

The British Boom: What boom? Whose boom?

Thirteen ways of looking at the British Boom

Andrew M. Butler

Andrew Butler, 'the greatest SF critic the galaxy has ever known' (Cheryl Morgan, *Emerald City*) is 'a pipe-smoking, vaguely sarcastic academic' who has a PhD in the works of Philip K. Dick, and has published books on Philip K. Dick, Cyberpunk, Terry Pratchett, Film Studies, and Postmodernism, co-edited books on Terry Pratchett and Ken MacLeod, and has been featured editor on *Vector* since 1995. The following article on the British Boom, described by the leading British SF magazine *Interzone* as 'a farrago', won the 2004 Pioneer Award (the Science Fiction Research Association Award for Excellence in Scholarship). In his spare time Andrew teaches Media Studies, Cultural Studies and Digital Culture at Canterbury Christ Church University College. I (BRG) 'met' Andrew first through Acnestis, the prestigious British amateur publishing association. He has visited Melbourne twice in recent years, and is welcome back any time.

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1. 'There certainly seems to be something of a boom. To a certain extent these things are always artefacts — there's no objective criteria by which one can judge "boom-ness" (boomitude? Boomosity?) — so the fact that everyone's talking about it is to a certain extent definitional of the fact that something's going on' (China Miéville in Butler, 'Beyond' 7).

2. Mapping the Terrain

It is asserted that there is currently a boom within British science fiction — by editors, by critics, by authors, by readers, in the pages of *Science Fiction Studies* and in the publicity for some events at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London in May 2003. Let us assume that this is not a mass delusion, and there is indeed a boom. The Boom is thought of mostly as a British Science Fiction Boom, and to limit it to this genre is clearly within the parameters of a journal named *Science Fiction Studies*. But there is also a parallel boom within fantasy and horror, as well as within children's fiction — dominated by the hype surrounding the publication of the fourth and fifth Harry Potter novels by J. K. Rowling and the fact that the third volume of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, *The Amber Spyglass* (2000), won the overall Whitbread Prize, the first children's book to do so.¹ We could no doubt make a case for other, less cognate, genres. What we also need to remember is the generic slippage and interchange that goes on within adult and children's science fiction, fantasy and horror.

It is impossible to draw a clear, stable boundary around these distinct and overlapping booms, to subsume them within a single movement, but that is

what, with the clarity of hindsight and the demand for narrative convenience, we do with Romanticism and Modernism. What this article sets out to do is to survey the terrain from a variety of perspectives, in the hope that this will help to give some indication of the phenomenon's scope and characteristics. The Boom contains cyberpunk, post-cyberpunk, cyberpunk-flavored fiction, steampunk, splatterpunk, space opera, hard sf, soft sf, feminist sf, utopias, dystopias, anti-utopias, apocalypses, cosy catastrophes, uncomfortable catastrophes, *Bildungsromans*, New Wave-style writing, planetary romances, alternate histories, big dumb objects, comedies, tragedies, slipstream, horror, fantasy and any combination of generic hybrids and cross-breeds. Hopefully a series of micronarratives about Boom writing and writers will avoid the dangers of prescription in an era when the macronarrative or metanarrative is no longer achievable or desirable.

It is worth first comparing the Boom with two other movements within science fiction. The British New Wave in science fiction is primarily associated with the Michael Moorcock era of *New Worlds* magazine from 1964 onwards, dissipating at some point in the 1970s — the experimental writings of J. G. Ballard, Moorcock, Barrington Bayley, Brian Aldiss, John Brunner, and visiting Americans Thomas M. Disch, John Sladek, Pamela Zoline, and Norman Spinrad. If Moorcock can be said to be its polemicist, its Ezra Pound figure, then Ballard was its resident T. S. Eliot — although arguably the New Wave had found its creed in Ballard's 1962 guest editorial where he argued that 'science fiction must jettison its present narrative forms and plots [. . .] It is inner space not outer, that needs to be explored. The only truly alien planet is Earth' (117). Langdon Jones's *The New SF: An Original Anthology of Modern Speculative Fiction* (1969) anthology can stand as its archetypal collection. *New Worlds* did continue to publish non-New Wave material, but writers



Andrew M. Butler, speaking at Aussiecon Three, 1999. (Photo: Paul Billinger.)

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such as Robert Presslie, Don Malcolm and John Phillifent were more or less silenced. A movement can exclude as well as include; indeed different hailers of the Boom have their own list of exclusions.

In the previous paragraph I specified *British New Wave*, because the application of the term to American writing has led to some confusion. Certainly Judith Merrill, in her *Best of SF* anthologies, was looking to Britain for material, exposure to which may have led to a greater experimentation in form in US science fiction. There was a growing permissiveness that led to a greater willingness to explore sexual themes within sf. One product of this was Harlan Ellison's groundbreaking anthology *Dangerous Visions* (1967), in which taboos (for the science fiction market) were broken. This, along with a growing divide between hard and soft science fiction, has led to a retrospective acknowledgment of an American New Wave, which could include 'Aldiss, Ballard, Disch, Delany, Heinlein [sic] and on' (Brooke-Rose 99) or Joanna Russ, Ursula Le Guin, Philip K. Dick, Thomas M. Disch and Samuel Delany (Pfeil).² Broadly speaking the American New Wave seems to be a new kind of content, a paradigmatic New Wave, and the British one a new kind of structure, a syntagmatic New Wave. In turn it should be noted that British and American perceptions of the Boom are different.

The second movement is cyberpunk. It might be true that Bruce Bethke was the first to use the word cyberpunk — the title of a manuscript circulating in the early 1980s — and that it was Gardner Dozois who was the first to use the term to refer to a group of writers, but for the larger critical community it began with William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). Meanwhile Bruce Sterling circulated a fanzine, *Cheap Truth* (1983–86), edited as by Vincent Omniaveritas, which critiqued much existing sf and set out the grounds for cyberpunk — although it was not until issue 12 that cyberpunk was mentioned. In the final issue Omniaveritas declared cyberpunk to be dead, with *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*

(1986) as its tombstone. Indeed, many of the stories within the collection hardly conform to the concept of cyberpunk as it is now understood. In the years since, many other writers have been labeled as cyberpunk, post-cyberpunk or cyberpunk-flavored, irrespective of their connection to the original impulse. Here we have a model of how a movement can begin almost as a hobbyhorse, grow through association with a number of writers, and then explode beyond the control of its originators — and be increasingly difficult to define as cyberpunk.

The Boom has no resident polemicist (although M. John Harrison, China Miéville and others have found spaces to talk about it³), no key writer (although some would suggest Miéville), and no defining anthology or magazine (although *Interzone* could take some of the credit). Even such a thing as a starting point has yet to be agreed. Mark Bould has outlined a number of starting points between 1982 and 1995 (Bould, 'Boom' 308–9) and each of these starting points would lead to a different conceptualization of the boom. A writer like Mary Gentle found success with *Ash: A Secret History* (1999), winning among others the British Science Fiction Association Award, which ought to put her smack into the British Boom — although she's been a highly regarded writer since the 1980s and was first published in 1977. Perhaps we should borrow Borges's terminology and speak of precursors to the Boom, even of work precursive to the Boom. There are a number of writers — Brian Aldiss, J. G. Ballard, M. John Harrison and Christopher Priest, among others — who have been successful in the past and are now enjoying a renewed period of success or republication. There is also the problem as to whether the British Boom should only include British-born writers, or be expanded to include writers from the United States (Pat Cadigan, Tricia Sullivan, Molly Brown) or Canada (John Clute, Geoff Ryman) who have become long-time resident in the UK. Whilst many of the writers within the Boom know each other, there are varying degrees of influence and social connection. Some of them do have lunch together on a weekly basis, but that is as much the bonds of friendship as the secret powerhouse of a movement.

3. A (Partial) Census

Joan Aiken, Brian Aldiss, David Almond, Joe Ahearne, Chris Amies, Tom Arden, Neal Asher, Steve Aylett, Wilhelmina Baird, Cherith Baldry, J. G. Ballard, Iain M. Banks, James Barclay, Clive Barker, Paul Barnett/John Grant, Stephen Baxter, Malorie Blackman, Stephen Bowkett,

Chaz Brenchley, Keith Brooke/Nick Gifford, Christopher Brookmyre, Eric Brown, Molly Brown, Eugene Byrne, Pat Cadigan, Richard Calder, Mark Chadbourn, Simon Clark, Susanna Clarke, John Clute, Michael Cobley, Steve Cockayne, Storm Constantine, Louise Cooper, Paul Cornell, Gillian Cross, Peter Crowther, Russell T. Davies, Jack Deighton, Peter Dickinson, Eric Evans, Jasper Fforde, Christopher Fowler, Maggie Furey, Neil Gaiman, Stephen Gallagher, David S. Garnett/David Ferring, Mary Gentle, Debi Gliori, Muriel Gray, Colin Greenland, Nicola Griffith, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Peter F. Hamilton, M. John Harrison, Robert Holdstock, Tom Holland, Tom Holt, Lesley Howarth, Eva Ibbotson, Simon Ings, Brian Jacques, Robin Jarvis, Ben Jeapes, Diana Wynne Jones, Gwyneth Jones/Ann Halam, Graham Joyce, Peter Kalu, Garry Kilworth, William King, David Langford, Tanith Lee, Roger Levy, James Lovegrove/J. M. S. Lovegrove, Brian Lumley, Ian R. MacLeod, Ken MacLeod, Jan Mark, Graham Masterton, Paul McAuley, Geraldine McCaughrean, Ian McDonald, Juliet E. McKenna, Robin McKinley, John Meaney, China Miéville, Martin Millar/Martin Scott, David Mitchell, Michael Moorcock, Alan Moore, Simon Morden, Richard Morgan, Grant Morrison, Kim Newman/Jack Yeovil, William Nicholson, Jenny Nimmo, Jeff Noon, Daniel O'Mahoney, Darren O'Shaughnessy/Darren Shan, Stephen Palmer, K. J. Parker, Terry Pratchett, Christopher Priest, Philip Pullman, Robert Rankin, Philip Reeve, Alastair Reynolds, Chris Riddell, Philip Ridley, Adam Roberts/A. R. R. Roberts, Katherine Roberts, Justina Robson, J. K. Rowling, Nicholas Royle, Geoff Ryman, Jan Siegel, Alison Sinclair, Gus Smith, Michael Marshall Smith, Brian Stableford/Brian Craig/Francis Amery, Paul Stewart, Charles Stross, Tricia Sullivan/Valery Leith, Brian Talbot, Sue Thomas, Karen Traviss, Lisa Tuttle, Jo Walton, Ian Watson, John Whitbourn, Liz Williams, John Wilson, David Wingrove, Chris Wooding.

4. The Long Wave

The history of science fiction in Britain has been traced back to *Frankenstein* (Aldiss 1973), to *Paradise Lost* (Roberts, *Science Fiction*) and even to *Utopia* (Kincaid, 'More'; although Malory's *Le Mort d'Arthur* [1485] is the root fantastical text in Kincaid, *British* 7). None of these *ur*-texts was consciously written as science fiction. The various scientific romances of the last thirty years or so of the nineteenth century were often prompted by impulses which we would now recognize as science fictional; H. G. Wells's writings could stand as a definitive starting point



SET EDITORIAL COMMENT: The British New Wave — did it ever disappear? Compare the cover for *New Worlds* 178, December 1967/January 1968 (by Charles Platt and Christopher Finch) with the cover for *Interzone* 188, April 2003 (by Judith Clute). Okay, no nudes on *Interzone* covers; the cutup effect is achieved digitally rather than with scissors and paste; and the names on the covers have changed. But who could doubt that British SF is still Cool Britannia after 35 short years?

were it not that this would seem a nationalistic move. The American domination of the genre coalesces in *Amazing Stories* in 1926, but some British writers did contribute to the sf pulp magazines — most notably John Wyndham, Eric Frank Russell, and Arthur C. Clarke — and tried to meet the demands of the US market. Only with the onset of the New Wave in the 1960s did British science fiction begin to make an impact upon the way that generic science fiction perceived itself, in the writings of Moorcock, Aldiss, and Ballard. The moment did not last, however, and after a brief period of success in the early 1970s, the market for British sf collapsed. Brian Stableford cites the 1978 special All-British issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* with its article by Brian Aldiss celebrating the wealth of professional British authors: 'Ian Watson, Andrew Stephenson, Robert Holdstock, Chris Morgan, Mark Adlard, Bob Shaw and Philip Dunn [. . .] Richard Cowper, Edmund Cooper, Christopher Priest, Duncan Lunan, Laurence James, Barrington Bayley, Michael Coney, D. G. Compton, Angus Wells and M. John Harrison' (21). But, as Stableford notes, most of them had already produced their best work or would disappear until the 1980s or later, having reinvented themselves as fantasists. Adlard has not published a novel since *The*

Greenlander (1978), the first of a projected trilogy, Compton was only occasionally published after 1975 and few now will know the names of Morgan, Dunn and Lunan as writers of fiction. The Holdstock and Priest-edited anthology *Stars of Albion* coincided with the World Science Fiction Convention being held in Brighton in 1979, but it was the last gasp of the market. *New Worlds* was no more — there were four, irregular issues between 1978 and 1979 — and since the only other British science fiction magazine, *Science Fiction Monthly*, and its replacement, *SF Digest*, had both closed in 1976, the only outlets for written British science fiction was the book and anthology markets and overseas sales.

In 1981 a group of fans, critics and writers based in Leeds — David Pringle,

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Simon Ounsley, Alan Dorey, and Graham James — decided to take the profits of the Yorcon II convention to set up a new magazine. Meanwhile in London, Malcolm Edwards pitched the idea for a new magazine to the BSFA (then chaired by Alan Dorey) and brought John Clute, Colin Greenland, and Roz Kaveney in as associate editors. The BSFA plan having come to nothing, the eight banded together to set up a quarterly magazine that they eventually called *Interzone* (see Pringle and Terran for more on this). Inevitably it suffered comparisons to *New Worlds*; in part it was championing former New Wave writers such as Aldiss, Ballard, Sladek, and Disch. Many of the stories it published in the early days had the downbeat endings typical of much if not the bulk of British science fiction since the Second World War. The *Interzone* editorial collective dwindled until Pringle became the main editor, but the magazine went from strength to strength, going bimonthly in 1988 and monthly in 1990. Other professional magazines have emerged: among others *Extro* (which published three issues in Northern Ireland in 1982), *Back Brain Recluse* (edited by Chris Reed from 1984 and linked to the small press scene), *The Gate* (1989–91), *SF Nexus* (1993–1994, which merged with *Interzone*), *Amaranth*, *Spectrum* (paid for by editor Paul Fraser), *Od-*

yssey and 3SF (published in 2002–03 by Ben Jeapes’s Big Engine small press). There is also TTA, also known as *The Third Alternative*, which is more geared to dark fantasy and horror. However, *Interzone* is the only paper-based science fiction magazine to keep a regular schedule over a sustained period of time in Britain.⁴

Among the British writers who carved out their science fiction writing careers in the magazine were S. M. — later Stephen — Baxter, Keith Brooke, Eric Brown, Molly Brown, Eugene Byrne, Richard Calder, Nicola Griffith, Peter F. Hamilton, Simon Ings, Graham Joyce, Paul McAuley, Ian MacLeod, Ian McDonald, Kim Newman, Alastair Reynolds, and Charles Stross, leading to what *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* called ‘a second new wave of UK SF’ (Clute and Nicholls 622). Their writing was diverse in scope, yet within an identifiably British mode: for example Baxter wrote hard sf within his Xeelee sequence and has been compared to Clarke, McAuley has tried his hand over the years at hard sf, steampunk, and technothrillers, and Newman and Byrne mapped out alternate histories rooted in British popular culture. As if giving this new generation of writers a regular market was not enough, Pringle branched out into editing role-playing game tie-ins with the Warhammer series of novels and anthologies, giving Kim Newman, David Garnett, Brian Stableford, and Ian Watson opportunities to write novels in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and many others of the *Interzone* generation another market for short stories (Baxter, ‘Freedom’).

After this generation of short story writers began to publish novels, they were joined by a series of writers who had not first appeared in *Interzone*, though in some cases not for the want of trying. Iain M. Banks had begun as an *enfant terrible* with the publication of his controversial *The Wasp Factory* (1984), and followed it up with the sf-tinged *Walking on Glass* (1985) and *The Bridge* (1986), before publishing his space opera *Consider Phlebas* (1987). Jeff Noon — previously known only for winning the Mobil Playwriting prize at the Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre in 1985 with his Falklands play *Woundings* — wrote a novel called *Vurt* (1993), which launched a new Manchester-based publisher called Ringpull and became a cult hit. He followed this up with *Pollen* (1995), but it was not enough to save the publisher from bankruptcy. Ken MacLeod, a friend of Iain M. Banks since childhood, launched his first novel *The Star Fraction* (1995) at the World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow, a convention that saw Pringle’s *Interzone* finally winning a

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Hugo and Noon winning the John W. Campbell Award. Since then Jon Courtenay Grimwood and China Miéville have both begun having novels published without a visible track record of short stories.

From its nadir in 1977 and 1978, British science fiction has spent two decades rebuilding itself and finally is being taken notice of again. It is worth quoting Brian Stableford here:

The writers [...] felt that science fiction had been labouring too long under artificial constraints, held back by the walls of the ‘pulp ghetto’ and subjected to the unreasonable contempt of literary critics. They were longing to break free, to carry the cause of science fiction forward to a position of honour and prestige that it had been unjustly denied. They [had . . .] the conviction that the tide had turned, and that the battle — although not yet won — was theirs for the taking. [. . . It] looked as if the last barriers to the progress of the genre had been removed — and the one thing no one could imagine was that new ones would be raised against it (21).

This passage has much of the same rhetoric of the current generation of writers considered to be part of the Boom. However, Stableford is talking about the

perspective of the New Wave writers in 1970, looking forward with boundless optimism. By 1975 that optimism was misplaced, and there is no guarantee that the current Boom will continue indefinitely.

5. British British vs US British Boom

One thing that has become clear to me in discussing the state of British science fiction at various locations on both sides of the Atlantic, is that there are two different perceptions of the Boom in terms of the market place. At a discussion panel at the ICFA in 2002 I noted that two writers had blazed a trail for best-selling science fiction and fantasy prior to the contemporary boom, Terry Pratchett from *The Colour of Magic* (1983) and Iain M. Banks. But Pratchett has been through a whole series of different American publishers, suggesting that he has not sold consistently, and Banks seems to be a name that had not broken as much in the United States as it has in the UK. It almost feels that the leg-up apparently given to Ken MacLeod by Banks in the UK has been reversed in the United States; MacLeod’s Fall Revolution Quartet may have been published in a different order but it has now all been published, and first US editions of the Engines of Light trilogy have followed swiftly upon the British. In Britain MacLeod has been perceived as one of a number of Marxist or left-wing writers that also includes Gwyneth Jones, Adam Roberts, and Miéville, but in the USA it is his libertarian interests that seem to have caught attention.

It is likely that a large number of the names I have listed in section 3 remain unpublished in the USA, but equally many British writers have been able to sell in New York what has not sold in London. Ian McDonald, Manchester-born but based in Northern Ireland and first published by *Extro* in 1982, sold his story collection *Empire Dreams* (1988) and his first novel *Desolation Road* (1988) to American publishers, prior to any British publication. Equally Ian R. MacLeod was able to enter the US book market well before the British one. His story ‘Through’ was published in the July/August 1989 issue of *Interzone*, but his first books were the collection *Voyages by Starlight* (1997), mostly collecting stories from *Asimov’s* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and the novel *The Great Wheel* (1997). It was not until Summer 2003 that *The Light Ages* marked his novel debut in Britain.

There is clearly a complex interplay between the British and United States markets, with either side at various points appearing to the other country to dominate the genre. The perception from British writers and readers during the 1980s and early 1990s was that they could

not sell their work in the US because they were perceived as being too-British; this ironically was at a time when American steampunks such as Blaylock and Jeter could set novels in Victorian London. Not only did Gibson's novels include near-future British settings, but also several of them were first published in book form in Britain. Bruce Sterling, the cyberpunk subgenre's best polemicist, clearly saw British writers Ballard and John Brunner as forebears, and wrote columns for *Interzone*. It might even be argued that the downbeat endings of *Neuromancer* (1984) and other cyberpunk novels owe something to British sensibilities. At a panel I chaired on British science fiction in the 1980s and 1990s at the 1999 Eastercon, a member of the audience argued that, 'we, from the American side of the Atlantic, look on Britain as being a hot house of cyberpunk' (Butler, Brown and Billinger 13; see also Cobley).

6. Cool Britannia?

Perhaps American eyes were also looking across the water because of the fuss about Cool Britannia.

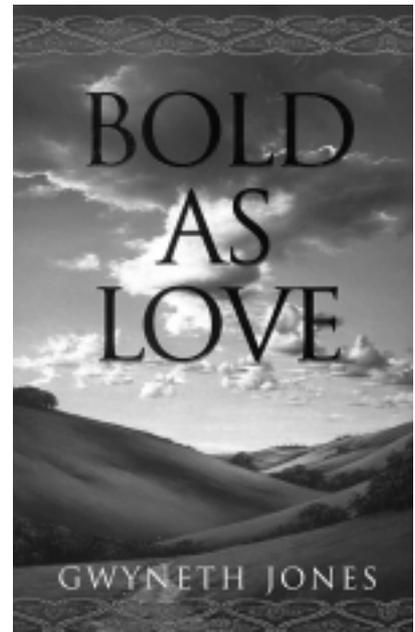
The British New Wave seemed focused on and drew imagery from Swinging London, although many of the successful bands and musicians had emanated from Liverpool. Perhaps by coincidence, the Boom emerged during a renewed period of optimism about the cultural significance of Britain. This time the musical powerhouse was Manchester and there was a cross-fertilization of psychedelia in the forms of acid house and rave, as well as the guitar-based lad bands such as The Happy Mondays and The Stone Roses of the Manchester/Madchester indie music scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Rivalries emerged between the music scenes of Manchester, Sheffield, Hull, and Bristol, among other late industrial cities, and the ultra-hip Camden, London. The Mancunian band Oasis — centered on the Gallagher brothers — went head to head on chart success with the southern art school mockney Blur and came out on top. Oasis looked back to the chords and tunes of The Beatles and the Liverpool scene whereas Blur drew lyrically on predecessors such as The Kinks. Both had a sense of Englishness about them, as did Pulp, but an Englishness that was capable of being read ironically. Their vast audiences were being eyed by a Labour Party trying to pull itself together after their defeat by the grey man John Major of the Conservative party who on any rational level was surely unelectable.⁵

Jeff Noon's position in Manchester surely helped him in the mid-1990s, in a period when publishing houses outside of London appeared to be thriving. *Vurt* could have been plotted on an A to Z map

of Manchester: focused on the broken glass and dog excrement surrounding the tenements in Hulme and the Moss Side crescents which had seen riots in the 1980s, and had become the province of the squatter, the dealer, the student and the infirm, to a soundtrack of pounding bass. Within a few years of the publication of *Vurt*, urban renewal came to the area and the crescents and tenements were demolished to make way for prettier low-rise flats. Whether the battle against glass and dog excrement will be won remains to be seen. The novel also featured the club scene that had been dominated by the Hacienda in Manchester. Noon in time abandoned Manchester for Brighton, which increasingly became the music capital in terms of DJ culture and a thriving club and gay scene. He also temporarily abandoned sf after *Pixel Juice: Stories from the Avant Pulp* (1998), although *Falling Out of Cars* (2002) saw a return to the genre.

The sense of place in Noon was duplicated by other novelists who lived outside London. Before Peter Hamilton turned to his monumental *Night's Dawn* trilogy (1996–99) he had set the *Quantum Murder* trilogy (1993–95) in a near-future Rutland — a county that had been disappeared in the reorganization of local government in 1974 and reappeared in a further reorganization in 1997. Nicola Griffith's *Slow River* (1995), written in the United States, recreated her previous home of Hull and the landmarks, including the Polar Bear pub, of the Avenues/Spring Bank area of the city. Stephen Palmer's *Memory Seed* (1996) disguised Anglesey and north-east Wales as a post-apocalyptic city and landscape.

Meanwhile there was the shared experience of the final defeat of the much-hated Conservative government in the landslide Labour victory of the 1997 General Election. For weeks the phatic was dominated by the question: 'Were you up for Portillo?' — referring to the unseating in the early hours of the morning by the openly gay Labour candidate Stephen Twigg of arch-Conservative MP, Michael Portillo, widely assumed to be a closeted gay. The pleasure taken in the defeat of specific Conservatives blinded many to the ironic possibilities inherent in Labour's choice of 'Things Can Only Get Better' as their victory anthem. After a brief early period of radicalism in the form of the introduction of a minimum wage (compromised as it was) and other reforms, New Labour seemed to progress to putting Conservative-type policies into practice. Portillo, in the meantime, read Marcel Proust and seems to have reinvented himself as a compassionate Conservative, more caring than and apparently to the left of the Blairite Twigg. New Labour quickly became a political



party more interested in big business than unions, and in being tougher than their Conservative predecessors.

Whilst some British sf writers may have been carried along by the publicity of Cool Britannia, and, with some exceptions, the default position of contemporary British science fiction writers is on the left, it is difficult to think of a British science fiction writer sympathetic to the Blairite cause. Blair's love affair with celebrities, including Oasis and other pop stars, must in part be Gwyneth Jones's inspiration for her near-future fantasy *Bold as Love* (2001) and its sequels, in which pop stars of a more sixties vintage share power. China Miéville stood as a Socialist Alliance candidate in Kensington and Chelsea and was hailed by the London *Evening Standard* (not known for its leftist tendencies) as the sexiest man in British politics (Renton 25).

7. Eclipse

Nature abhors a vacuum. It seemed clearest in the announcement of the novels shortlisted for the Hugo Awards in May 2001: *A Storm of Swords* by George R. R. Martin, *Calculating God* by Robert J. Sawyer, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J. K. Rowling, *Midnight Robber* by Nalo Hopkinson and *The Sky Road* by Ken MacLeod. Martin was the only American writer; the rest included two Canadians and two British writers. The eventual winner was J. K. Rowling — the first British recipient of the award since Arthur C. Clarke in 1980, indeed only the third British recipient after Clarke (who had also won in 1974) and Brunner in 1969. Generic American science fiction appeared to be in some kind of trouble.

Cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk still dominated the 1990s sf scene in America, and a series of writers were being com-

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Consider Phlebas had
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was evidently back with
a bang. And moreover,
it was up-to-date,
well-written, fast, and
cool' (Ken MacLeod).**

pared to both William Gibson and Quentin Tarantino. No new movement seems to have come along to replace it, and many of the big writers of the 1980s seem to have been diverted into sequels to books by other writers and media tie-ins. Gibson is mapping a trajectory for the mainstream, and Neal Stephenson's output is slowing. The philosophizing that underlay Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* (1992) expanded through the rest of the trilogy, and dominated *Antarctica* (1997); what many had first perceived as hard sf had become much more cerebral and politicized. For whatever reason the genre seemed to losing its buzz.

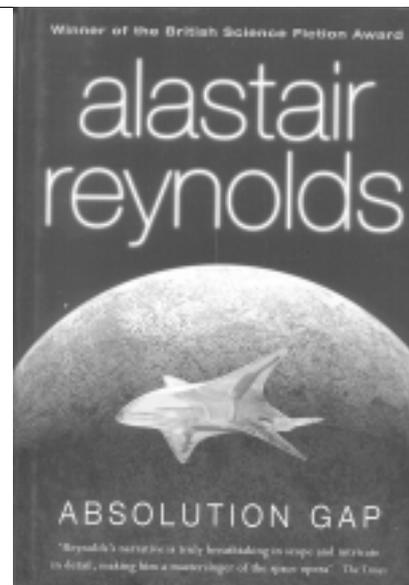
Pages of magazines, pages in journals, slots at conferences still had to be filled, and so editors, critics and academics were casting around for new writers to interview or write about. At first the smart money was on Australian science fiction, boosted by the 1999 Melbourne Worldcon, the anthologies *Dreaming Down Under* (1998) and *Centaurus: The Best of Australian Science Fiction* (1999) and the non-fiction *The MUP Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1998) and *Strange Constellations: A History of Australian Science Fiction* (1999). Janeen Webb, co-editor of *Dreaming Down Under*, wrote that: 'Whether we have somehow arrived in the much discussed new Golden Age or are undergoing an entirely different occurrence remains to be seen, but we are certainly experiencing one of those spikes in literary output that occur when conditions are right' (114). Greg Egan, Sean McMullen, and Stephen Dedman were the three names to watch. Instead the eclipse of American genre sf allowed British talent to shine through, marked by Charles N. Brown's assertion in conversation that only British writers were being interviewed for *Locus*.⁶

8. Remix

To some extent a genre is always parodic of itself. Just as parodies and pastiches depend on the reproduction and recognition of particular codes and conventions, so does writing within a given genre. The codes of genre science fiction, whilst they may look back to Shelley, Poe, Verne, and Wells, were largely formulated in American pulp fiction magazines, within the period of the emergence of America from the isolationism of the 1920s to becoming one of the world superpowers in the aftermath of the Second World War. One man, with his wits, and his bare hands if necessary, can bring down an empire, and save the world. Except in short-lived marketplaces that have existed within Britain and the Commonwealth, there is a sense that British writers have had to parody American formulae to make their way in the marketplace — during the period in which the British lost an empire.

Some authors have foregrounded this parodic intent in their writings; Ian McDonald clearly drew on Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) for *Desolation Road* (1988), as well as elements of Gabriel García Marquez, and *Hearts, Hands and Voices* (1992) drew on works by Geoff Ryman, most notably *The Child Garden* (1989) and *The Unconquered Country* (1986). McDonald's Northern Ireland-set *Sacrifice of Fools* (1996) mixes the police procedural with the sexual politics of Gwyneth Jones's Aleutian trilogy (1991-97), which in itself offered a response to Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). McDonald's remix aesthetic, which draws to some extent on music culture of the 1980s to date, puts little store in originality, but more in the skilful blending of the individual elements. Adam Roberts, a self-acknowledged fan of McDonald, is the author of four novels to date, including *Salt* (2000), which owes debts to *Dune* (1965) and Le Guin, *On* (2001), which echoes Christopher Priest's *Inverted World* (1974), and *Polystom* (2003), which echoes Bob Shaw's *Ragged Astronauts* trilogy (1986-89), as well as having virtues of their own.

But perhaps where British science fiction has become most systematically parodic and revisionary is in its revival of the subgenre of space opera, which had been more or less relegated to the sidelines as contaminated by media sf — *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and so forth. Iain M. Banks's *Consider Phlebas* had the sort of galaxy-spanning plot that we had perhaps thought was no longer possible. As Ken MacLeod writes in his introduction to the German edition: 'Space opera — the colourful, violent, galaxy-spanning space opera so many of us had read when younger, and which Brian Aldiss has



called "widescreen baroque", was evidently back with a bang. And moreover, it was up-to-date, well-written, fast, and cool' (MacLeod, 'Phlebas' 2). But the novel, which introduced the left-of-center, post-scarcity, utopian empire known as the Culture, is deceptive. The mercenary hero, Bora Horza Gobuchal, is actually fighting for the wrong side, against the Culture, but is brought in from the cold by the end of the book, if only in the name of a spaceship. Having established the peaceful, utopian, game-playing tendencies of the Culture — usually viewed from the outside — Banks then increasingly undercuts this in his portrayals of the processes by which other civilizations join the Culture. Sure, it is a utopia that these civilizations join, but the dice are loaded so that it seems in these civilizations' interests that they do join — and in later volumes the Culture's dirty tricks are more exposed. What begins as a left-wing, anti-imperialist utopia ends up in self-critique.

By then there was also Colin Greenland's *Take Back Plenty* (1990), a caper that featured Tabitha Jute and her spaceship, Alice, who owes a debt to McCaffery's ship who sang as well as to Lewis Carroll. Jute is persuaded to transport a troupe of players from Plenty to Titan and is caught up in intrigue and criminal deeds, among the canals of Mars and the steaming jungles of Venus, which are inspired more by Edgar Rice Burroughs than *New Scientist* or *Nature*. As Rachel Pollack wrote in her review: 'the writer must play with or work against what has gone before' (Pollack 102). Having won both the Arthur C. Clarke and BSFA Awards for this novel, Greenland eventually bowed to popular pressure and brought back Jute in *Seasons of Plenty* (1995) and *Mother of Plenty* (1998). Unfortunately the audience were less receptive this time round — or Greenland's grafting of a trilogy structure on to a standalone novel failed. More successful was *Harm's Way* (1993),

There is a 'can't do' spirit that infuses much of British society . . . There is something in the British character that loves a loser — Captain Scott, who did not get to the South Pole first, Eddie the Eagle, the world's worst ski jumper . . .

a steampunk tale where ships sail the solar winds around the system.

Space opera is also the starting point for Alastair Reynolds's novels, beginning with *Revelation Space* (2000). Dan Sylveste is a tough archaeologist and scientist, risking the lives of his team in his exploration of an extinct civilization on the colony world Resurgam. It is not long before his past and local politics catch up with him, but it is clear that the previous species died out for a reason. It might be that he will not have time to investigate this as both an assassin with an anonymous client and the crew of a spaceship, *Nostalgia for Infinity*, with its half-dead captain are on his trail — always assuming that whatever caused the extinction of a space-faring species will not happen again. As Paul Billinger notes in his review 'the most sympathetic character is a professional killer' (30), and no one is entirely who they seem: Sylveste is a modified clone of his lost father and has various other copies of his father, and has lied about his experience with the revelation space of the title; the triumvirate deputizing on *Nostalgia for Infinity* have their own motives; the assassin, press-ganged by one of the triumvirate, is not letting on about her true profession. As in Banks's space opera, it is no longer possible to identify heroes and villains with any certainty.

9. The 'Can't Do' Spirit

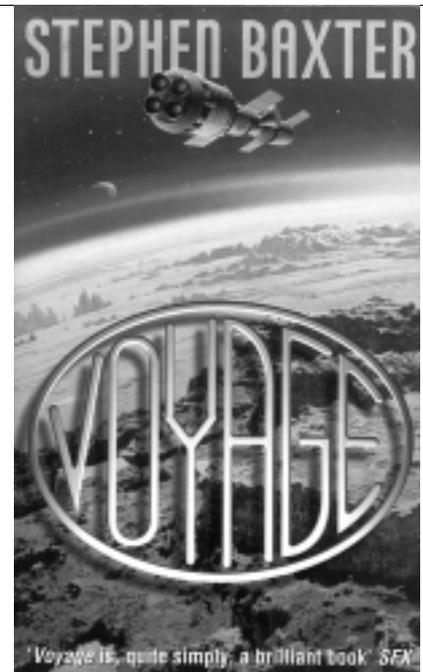
If the United States has been going through a period of expanding influence over the last century, with each new problem just a challenge to be solved, then Britain is very much a country that is declining, that can only see the problem. There is a 'can't do' spirit that infuses much of British society, largely from our experience of declining public services (that seem strong across Europe). Britain is in a unique position with three different international structures: we are the junior power in the special relationship with the United States, we are the often-despised begetter

of a Commonwealth of Nations (who delight in defeating us at cricket), and we are the odd one out in the European Union, resisting integration and clinging on to our pounds and ounces decades after we agreed to go metric in the 1960s and to our decimalized pounds (whilst still mourning shillings). There is something in the British character that loves a loser — Captain Scott, who did not get to the South Pole first, Eddie the Eagle, the world's worst ski jumper, and numerous others. There are also the internal divisions as well — the distinct countries of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, each with their own north-south, east-west or other divides. As a fractured country yet to relocate its rôle, pessimism is the only course to take.

The fracturedness reflects the multicultural nature of Britain, with some attempt to represent the diversity of personal identity. John Meaney, for example, attempts to imagine diversity within alien species rather than seeing them all as other; there are nationalities, different cultures, subgroups, factions, and so forth. That being said, Peter Kalu is probably the only Black British science fiction writer, and the list of Boom writers is rather chappist — most of the female writers listed in section three are part of the children's market. The male writers are at least attempting to portray female characters, including a series of lesbian lead characters such as Greenland's Tabitha Jute, Malise Arnim in Simon Ings's *Hot Head* (1992), and the central characters of Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden*. There is a nod towards Islam in several books, including *Hot Head*, and to the new Europe in Ings's *Headlong* (1999), Paul McAuley's *Fairyland* (1995), and Gwyneth Jones's *Kairos* (1988/1995).

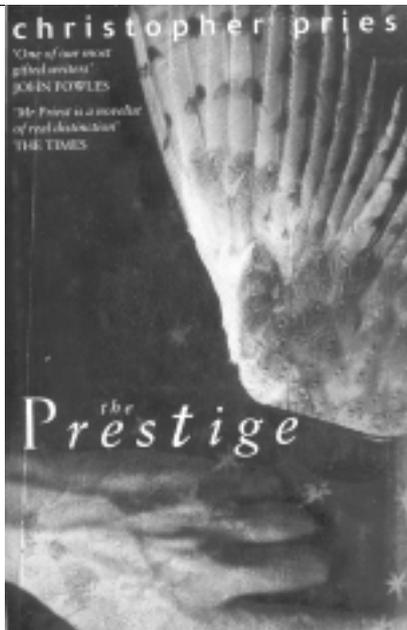
In Ings's work there is a portrayal of life after the cyberpunk future: after the machines have gone out of control and chips have been banned in *Hot Head*. In *Headlong*, Christopher and Joanne Yale have been made redundant, and their chips have been removed. After they both begin to suffer from Epistemic Appetite Imbalance, Joanne dies and Christopher sets out to investigate, keeping one step ahead of European Union agents. The novel, told in retrospect from somewhere in Leeds, is suffused with a nostalgia for the posthuman. Technology is not bad — you cannot live without it — but it is unlikely to make life any easier.

Stephen Baxter's alt.space stories show part of the tension between hope and pessimism at work. He is clearly sorry that the Apollo moon missions ended and that human exploration did not continue further into the solar system. In various short stories, as well as *Voyage* (1996) and *Titan* (1997), he creates



futures (and pasts) where the program continues, where humanity makes it to Mars and even to Titan. If only for dramatic reasons, these are hardly triumphant missions; Baxter imagines a future where more money went into space missions but also where more disasters also occurred. His attitude seems ambivalent: 'though in some ways *Voyage* for me was an exercise in wish-fulfillment, I found I could no longer believe whole-heartedly that throwing humans at Mars regardless would necessarily be a Good Thing' (Baxter, alt.space 19). From the stories as a whole a curious sense of nostalgia emerges — for failures that never happened, for lost opportunities for things to go wrong. In *Titan* there is an utterly convincing portrayal of the harshness of space, the dangers of exploration and penultimately an almost Stapledonian sweep of a universe without humanity. Alas, for many of us, Baxter finds a happy ending — which for me is more interesting for its failure than its success.

There's a curious and not entirely convincing eucatastrophic closure to Roger Levy's first novel, *Reckless Sleep* (2000), which might almost owe a debt to *Brazil* (Gilliam, 1985). The world is literally falling apart, thanks to a series of nuclear explosions on undersea faultlines; London is partially ruined and covered in ash. There had been the hope of a colony, Dirangasept, but the colonists had been attacked by unidentified alien inhabitants, and the Far Warriors who had been sent to operate remote control war robots have been defeated. The Far Warriors, suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, thanks to too much VR remote control of the robots, are now more or less blamed for the debacle. Veteran and poet Jon Sciler gets a job testing a new VR environment at the same time that Chrye, a psych student studying the effects of



using VR, starts to interview him for her project. Sciler discovers that his fellow veterans, also VR testers, are being killed one by one.

This future is unremittingly grim, and the outlook bleak. VR should be a great new hope for escape from Earth, but seems to be another chance for Armageddon; indeed it might be infected by the telepathic aliens unwittingly brought back from Dirangasept by the Far Warriors. The novel even offers up the possibility that Dirangasept is itself purely a simulacrum, and that the aliens were simply monsters from the id. VR is no solution to real world problems. As Steve Jeffery wrote in his review: 'Levy's debut is assured but tries perhaps too hard [...] to be too many things at once: sf thriller, fantasy, dystopia and romance' (Jeffery 28). However, this intergenerification is typical of the British Boom.

10. Irony

The key to British science fiction must be a sense of irony. There is something in the British psyche that sees things doubled, and refuses to let the addressee know which version is meant. Politeness is a key sign of contempt, insults a sign that you have been taken into their heart.⁷ John Wyndham's novels were long thought to be cosy catastrophes, but in fact they are more bleak than Wyndham's readers initially perceived (Wymer 1992). We simply misread him and missed the irony. Perhaps irony is particularly prevalent in British science fiction: if we assume that the scope of the genre has been shaped within a US market context, it has been influenced by a whole series of ideologies such as the American Dream, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and has developed a range of narrative tropes and devices which engage in, mediate with, or resist these ideologies. Clearly a British writer

cannot unproblematically 'inhabit' the US national identity, but ends up using the tropes and devices despite the ideological mismatch. This is particularly true of Baxter's alt.space stories.

Paul Kincaid and Colin Greenland, talking about the other British writers who emerged at the time of the British New Wave, both identified a voice that was present in the works of Keith Roberts, D. G. Compton, Richard Cowper, Michael Coney and Christopher Priest, among others. Greenland identified it as being 'ironic [...] It's informed with a sense of literary tradition, not simply spinning out words and racking up pages. It feels the tensions and connotations of language, so it's richer in history, and mood, and atmosphere, and the shades of character. Time and memory are every bit as important as space and action' (Butler, Greenland and Kincaid 23). That same voice seems still to be at work in Boom writing, although the relationship to the tradition has become more problematic. In a novel like Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *neoAddix* (1997) there is an acknowledgment of earlier cyberpunk and its forebears with its naming of its protagonist Alex Gibson, and there is another (albeit pointless) tip of the hat to the closing line of Arthur C. Clarke's 'The Nine Billion Names of God' (1953).⁸

Boom science fiction should not be taken at face value. In the few happy endings something more sinister must be taken into account — characters may have achieved their desires but at a cost. In the bleak endings many ironies come together, including the consequences of the characters' actions. But perhaps the bleakness itself needs to be ironized as a pose, a nod to the depression of Douglas Adams's *Marvin the Paranoid Android*, and before him Eeyore in A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926). Quite often — and this can be a problem as well as a strength — the resolutions do not resolve anything.

11. The Mainstream

Since the actual readership of just science fiction in Britain is rather small, and new fans of science fiction seem more interested in films, tv and comics than the written word, British science fiction is dependent on the mainstream. In a sense there is a tradition of British mainstream writers being allowed their one generic dalliance — think Conrad and Ford's *The Inheritors* (1902), Forster's 'The Machine Stops' (1909) and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Sometimes it is less happy — E. P. Thompson's overly long *The Sykaos Papers* (1988), or P. D. James's *The Children of the Moon* (1992), which could not possibly be science fiction because it was well written, was not about

**The key to British
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Martians, or was about the real world. Martin Amis scores points for dealing with the nuclear bomb in *Einstein's Monsters* (1987) but loses them again for claiming this is the first fiction about the bomb — and for his allegation in a documentary that science fiction readers are a bit like trainspotters. Ian McEwan, Will Self, David Mitchell, and Louis de Bernières have all used fantastical elements in their works, to some success. This has some way to catch up on theater, where plays on quantum physics, probability, chaos theory and so on by Alan Ayckbourn, Tom Stoppard, and others have been acceptable for years.

The mainstream media in Britain is beginning to take science fiction more seriously, although there is still a slight sneer in some presenters' voices on BBC Radio 4. Cadigan, McAuley, Newman, Miéville, and others are increasingly being called on to review films for the radio, but not as often as the mainstream writers of their generation. *The Independent* and *The Guardian* both review science fiction frequently, even allowing the coverage to spill over beyond the monthly round-up of five or six novels into a five-hundred-word review. *The Guardian* not only reported on Priest's win of the Arthur C. Clarke Award, but gave him space to discuss his inspiration for *The Separation* (2002). *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times* all carry obituaries when British science fiction writers die.

Not all is rosy though. In 1983 the British Book Council compiled a list of twenty young British writers who seemed promising — including Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, and the already veteran Christopher Priest. Two lists later and the broadsheet newspapers wondered what had happened to the 1983 generation — indeed where Christopher Priest was now (this being symptomatic of the publicity his publisher had lavished on his latest book . . .). In 2003, China Miéville was specifically excluded from the list because of his generic status (Jack 11). The barricades have been drawn back, but not that far.

12. '[. . .] these moments are cyclical. We're lucky enough to be in a time when sf is loud and proud and exciting. It won't last forever. It's fun milking it while it lasts . . .' (China Miéville in Butler, 'Beyond' 7).

13. An[drew]thropic Principle

The Boom exists because I am here to observe it.

Perhaps I flatter myself. I do not wish to claim that I am single-handedly responsible for the Boom, but I have been in the right places a number of times, and helped to provide a space for discourse about the Boom, as well as adding my own voice. In 1995, the year of the Glasgow Worldcon and various British Hugo wins, I became co-features editor of *Vector*, the critical journal of the BSFA first published in 1958. Whilst Gary Dalkin, my co-editor, and I were more interested in media than our predecessors (for media, read film, tv, and some comics, not necessarily sf),⁹ we both agreed that the field was being destroyed by what Mike Resnick was calling wookie books – tie-in books. We would rail against them at any opportunity – in editorials, in articles, and in responses to letters of comment. At the same time, we took every opportunity we could to promote interesting novels by British writers, in a sense wanting to put the British back into the BSFA. In the run up to the BSFA's fortieth anniversary and the 200th issue of their magazine *Vector* in 1998, we held a poll to establish the most popular British sf novels. The results were published in the 201st issue; and at the following year's Eastercon I ran several panels on the history of British science fiction to the then present day discussing the results.¹⁰

A coincidence of connections led Mark Bould and myself to the launch of China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000), Mark conducting an interview for *Vector* with Miéville and an invitation to both of us to hear him speak at Marxism 2000 on the subject of Marxism and fantasy. In an editorial for *Vector* I commented on the Marxism 2000 event and added: 'With writers like Miéville, MacLeod, Meaney and many more, sf in Britain at the end of the century seems to be revolutionary: clearly in a tradition, but still finding new ways to tell new (and old) stories. Could this be another Golden Age? Or am I being just too utopian?' (Butler, 'Revolution' 3). By the end of June the following year critics such as Gary Wolfe and John Clute and authors such as M. John Harrison were talking of a Boom, leading to the guerrilla panel at 2001: A Celebration of British Science Fiction.

Not that the feeling was unanimous. After a paper at that conference (on science in a number of British plays) Nicholas Ruddick argued (without using the exact word) that current sf was banal and that literary values were in decline; as I wrote in an editorial: 'If Miéville, MacLeod, Meaney, Grimwood and Robson had been in the room, let alone a slightly older generation of Baxter,

Greenland and Jones, then I would have been able to refute it *thus*' (Butler, 'Foresight' 3).¹¹ In noting the buzz about British sf being at the cutting edge I still sounded a warning, sceptical note:

[. . .] the image of Colin Welland at the Oscars, shouting, 'The British are coming!' does loom rather large at this point.

(And then a more science fictional image, of Kevin McCarthy stopping cars, and screaming 'They're coming! They're coming!...') (Butler, 'Foresight' 3).

By the time I wrote the following editorial, I had spent three weeks in Melbourne – where both *Ash* and *Perdido Street Station* were hot reads – and I had been to the Hugo Awards Ceremony where Rowling won:

There's a sense, which we've been trumpeting for a couple of years now, that we are in a boom time for British science fiction, in the last eighteen months or so we've had a couple of novels which have been respected by gratifyingly large audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, and both seem to be making inroads Down Under in Australia (Butler, 'Hugos' 3).

The Boom was off and running.

In film, the British did not come, as Goldcrest, the producers of *Chariots of Fire*, went belly-up after a series of poor choices – such as editing out Mark Bould's performance from *Revolution*. Some British directors, actors, and writers are enjoying Oscar success, but largely in American films. Is the Boom doomed? Entropy, after all, is a favored metaphor of British sf – and everything must pass. With so many writers active, can the market sustain them all? How many more will the American publishers take on? Meanwhile Tor has set up a British imprint, mostly publishing American authors, and this is likely to offer the existing sf imprints – Gollancz, Headline, Earthlight, HarperCollinsVoyager, Penguin and Little, Brown – a run for their money. As some of these are connected to US companies, could these face a US resurgence? Tor is piggy-backing off Pan Macmillan – home to Miéville, among others – so for how long can the two remain distinct? Worried voices are already beginning to mutter. Paul Kincaid has noted in the pages of *Science Fiction Studies* that: 'the pool of British publishers is growing smaller, and looking at the current economic climate, I suspect that advances will be falling, if they haven't fallen already. [. . .] I do wonder whether we have

the infrastructure to support the renaissance we seem to be engendering' (Kincaid, 'Golden' 531).

The first sign of this may have just arisen in July 2003. Under the watchful eye of veteran sf editor John Jarrold (who had published Banks, MacLeod, and others at Legend and Orbit), the Earthlight imprint of Simon and Schuster UK had grown to rival the position Granada/Panther/Grafton/ HarperCollinsVoyager had held in the 1970s and 1980s. Earthlight republished the sf back catalogue of Ray Bradbury among others, and new novels by Byrne, Calder, Cobley, Grimwood, Holdstock, McDonald, Whitbourn, and others. Jarrold decided to go freelance and was replaced by Darren Nash, who continued to maintain Earthlight's prestige as HarperCollinsVoyager seemed to dwindle to myriad editions of Tolkien and a handful of other classics in uniform, dark blue, editions. However, Simon and Schuster have decided to restructure, in the process closing the Earthlight imprint and ousting Nash. It might be that this marks a death of sf as the list is to be absorbed into Simon and Schuster's Pocket Books imprint, and thus not necessarily distinguished as science fiction. The mood, however, is more that the books will no longer get the kind of specialist attention that Jarrold and Nash were able to give. It is too early yet to tell whether this is the beginning of the end of the Boom.¹²

It is perhaps very British to expect it all to fail – but there is some part of us that is forever Eeyore.

Notes

1. The Whitbread Prize is a two-step process, with individual awards and juries for novel, first novel, non-fiction, poetry and children's fiction, with the children's fiction award sometimes being announced at a different time of year. These winners are then judged together to gain an overall award.
2. For a critique of Pfeil's position see Butler, 'Modelling Sf'.
3. Among other spaces, the Boom was discussed as a piece of guerrilla programming by Harrison, Miéville, and others at 2001: A Celebration of British Science Fiction (28 June–1 July 2001) endorsed by the organizers (Farah Mendlesohn, Andy Sawyer, and myself), by John Clute, Brian Aldiss, Ellen Datlow, Gary Wolfe, China Miéville, Farah Mendlesohn, and myself at a panel at the 2002 ICFA, by Paul Kincaid and myself at The Goldfish Factor (the Science Fiction Foundation/British Science Fiction Association joint AGM event) in April 2003, and at the ICA in May 2003 in

events organized by Miéville and Harrison. Gary S. Dalkin and myself often turned to the topic of the state of British sf in our editorials for *Vector* from 1995 to present. There have no doubt been other moments. To many of these people – along with Mark Bould and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., who patiently watched me scribble on the backs of envelopes – I clearly owe a debt.

4. [2004] But see section 13 and note 12.
5. [2004] See Luckhurst for a longer treatment of the context and project of New Labour's 'New' Britain.
6. This was over breakfast at ICFA 2002. In 2002 there were six interviews with British writers Miéville and Siegel (March), Baxter (April), Joyce (May), McAuley (June), Gaiman (September), which clearly showed the period in Spring and Summer to be dominated by British writers. However there were also six interviews with British writers in 1995 (counting Pat Cadigan) and in 1998.
7. This is not just an English phenomenon; there is also a divided consciousness at work in the Welsh, Northern Irish, and Scottish, either as writers from those countries are subsumed into metropolitan, London life or as the apparently English claim authenticity from 'provincial' roots. For two examinations of a Scottish dividedness see Middleton and Butler, 'Strange Case'.
8. I am not making a nonsensical claim that writers from Britain are ironic and writers from the USA are always sincere – a list including Twain, Bierce, Vonnegut, Michael Moore, and the Coens would refute this – but that the dominant mode of narrative voice in British sf is ironic.
9. [2004] Despite this interest in media, there is a regrettable absence of any real consideration of comics in either this article or the rest of the British Boom issue of *SFS*, as John Newsinger pointed out in the next issue. I regret this absence and that none of the people we invited to contribute (including John) covered the topic. I had drafted a section on media (predominately television), but dropped it because Mark Bould was covering the ground in his article (Bould, 'Monster'). In the absence of that article, let me reinstate that deleted version of section 9:

There is a shared media background to the Boom writers aged between thirty and fifty, which has informed their aesthetic. One of the earliest – this generation

being just too young for the Quatermas serials – are the various series for children by the animators Oliver Postgate and Peter Firmin: the proto-fantasy/faux-Norse tales of *Noggin the Nog* and his archenemy Nogbad the Bad, the uncanny tale of a stuffed cat *Bagpuss* (1974), but most importantly the science fiction series *The Clangers* (1969–1974), featuring a whole family of aliens who sounded like swanee whistles and co-existed with a soap dragon. Despite the making of only a handful of episodes of these and other series, they remain a strong presence in the psyche of any British thirty to fifty something, creating a mythology from the simplest of animations.

Rather more sophisticated in technique were the marionette acted series of Gerry Anderson: *Supercar* (1961–1962) featuring a car that could fly or be a submarine, *Fireball XL5* (1962–1963) with a space patrol, *Stingray* (1964–1965) in which various undersea menaces are met, *Thunderbirds* (1965–1966) featuring an international rescue team and *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons* (1967–1968) in which the alien Mysterons are trying to infiltrate Earth and *Joe 90* (1968–1969) where a nine-year-old-boy is used as secret agent. The series were backed by a comic – variously called *TV Century 21* and *TV21* – which featured both strips spinning off from characters in the various series, and introducing characters from future series. Together it formed a single continuity for the range of the Supermarionation series. Stephen Baxter, an avid reader of the comic through the 1960s, has written: 'it was an important and formative part of my life, and no doubt of others' (Baxter, 'Adventures' 8). The Anderson series continue to gather viewers as they are repeated to this day.

For a slightly older audience there were the two long-running series *Doctor Who* and *Blakes Seven*, the former beginning 23 November 1963 in a Saturday teatime slot on BBC1 and featuring an eccentric old man – apparently an alien – who travelled through time and space in a spaceship disguised as a Police call box, rescuing people and saving the day. When the initial actor in the rôle, William Hart-

nell, grew tired, the producers simply had his ship rejuvenate him into Patrick Troughton; in time he regenerated into a further six incarnations, most recently in a television movie. Whilst the character and the format of the series would change from year to year or producer to producer, some things remained constant – beyond the attractive assistant ready to scream at the first sign of danger. Reason and rationality had priority over force; the Doctor rarely fired a gun and always tried to solve a problem rather than calling for violence. The production values were better than the budget would suggest, with gravel pits and quarries across the south east of England standing in for alien planets (or, in one episode when they did land in a quarry, for a quarry).

Blakes Seven (1978–1981) was created by Terry Nation who had created the Daleks for *Doctor Who*, although some credit should also be given to script editor Chris Boucher. The series began with Blake being shipped for political reasons to a prison planet and his escape with a motley band of prisoners. They locate a ship, named the *Liberator*, and begin a series of attacks on the evil Federation, personified by the shaven headed female Servalan. Whereas Spock and McCoy might banter in *Star Trek*, here heroic Blake, cynical Avon and cowardly Vila and the others would argue, fall out and even plot against each other. It was impossible to tell who was a hero and who a villain, even down to the apparent central character Blake, written out at the end of the second series only to return as a possible traitor in the blood-bath that ended the final series. Whilst *Doctor Who* had dabbled with moral ambiguities, here there was no moral certainty at all.

There are various other television series that are remembered with various kinds of affection – several incarnations of *The Tomorrow People* (1974–1978), a partial adaptation of *The Tripods* (1984–1985), intended as a replacement for *Doctor Who*, as well as occasional plays by Nigel Kneale, serials by Michael J. Bird and so on. Perhaps more important than any of this, though, is the shared heritage of main-

stream programming such as *Blue Peter*, *Tiswas*, shows featuring northern comedians, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *The Goodies* (especially the episodes 'Kitten Kong' and one where children's tv characters take over the world), *Fawlty Towers*, and *Blackadder* among many others which have added to the unconscious linguistic resources of the writers. In *Vurt* the characters hallucinate a typical Saturday night's viewing from the 1980s.

To shift from influences to the influenced, it is clear that the heritage of British television sf and fantasy has had an influence on recent television – a remake of *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)*, the darkly surreal *League of Gentleman*, and even in the details of the British *Queer as Folk* (one of the central characters' *Doctor Who* fixation was inspired by creator Russell T. Davies' own taste, indeed Davies has penned some science fiction serials for children [2004: and was tasked with reviving *Doctor Who*]). In addition, British writers have had a huge influence in other media, notably comics where Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman, among others, have helped to invigorate the mode. [2004: The weekly comic *2,000 AD* (1977-) has had an incalculable influence upon British sf, most obviously through the Judge Dredd strip. Artists included Brian Bolland, who went onto to work for DC, including *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988) and Dave Gibbons, who also drew for *Doctor Who Weekly* and drew *Watchmen* (1986-87), and went to work for DC. Writer Alan Moore, who had collaborated with Gibbons on *2,000 AD*, *Doctor Who*, and *Watchmen* went on to work for Marvel, DC and alone, producing such seminal works as *Swamp Thing*, *V for Vendetta*, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, *From Hell*, and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Other significant figures include Grant Morrison, Bryan Talbot, John Wagner, and Dave McKean. Neil Gaiman wrote *The Sandman* and *Miracle Man*, as well as collaborating with Terry Pratchett on *Good Omens* (1990) and J. Michael Straczynski on *Babylon 5*.] Finally, the British film industry remains immersed in heritage and comedies penned by Richard Curtis, although Bond has at least one foot in the sf camp. However recent years have seen low budget sf and horror films such as *Reign of Fire*, *Dog Soldiers* and *28 Days Later*. Clive Barker has long

been active in Hollywood; Neil Gaiman is likely to join him.

10. Each voter was given five votes which would be weighted according to their ranking. The top ten was 9th Coney, *Hello Summer*, *Goodbye* (1975) and Brunner, *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), 8th Roberts, *Pavane* (1968), 7th Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos* (157) and Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), 5th Wyndham, *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), 4th Baxter, *The Time Ships* (1993), 3rd Brunner, *Stand On Zanzibar* (1968), 2nd Clarke, *Childhood's End* (1953) and 1st Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The most popular writer was Arthur C. Clarke. See Butler, 'Best'.
11. Contrast this statement a year later from Miéville on the Boom: 'Generally, good to excellent "literary" quality' (Butler, 'Beyond Consolation' 7).
12. [2004] A success story I neglected to discuss was Peter Crowther's series of novellas and story collections under the PS Publishing imprint, which included works by Baxter, Barclay, Campbell, Chadbourn, Gallagher, Gentle, Lovegrove, MacLeod, McAuley, McDonald, Miéville, Newman, Roberts, Ryman, Smith, Tuttle, and others. Crowther has also edited the first issue of a quarterly magazine, *Post-Scripts*, dated Spring 2004. Also in 2004, David Pringle came to the end of his tenure as editor of *Interzone*. The schedule had become erratic, and it looks as if the economics of fiction magazines had finally caught up; however the baton has been passed to TTA, which is revamping the magazine. Pringle's importance within British science fiction, and the emergence of the Boom, is unique – he is not the only begetter of it, but he did more than most to allow it to come forward.

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Pioneer Award Acceptance Speech

Andrew M. Butler

[The SET editors tracked down Andrew Butler's article because it won the most recent Pioneer Award for an essay written about science fiction. Also, Andrew is one of our favourite SF critics. The award was made formally at the 2004 conference of the Science Fiction Research Association held at Skokie, Illinois. Andrew faced the problem of travelling several thousand kilometres to receive an award from a committee chairman (Paul Kincaid) who lived not far from him in Britain. Hence, his acceptance speech was delivered by Maureen Kincaid Speller – friend of Andrew, partner of Paul Kincaid, and founding editor of *Acnestis* – at the SFRA 2004 conference.]

I'd like to begin with two apologies: first I am not Andrew Butler. Nor for that matter am I Andrew M. Butler.

Secondly, I, which is to say Andrew and/or Andrew M. Butler, channelled for now via Maureen Kincaid Speller, am sorry not to be with you at this conference, because I would very much have liked to receive this award in person – in part because it might be the very first thing I've won.

Actually, I might be lying. I have this dim memory of a school sports day, where I led the field in the egg and spoon race.

Then there was the occasion when I came second in the Science Fiction Foundation raffle, and won a pile of signed Neil Gaiman comic books. First place went to John Clute who, if I recall correctly, won a Happy Meal at a major burger chain. I think I got the better deal.

But I did plan to be with you today. It appealed to my sense of humour that evening when I received an email about the award from Paul Kincaid, the chair of the Pioneer judges, who lives some twenty minutes away from me, giving me news that meant we both needed to fly a few thousand miles and across several time zones to shake each other's hands. I did wonder whether it would be more convenient for Paul and I simply to invite all of you lot across to visit us. As it is, you are being addressed by someone *even* closer to Paul, and that appeals even more.

At first, I confess, I presumed that Paul's email was a joke, or that he'd got

the wrong person, and I had to turn my computer back on to double check what the message had said. You see, ever since I've been writing I've written under the pseudonym of Andrew M. Butler, and so perhaps the judges confused me with somebody else, such as, say, Andrew Butler.

(Actually, there *is* an Andrew Butler, who edits or has edited one of the Tolkien Society magazines in Britain, although to the best of my knowledge I've never been confused with him. It may, of course, be that he's been confused with me, which rather suggests I should offer a third apology, to him.)

I am also confused with Andy Sawyer. I have to be careful what I say here, because I have nothing against Andy Sawyer, but it's just that Andy Sawyer does such a good job of being Andy Sawyer, that I can't begin to compete. I can remember a Liverpool PhD student suggesting a drink after work, which was a pleasant idea, but inconvenient as I lived two hundred miles away – whereas Andy was rather closer – and then there a letter of complaint from a reviewer whose name had been misspelt in *Foundation* and who, by the way, had enjoyed talking to me at a conference (to which I hadn't actually been). I presume that was Andy Sawyer again at that conference.

I have to say, and this is partly why I insist on my middle initial and partly a result of it, that I live in constant fear of being exposed as the charlatan I so clearly am. This is not some inverted modesty on my part or fishing for compliments, but I am genuinely surprised by the fact that anyone wishes to read what I write. The M. is a comfort blanket. The shy, retiring, introverted Andrew Butler can sit at his computer, drafting a script that Andrew M. Butler can read out – but Andrew Butler could never say those things. In fact Andrew Butler would be reluctant to be with you because he'd be embarrassed. My fear is that if I lose my M., then you'll never hear from me again.

(I realise, of course, that this may mean some concerted campaign to leave out my M. from each appearance of my pseudonym in future, precisely in the hope that I disappear.)

Neither of us can be with you for two further reasons – I am right in the middle of hitting a marking deadline and this

really couldn't be avoided. Then there is my health – I registered with a doctor and had a medical, which revealed my blood pressure to be so high that it was practically off the scale. In fact they had to send for a bigger device to measure it with. Given the blood was so pressurised, it was then rather odd that they then had to extract any to take to test, when surely it should spurt out at the tiniest prick. I'm now on beta-blockers and the pressure's coming down.

There are, of course, people I should thank in my absence – although perhaps they'd rather not in case they get the blame. Obviously thanks go to the people who judged the award and to those people who have organised this year's SFRA conference; as a former co-organiser of an SFRA conference I have some idea of what you are going through right now.

Thank you to Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr, whose suggestion that Mark Bould and I should do a special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* on the British Boom we learnt of by reading the journal. I jotted down my ideas about the boom on the back on an envelope and Istvan nodded sagely, before taking it away with him, presumably to ensure that I'd never write the article.

Thanks to my old comrade, Mark Bould, who generously indulged my neuroses as they developed at the institution where we worked together for three and a half years, and whose article (Mark Bould, 'What Kind of Monster Are You? Situating the Boom', *Science Fiction Studies* 30.3 (November 2003), pp. 394–417) was written in tandem with my own. I suspect we both ended up stealing from each others' drafts, and it must have been those bits that swung the award for me.

I've learnt so much from so many of you, and I'm constantly struck by the excellence of the science fiction academic community, as scholars and as friends. Thank you all.

And now thinking back, I can remember more details of that egg and spoon race. It would have been 1975 or 1976, and it was actually my birthday. Think of me being five or six and in short trousers. I presume I'd already demonstrated my prowess by coming a distant last in every other race else I'd entered, but for some reason I went in for the egg and spoon

race in which you had to balance an egg-sized ball on a spoon over fifty yards, without the aid of glue or your thumb. I turned out to be good at this, and in fact was leading the field. The crowd were cheering me on as everyone else was dropping their eggs all over the place. I was a good dozen yards ahead of whoever was in second place, if I could only

keep my nerve and my balance . . . Five yards. Four yards . . . Three . . . Two . . . And then I looked back to see how far ahead I was. Disaster! I dropped the egg. By the time I'd scooped it up, everyone else had crossed the line. Later that day I had to retire to bed with sun stroke or heat exhaustion.

There's a moral there, I suspect.

So this is the first thing I've ever won, and I'm flattered and flabbergasted and honoured beyond words to receive it, even in absentia. If you do find yourself in Canterbury (especially if you picked up a bottle of Laphroig in duty-free), do drop in so I can thank you in person.

Thank you.

Dissenting opinion

If this goes on: Butler, *Science Fiction Studies*, *Interzone* and the 'British Boom'

Paul Brazier

[The following section was first published as 'If This Goes On', *Interzone* 193, Spring 2004, pp. 59-60; also reviewed were Gwyneth Jones' *Midnight Lamp*, Mary Gentle's *1610* and Elizabeth Hand's *Bibliomancy*.]

I don't know much about Paul Brazier, but I do know that he has been involved in the publication of David Pringle's *Interzone* for some years, and, since David has relinquished editorship of the magazine, has announced his own subscriber site, quercus.com, which will feature high-quality new short science fiction.]

We don't often review academic journals here [in *Interzone*] because they plough their own furrow and it is parallel and rather distant from our focus on fiction. However, *Science Fiction Studies* No 91 (\$US12, SF-TH Inc. at DePauw University) purports to be a first attempt to examine 'The British Boom'. I place that title in ironic quotation marks because I disagree that any such thing exists and find the essays offered here unfocused, unconvincing and extremely partial.

The issue begins with an interview by Joan Gordon of China Miéville and as such it is an interesting piece of work. However, it quickly becomes plain that the editors of this magazine see Miéville as somehow embodying or representing the British Boom, whereas the books he has published are no more than some of the more recent representatives of a solid trend in British publishing that has been growing for the past 20 years.

I would expect a critical investigation such as this purports to be to attempt to examine the evidence, all of it, and draw conclusions based on it. Instead of this, we get a hotch-potch of assertions that select their evidence and ignore large tranches of what has happened since 1984.

Following the Miéville interview, there is a farrago entitled 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at the British Boom' wherein Andrew M. Butler, having apparently made notes towards an essay, then finds that he can't make a coherent essay out of those notes but doesn't want to waste all that work so publishes the notes undigested.

The point apparently being made is that, unlike the New Wave, there is no one movement that has given rise to this 'boom'; there are just an extraordinarily diverse number of different people who have all made it happen. This collection of undigested nuggets concludes with Butler quoting largely from his own work elsewhere, which only reveals how self-referential the whole process has been.

Next up, Mark Bould makes a brave stab at linking the 'Boom' to the *Doctor Who* milieu and media SF in general. This is an interesting point of view. There is certainly a stream of continuity that can't be ignored here and I would have liked to see more. However, instead, it is followed by Roger Luckhurst trying to claim that the 'boom' is somehow a product of the Labour Government's cultural governance. He makes an interesting

case, but the current 'boom' features mostly writers who were already active when Labour came to power, so while the government may have encouraged a pre-existing trend, it seems ridiculous to claim that they are responsible for it, however in favour of them you might be.

Matt Hills now offers an intriguing look at counterfictions in Kim Newman's work. Again, there is a lot to think about here, but precious little to do with the boom, and also precious little to do with science fiction. I like Kim Newman and I think he is a fine writer, but I have read few of his books because I often don't understand the post-modern cultural references in them. I would have put him down as a horror writer but Hills claims his rewritings of Robert Louis Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde story mean he is reinventing Gothic SF as a counterfactual or, to use the more familiar term, a parallel world. All very interesting but not my idea of science fiction, and certainly not central to 'the boom.'

Joan Gordon returns with a long essay on China Miéville. Were they really so short of material that they had to feature the same author examined by the same critic twice? Perhaps so, because the next piece is the text of a largely autobiographical talk given by Stephen Baxter about baby boomers. It is fascinating in itself but adds little to the debate about 'the British Boom.'

Finally, Andy Butler and Mark Bould offer a selection of comments from other leading lights in British science fiction, a kind of letter column before the fact, and

most of the penetrating comments that appear in this publication appear here. The section closes with a long list of writings that might or might not be considered part of the boom.

And I threw my hands up in despair. It is mentioned several times that the definition of science fiction that *Science Fiction Studies* uses has been revamped recently to allow more discussion of related works such as fantasy and horror. However, this reading list and the previous list of authors who might be deemed to be part of 'the boom' seems determined to rope in every single author who has published anything even vaguely fantastic from the past twenty years and, by excluding nothing, effectively fails to draw any kind of boundary around its subject area.

Its sins of inclusion, however, are massively overwhelmed by its sins of omission. To fail to examine the role of Peter F. Hamilton in starting the snowball rolling is to ignore the core powerhouse of the current success of science fiction in Britain. Equally, to overlook Iain M. Banks is to dismiss an extraordinary talent who has succeeded in bridging the gulf between mainstream and science fiction and insisted that each side take the other seriously. And to pass over Alasdair Reynolds is miss the prime example of what they are talking about,

not a boom, but the emergence into notice of a long-established steady growth, a simple resurgence in science fiction in Britain.

But their sins are more heinous even than that. Much is made throughout this publication of the fragmentary nature of what they are trying to discuss. Of course it's fragmentary: they've pulled in everything they can find that might be labelled fantastic in any way in order to justify talking about works of fantasy as being at the centre of their subject where they should have been talking about works of science fiction.

They got closest to understanding what they were doing when they discussed cultural continuity. The editors, the people who buy books that then sell, they are the ones who have made this happen and they are the products and manifestations of that cultural continuity. There are far too many to name them all, but certain names spring immediately to mind — Malcolm Edwards, John Jarrold, Jane Johnson, Peter Lavery, Cathy Gale, who originally encouraged Peter F. Hamilton and, of course, our own David Pringle — have been there, soldiering on, largely unacknowledged outside the trade, but doing the work that has made modern British science fiction the success it is.

For many, John W. Campbell editing

Astounding/Analog characterises the Golden Age of science fiction, while Michael Moorcock and *New Worlds* does the same for the New Wave. But this new movement, this so-called British Boom, is not magazine-focused at all. Of course, *Interzone* has launched the careers of many novelists from Stephen Baxter, Richard Calder, and Greg Egan to, latterly, Liz Williams, and it is difficult to assess accurately how much influence the fact that there was a home-grown professional magazine market has had — certainly, several of the new writers that I have introduced here are now producing and submitting novels to publishers and I have high hopes for them — but most of this new resurgence is novel-based, and it is sad to have to acknowledge that perhaps the magazine as the guiding light of a generation of novelists has had its day.

Nevertheless, to ignore the work of the editors in the trade today is quite simply to ignore the reason there is anything that could be termed a boom. This issue of *Science Fiction Studies* adds nothing to our understanding of where it came from or where it is going. If you want real insight, look rather to the historical record of *Interzone* to give you some notion of what might have caused today's boom. David Pringle should be proud.



Thank you, everybody

for raising the money through the BBB (Bring Bruce Bayside) Fund to send me (Bruce Gillespie) to Corflu in February 2005.

The Fund has been subscribed beyond the wildest dreams of me or the administrators, but we still have available copies for sale of

The Incompleat Bruce Gillespie A selection of Bruce Gillespie's fanzine writing

\$10 from Bill Wright, Unit 4, 1 Park Street, St Kilda West VIC 3182
or see me at Corflu or Potlatch in San Francisco in February.

