joanna Lander objects to 'movie parking' — 'where the hero is always able to find a parking place right in front of the store or the police station'. In *Blackout/All Clear*, readers will notice that there is an absence of 'movie' recognition. Although the fatally wounded Michael Davies recognises Polly's voice (AC 544), Polly fails to recognise him (his face caked with plaster dust and his voice hoarsened with blood). At first glance, Merope on one occasion fails to recognise Polly (AC 293), and on another occasion, Binnie Hodbin (AC 617). When Dunworthy is injured, confused, and demoralised, Polly thinks at first that she recognises him at St Paul's (AC 250), but then decides that she is 'mistaken' (AC 278). Similarly, Michael Davies wrongly decides that two youngsters are not after all the Hodbin siblings (whom he had last seen three years earlier) — 'in spite of the similarity' (AC 485). Michael also fails to recognize Commander Harold's great-grandson Jonathan: seeing instead 'a tough-looking young man' (AC 425). Colin can detect 'no resemblance' (AC 453) between the women he meets in 1995 and their photographs from 1944 when they were youthful ambulance drivers.

Just as readers may fail to recognise the same character under a different name, the characters themselves may fail to realise that people they are looking for are near by. Overnight at St Bartholomew's hospital on 29 December 1940, Merope and the Hodbins (Alf and Binnie) have been commandeered as an ambulance crew. Merope realises after a while that Agatha Christie ('Mrs Mal-

lowan') is acting as dispenser (AC 290), but she does not learn until Polly's arrival that John Bartholomew passed through the hospital that night, and that Michael has been admitted as a casualty. This adds plausibility to Colin's experience when the net opens again and he undertakes drops in search of Polly: 'being in the same general temporal-spatial location wasn't enough. He had to know exactly where she was before he went to get her' (AC 450).

When Colin comes to the rescue, he never mentions which year of the 21st century he emerges from — although he reveals that 'Till three years ago, we thought the entire war was permanently shut to us' (AC 590). For ten years of his life (some of it, perhaps, in flash-time) he has been searching for Polly: determined to bring her back before her deadline. Colin was 22 (AC 501) when he visited 1976: 'The year they declassified the Fortitude South papers' (AC 633). There, he found one of Michael's coded newspaper messages — allowing him to locate Michael (although too late for 21st-century medical aid to save him). Colin then lived through another five years (AC 501) before visiting 1995 and learning that he would find Polly in late April 1941 at a rehearsal for a *Sleeping Beauty* pantomime.

Colin's encounter with Michael had revealed that Merope and Polly were alive and together in January 1941, even though the *Daily Express* reported Polly 'killed' in September 1940 at St George's shelter (AC 633) — a misunderstanding that at the time caused Sir Godfrey to look 'beaten', with a 'lined and ashen' face (B 348). But on Colin's subsequent visit to the address Michael gave him, he finds only a 'gaping hole' (AC 449). He is unaware that the orphaned Hodbin urchins had contrived to get Polly and Merope evicted from Mrs Rickett's boarding house before it was bombed. Instead, he has to base his hopes on the absence of Polly's and Merope's names on the list of casualties.

By Colin's rather confusing account, although drops 'in other places and times weren't affected' (AC 608), all drops 'in England and Scotland and the first three months of 1941' had ceased to function after Mr Dunworthy's departure from April 2060 to the Blitz. However, the 21st-century historians 'could get a few drops to open after mid-March' (AC 608) — when they had no idea of Polly's and Merope's whereabouts. Colin is aware that any day of the Blitz that he spends in futile search of Polly 'was one he wouldn't be able to come to again. And one of those days might be the day he had to pull her out because if he didn't, she'd be killed' (AC 449).

How love can rot up your research

Polly was 25 before she began her seven-months experience in the Blitz of 1940–41. Thus, the 27-year-old Colin is now slightly older than her — just as he

planned — but also 'sadder, grimmer, his face lined with suffering and fatigue' (AC 587). Fortunately, Polly immediately falls for this grown-up Colin: she finds herself 'suddenly breathing hard' (AC 588) when he approaches — and Merope later remembers Polly's telltale face as registering 'transcendent joy' (AC 625).

Meanwhile, Colin appears to have been so distraught about Polly that he has lost his former skills as a researcher. When the small girl Trot identifies him at the rehearsal as *Sleeping Beauty's* 'Prince Dauntless', she asks: 'Did you look for Polly for a hundred years?' Colin's reply is 'Nearly' (AC 596). But there was surely no need to spend so much labour in visiting the past and 'sitting in libraries and newspaper morgues' (AC 609). By his own account, 'We couldn't get anything before 1960 to open or anything after 1995, when we could have gone online, so I had to do it the hard way' (AC 633). He appears to have forgotten that his own 21st-century life is 'after 1995'.

We readers live in the 21st century, and know that astonishing quantities of old newspapers and other printed records (including censuses, parish records, electoral rolls and military files) have already been scanned into searchable digital electronic mode — both officially and by selfless volunteers. The 'Fortitude South' papers that became available to the public in 1976 would surely have been downloaded on home computers all over the world long before the originals were vaporised by the pinpoint bomb of 2015, and thus would have remained available to Colin in electronic mode in 2060. There was no need for so much drudgery 'in archives, hunched over volumes of yellowing newspapers, over a micro-film reader' (AC 633) — 'those long months spent in the reading room' (AC 502).

The continuum considered as God's Providence

In the 21st century, when Colin leaves to rescue Polly, nobody understands the shutting down of the net. However, Polly is granted a startling Agatha-Christie style of revelation: an abrupt rescue from the nightmare world of Mr Dunworthy's latest analysis of slippage.

According to Mr Dunworthy (assigning all the blame to himself), time-travelling historians have created so much change that the continuum is headed for a 'tipping point' (AC 400) where the future will alter, and Hitler will have won the war. The continuum has struggled to repair itself by isolating 'the infected area' (AC 398): the time-travellers who are the 'source of the damage' (AC 409). These stranded historians will all need to be killed in order to avoid more damage — as will everyone they have 'come into contact with' (AC 409).

Regarding herself as a kind of Typhoid Mary at the centre of a 'deadly blast radius' (AC 414), Polly begins

trying to isolate herself — especially from the people she is fondest of. One of these is Sir Godfrey Kingsman, whose life she saved when her arrival in 1940 caused him to reject a tour whose entire company of actors was subsequently killed. After an unsuccessful attempt to alienate Sir Godfrey, Polly receives her revelation. The continuum allows her to save his life a second time: applying first aid and blocking the escape of leaking gas at the bombed Phoenix theatre.

Polly's new theory reverses everything. The closing of the net is intended 'not to shut off interference from the future, but to enlist it when the continuum's threatened' (AC 567). Slippage operates to put historians where they can alter 'the course of history' — keeping them there until they do (AC 567). In Merope's formulation, 'now that we've done what we were supposed to do', the 'drops should begin working again' (AC 572).

The continuum has an excuse for being partisan. The invention of time travel is incorporated in it, and is thought to depend on the survival of Ira Feldman's parents. If Hitler had triumphed, they would probably have died childless in concentration camps. Polly likens the time-travellers to the late-arriving Good Fairy in *Sleeping Beauty*: unable to 'undo the spell', but 'only make it less terrible' (AC 568).

Polly agrees with Mr Dunworthy that 'a chaotic system isn't a conscious entity' (AC 567) or 'part of some grand plan' (AC 566). Nevertheless, her new image of the continuum resembles God's Providence — equipped with prescient power and beneficence. Indeed, Merope and her colleagues appear to have been obeying the apostle St Paul's instruction to the Ephesians (in its King James Bible translation): 'See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise./ Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.' Having accomplished this redemption, they need no longer fear having 'undone the future out of a desire to help' (AC 407).

In fact, the historians' good deeds have been rewarded: most remarkably in the preservation of the Hodbins — who actually did well when they blocked the attempt to equip John Bartholomew with a message to 2055 about the trouble befalling time travellers in 2060. These and other Hodbin antics are later seen as vital in the winning of the war. Moreover, when Colin visits 1995, it is Binnie (now named 'Eileen') who tells him where to find Polly.

Combining DNA from different centuries

Rejecting her chance to return to the 21st century, Merope chooses instead to look after the Hodbins — spending the rest of her life as 'Eileen' in the 20th century. At the last, Polly realises (by looking anew at the personality expressed in Colin's face and by remembering how Merope addressed him as 'my boy' and said that she would 'always be with' Polly) that

Colin is Merope's great-great-grandson (AC 640). He will have descended from either Merope's son (Godfrey) or her daughter (Mary): children with a mixture of different-century DNA.

The 21st-century Merope and the 20th-century vicar, Mr Goode, would have married in 1945 — around the same time as Paige Fairchild and Stephen Lang, who are likely to be another pair of Colin's great-great-grandparents.

Acting as FANY driver for Stephen Lang in 1944, Polly had chosen an alternative route that prevented their both being killed by V-1 bombs whose whereabouts were recorded in her 21st-century implant. Without her intervention, we may suppose that there would have been no descendants of Stephen Lang and Paige Fairchild, and thus Colin would never have been born. Polly herself has found Stephen's crooked grin and loping gait vividly reminiscent of Colin, and has assessed Paige and Stephen as perhaps '— what would they have been? — great-grandparents?' (AC 629).

The ending of *Blackout/All Clear* echoes other endings in the Oxford time-travelling series. Having sent Mr Dunworthy ahead through the St Paul's Cathedral drop, Polly and Colin prepare for their own departure in another 12 or 13 minutes. They exchange cues from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. When Polly identifies the 'all clear' (not Juliet's 'nightingale'), Colin responds, 'It is the lark' — and Polly then completes Romeo's line: 'The herald of the morn' (AC 641). Although Romeo's and Juliet's next meeting after hearing the lark was the death of them, the omens for Colin and Polly are only joyous.

Standing together in the centre of the flaring light of their drop, they resemble the similarly joyous Ned and Verity standing bathed in sunlight in Coventry Cathedral (reconstructed on Oxford's Christ Church Meadow) at the end of *To Say Nothing of the Dog*. Moreover, when Polly keeps her 1940s friends in remembrance — 'Not as lost to her, but as removed to this moment in time for safekeeping' (AC 636) — she echoes John Bartholomew's conclusion in 'Fire Watch'. Despite being destroyed in the 21st century, St Paul's Cathedral lives on (with its 1940s protectors) in Dunworthy's memories and his own: 'all of it, every moment, in us, saved for ever' (FW 45).

In *Blackout/All Clear*, Willis has completely reversed the duty of time travellers. They should alter as much as possible instead of as little. It was difficult to understand how the saving by Michael Davies of hundreds of lives could be inconsequential — unless in a religious context. The problem disappears when chaos theory unmask itself as Providence. But when Willis institutes so complete a reversal, she alters her own genre. *Blackout/All Clear* becomes a fairytale love story — and an engaging one — but not science fiction.

— Yvonne Rousseau, 7 December 2010