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 Without Boundaries
 Editorial by Andrew Oldham

When I was twenty-one I met the science fiction writer, Jeff Noon. I had just won an Arts Council award for a novel that was never published. It was in hindsight too immature, too lacking in what I learnt to love within this genre and it had a terrible title. It wasn't a bad novel, it just needed editing - that was Jeff Noon's appraisal. I met Jeff on a cold Autumn evening in Manchester, it was raining, we had coffee, I didn't drink the stuff. We talked about his work, he hated his novels being placed in the Science Fiction section of bookshops. He felt at the time that it marginalised his writing, classed it as pulp fiction - that was ten years ago and it shows how far this genre has come in a decade. Once beset by the image of anoraks, teenage boys, and middle aged men who for some mysterious reason have never even dated anyone of the opposite sex let alone been seen in the same room as them without passing out or dribbling, the content of Sci-Fi changed with these new voices. Thanks to the likes of Atwood, Noon and Zebrowski the Literary world has reappraised Sci-Fi. Science Fiction writers for a long time have been pushed to the periphery, seen as the same, categorised and pigeon holed, but anyone who has read the three aforementioned authors will know, they are million miles apart, they cover and explore different ideas but all of them, unlike 'Literary' or 'Mainstream' writers, allow their imagination to govern the story, to direct it and in the end to push down boundaries. Now, we are in an era where the ideas and predictions of such writers as Clarke, Heinlein, Asimov and Bradbury are coming true. This is no mistake, many Sci-Fi novelists keep their fingers on modern scientific ideas from the mapping of the genome to alternative modes of space travel but sometimes, just sometimes, reality covets fiction and inevitably achieves it.

Jeff Noon that evening bestowed on me the greatest compliment I have ever had for my prose writing. He asked me if I had ever read Bradbury, my work

at that period was governed by a small town feel, the ideas and secrets beneath the thin veneer of the suburbs, the dark and horrific (ten years later it still fascinates me, give me the first five minutes of David Lynch's Blue Velvet, and I will map you parts of my childhood and the town I grew up in, all caught in those images). At twenty-one, I had never read or even heard of Ray Bradbury, I did not read Science-Fiction - I was still caught up in the idea of the Literary novel - Noon told me to go away and read him because my work has echoes of Bradbury. Bradbury has never been very popular in the UK, not because of his writing, but because he is a master of the short story and the British have a problem with the short story. The short story can be intense and unlike a novel we have to invest the maximum of concentration on each page, but trust me on this one, Ray Bradbury has a way of catching you in the first few lines - I devoured all his writing in matter of months. The idea of the Literary Novel soon fell by the wayside, for one simple reason, there is no such thing. There are good story tellers and bad story tellers and critics deliver unto us the idea of the 'Literary Novel'. Ask any Booker winner whether they think their work is Literary, and you're more than likely spoiling for a fight, the Literary Novel is a curse, a tome to live up to. The Great Gatsby: a great American Literary Novel or a sad story about man who achieves the American Dream? Oryx and Crake and The Handmaids Tale by Margaret Atwood, the latter seen as Feminist Novel, the fore as a comment on genetic manipulation are both firmly rooted in Science Fiction. There is no such thing as Literary, writers should writer, poets should write - because what binds us all, what makes us able to create, is ideas, and their are great ideas and bad ideas. And if you have no ideas, then you should be driving a taxi. Sci-Fi writers of the 50s, knew this, often paid by the word, and normally a pittance, they didn't have time to lapse in years of introspection, they had to produce ideas, write stories and turn them around in a short period. Now, you could accuse them of not being Literary enough to warrant study, but if you get into the mind set of having to produce one short story a week, you will soon find that your ability to edit, choose and develop ideas achieves a new high and a new Literary voice. You become critical of your own work but you work because you have a deadline. I admire Bradbury for that, at the height of his career he was doing this, and it's not easy - I tried it, and nearly died in the process, your brain achieves a new way of thinking and is constantly editing, always writing and filing away ideas, you become a walking library.

So this issue is devoted to Science-Fiction, bringing together interviews from three great Sci-Fi writers, showing that the genre is still a wide open field waiting to be explored. Sci-Fi is more than robots and aliens, it is the mapping of the mind, the organic society, the spread of viral diseases, it is everything imagined and everything that has ever been, it is the height of our creation and the nadir of our world. Sci-Fi delivers both salvation and destruction. Readers read. Writers write. Critics pigeon hole. Sci-Fi is writing without boundaries.

 An Interview with Ray Bradbury

Interview by George Zebrowski, reprinted here with kind permission.

Ray Bradbury is American novelist, short-story writer, essayist, playwright, screenwriter, and poet. Born in Waukegan, Illinois on August 22, 1920. In 1945 his short story The Big Black and White Game was selected for Best American Short Stories. In 1947 Bradbury published them as Dark Carnival, his first short story collection. His reputation as a leading writer of science fiction was established with the publication of The Martian Chronicles in 1950 (published in England under the title The Silver Locusts), which describes the first attempts of Earth people to conquer and colonize Mars.

Another of Bradbury's best-known works, the novel Fahrenheit 451, was released in 1953 and is set in a future when the written word is forbidden (the book was made into a film by the French Director, Trufaut in 1966). Ray Bradbury currently lives in California and is still actively writing and lecturing.

Reading this, you should not have to be told who Ray Bradbury is—many of you, that is. New readers, denied backlists by the blacklists of moneyed publishing, need to be told anew, wherever possible.

Ray Bradbury began publishing in 1941 and is still going strong. He is the recipient of honors and awards too numerous to mention, including the O. Henry Prize and the Grand Master Nebula Award.

Ray Bradbury is a hard man to catch up with, although I have been reading him all my life. In my first few tries at this interview we had to postpone because he was unexpectedly on his way to somewhere. I caught up with Ray in what now seems a timeless telephonic moment one spring evening at the turn of the century . . .

Let's start with an uneasy question. Ray, what were your feelings when you started writing? What did you hope for?

"Hah! I just wanted to be a good writer, that's all. I was twelve years old."

That early?

Sure.

You had what seems to have been a long apprenticeship—from the late 1930s to the early '50s. Why do you think it took a long while, as it does for so many writers? Did it seem long to you?

"No. Every day was wonderful. You just do it because you love it. I wrote a lot of good short stories all through the '40s. I began to be a good writer when I was 22, that's in 1942, so it didn't take as long as it looks. Took about ten years."

Now when you, arrived, so to speak, with The Martian Chronicles (Doubleday, 1950), you did so not only in the world of science fiction and fantasy but in the world of American letters. Did this surprise you?

"It didn't happen just then—I didn't arrive anywhere. The book didn't sell worth a damn. It didn't get any reviews. One review by Christopher Isherwood. It sold five thousand copies. So I didn't exactly arrive."

Well, by the time I got to it in the late '50s, it certainly seemed that way to me."

"Well, you were a member of a minority—a few thousand people."

Now whose idea was it to make a book of the Martian stories? Was it your own?

"No, it was Walter Bradbury, the editor of Doubleday. I had dinner with him when I went there in 1949. My wife was pregnant, we had no money. I went to New York to meet the editors, and they all said, don't you have a novel? I said no, I have short stories. At dinner one night with Walter Bradbury, no relation to me, he said, what about all those Martian stories? If you tied them together in a tapestry, wouldn't they make a book called The Martian Chronicles? I said, oh my God! So he said write me an outline, and give it to me tomorrow at the editorial offices, and if I like it I'll give you seven hundred and fifty dollars. So I stayed up all night and wrote an outline, and he gave me an advance the next day."

And how did you feel?

"I felt fine. I was rich, suddenly."

Yes, well, it was much more money back then. Would you tell me something about your association with John Huston and the scripting of Moby Dick? It always seemed to me that you were the perfect choice to write the script. When I saw your name on the screen, I said, 'Of course!'

"It was very difficult. He was a strange man. He could be wonderful, he could be a monster. He didn't know anything about Moby Dick, so he couldn't really help me. The main thing was he egged me on, and so I finally got the script finished. But it was a strange relationship, and I'm very grateful for it, of course, because it was my first screenplay."

You've often talked about preventing futures rather than predicting or advocating them. Do you see good science fiction as a kind of cultural vaccine against evil futures?

"Oh it can be. I mean Fahrenheit 451 is a perfect example of wrong things I wrote about that have come to pass, and we're living through them right now. Trying to make do with lousy TV. Dreadful TV news. The news on every station in America today, local TV news, is an abomination. You mustn't look at it, you mustn't listen to it. It's all lies. It's all building up things that shouldn't be built up. There's no real news. It's all fifteen-second sound bites. It's all violence, it's all murder, it's all rape. There is no news."

It's all to sell products. Now do you think, however, that science fiction should strive to depict desirable futures, or is that impossible or undesirable?

"No, you shouldn't strive to do anything. Just do your work and if it's positive, fine, and if it's negative, fine. Whoever you are, whatever you need to write—do your work, and then if it influences people, swell, but you can't set out to do that."

Then you've never tried to imagine a desirable future?

"No."

Could you describe one? Would that be possible?

"No, I don't think so. If it happens in a story, swell. There are good and bad things in the culture, constantly. The automobile is a wonderful device and a horrible device. It can transport us, it can change civilizations, and it has killed two million people so far."

But there are innovations that could be desirable?

"Well, the rocket ship is one. Space travel is one of the most beautiful things that has ever happened to mankind."

Tell me, what writers do you most admire?

"Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, F. Scott Fitzgerald, early John Steinbeck, the short stories of Hemingway, Eudora Welty, Katherine Ann Porter, Jessamyn West . . ."

What do you most admire about Hemingway?

"Let's talk about a real writer—John Collier. One of the most important writers of the twentieth century, yet most people don't know his name."

Sadly, that's so.

"He had a true imagination, he had a gift of metaphor, and he was a great influence on me."

Aside from writers, what people have you admired during your long career?

"Well, people like Federico Fellini, the film director. Loren Eiseley, who headed the department of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. His essays on anthropology were a great influence on me all through my late twenties and thirties. I wrote him a fan letter and encouraged him to write

a book back around 1948. He responded and said, by God I think that's a good idea. He set out and wrote thirty books, so I'm glad to say I was an influence on his life."

Yes, and I've often linked him with your work in my mind.
"Wonderful, wonderful man."

When last we talked, you mentioned the help you received from Robert Heinlein, from Leigh Brackett, and from Henry Kuttner. What was your experience with these notable writers?

"Well, especially with Leigh Brackett. I met her at the beach every Sunday afternoon from the time I was twenty-one to the time I was twenty-five, and we'd sit on the beach and I'd read her wonderful short stories and she'd read my terrible ones. And I hadn't learned to write yet, and she put up with this garbage that I was writing. I wrote imitations of her stories, and finally I broke free and began to write stuff from my own psyche, and by the time I was twenty-five I was beginning to write some good stuff; but it was meeting with her every Sunday, watching her play volleyball and reading her short stories that helped me. Later in this period she married Edmond Hamilton, and the couple were influences on me. I was best man at their wedding. Edmond was a beautifully educated man, and he introduced me to some of the greatest writers in the world. So I was lucky to have them as friends. Henry Kuttner was a constant critic. I can't say we were close friends, but we were close critical friends. He read my short stories and kicked me around the block when I needed it. I have dozens of letters from him, from my early twenties. He tried to sell my short stories for me. He contacted John W. Campbell, but he didn't get anywhere selling me to Campbell. He in turn sold Campbell a lot of wonderful fiction. I was privileged to know Kuttner as a casual friend."

And Robert Heinlein?

"No, I didn't really know Heinlein that well. I met him when I was nineteen, and he was thirty-one. He had just sold his first short stories. He joined the Science Fiction League in L.A., and I would see him on occasion. He sold my first short story for me. He sent it to Rob Wagner's *Script*. It was my first appearance in print. I was twenty years old, and I was very much beholden to Heinlein for that act of kindness."

Was it Kuttner who sent you his manuscripts after he was finished with them?

"He gave me a lot of his typescripts, yes."

In advising young writers, you suggest that they not read their contemporaries, but stick with Shakespeare, Pope, Pepys . . .

"That's for later. You gotta read your contemporaries when you're nineteen years old to know what's going on. But as you get older you should break free—don't go on reading in science fiction and fantasy, because you're going to imitate, repeat the clichés. The trouble with science fiction today is that you see all these repetitions of titles and themes that are repeats of other themes—galactic empires, dungeons and dragons. That's terrible. You have to break free from that."

Who are the greatest writers that you like to read?

"F. Scott Fitzgerald. I go to Paris every July and I take a copy of Tender Is the Night and I sit in outdoor restaurants and drink coffee and have a beer and I read the novel."

What are you working on now, Ray?

"Three novels, two books of short stories, a book of poetry, and two books of essays. Outside of that, nothing."

Are the essays previously published?

"Some are, from various magazines. I have an article coming in National Geographic."

"And you have a story reprinted in Skylife edited by Gregory Benford and George Zebrowski."

That's right! We're very glad to have you in the collection. What are you reading now?

"I'm rereading George Bernard Shaw, and Shakespeare, and Alexander Pope. There are not many living writers worth bothering with. I go back and reread Steinbeck and Hemingway, and books of essays by Aldous Huxley. I'm so busy writing, though, that I don't have much time to read."

I know the problem. What changes do you see in the publishing industry since you started?

"Well, it's easier to become a science fiction writer. There are hundreds of books a year published in science fiction and fantasy. When I was growing up and trying to become a writer, there were seven or eight books a year. So there are more opportunities open to the young writer."

And what changes for better or worse do you see in the science fiction and fantasy fields?

"I can only guess, since I don't read in the field. I can't judge."

Let me ask you, is there a question that you would have liked me to ask, and if so, what is it?

"Well, you might have asked me if I will ever write an opera, and the answer is yes. I've written several musicals, I've written a dramatic semi-opera for Fahrenheit 451, which was performed in Chicago and in New York, and will have performances all around the world in the next year. I'm working on a grand opera called Leviathan 99, which is based on a play of mine about Moby Dick in outer space—the Great White Comet. I've taken the metaphors and transferred them from sailing ships to rocket ships, from the open seas of the world to the open seas of stars and space, and Ahab is the space captain whose eyes have been put out by a comet when he was a young astronaut, and he goes out into the universe seeking this great white comet, which he seeks to destroy. This is the subject matter of my opera, which I hope will be written with Jerry Goldsmith, the composer."

The film composer.

"He's one of the best."

Films have been made of your work. Generally, how have you found them?

"Well, I love Something Wicked This Way Comes. It's not perfect, but it's damn good. Fahrenheit 451 is quite good, except they left out a lot of things. I'm hoping that if it's filmed by Mel Gibson that he'll put a lot of things back. But I'm not very optimistic because years have gone by and he never calls. So I don't know what's gonna happen next."

Well, it seems that you're as busy as ever.

"I'll be eighty in August."

Only eighty. Well, you and Charles L. Harness and Jack Williamson. Well, Jack Williamson makes you all look young.

"Jack is a wonderful man, a terrific man. He was very kind to me when I was nineteen years old. He read my stuff long before Leigh Brackett did, and it was really bad in those days."

It's hard for me to think that Frederik Pohl read Jack Williamson when Fred was eleven.

"Jack started publishing in magazines when I was about seven or eight years old."

Incredible.

"I couldn't afford to buy the magazines, but I borrowed copies from friends on occasion, and I read Jack Williamson first."

Well, I thank you for your snappy answers to my questions.

"Well, I'm wide awake, I had my nap!"

Thank you, Ray. I'm honored.

 The Foundation and Cornerstone of Sci-Fi: Isaac Asimov
 Interview by Slawek Wojtowicz, reprinted here with his kind permission.
<http://www.slawcio.com/>

Isaac Asimov was born in the former Soviet Union, but grew up in Brooklyn, New York. He taught biochemistry at Boston University until he retired in 1958 to become a full-time writer. Asimov published short stories from the late 1930s, and in 1952 published his first novel. The author of the classic I, Robot series (made into a recent film blockbuster with Will Smith) and The Foundation Trilogy. Asimov wrote more than 400 books and won every major science fiction award. He also wrote popular books and essays on science and technology, earning him the nickname 'The Great Explainer'. The author died of "heart and kidney failure, which were complications of the HIV infection he contracted from a transfusion of tainted blood during his December 1983 triple-bypass operation." HIV was not revealed as the cause of his death until 2002, when his widow Janet published the memoir It's Been a Good Life.

If you ask any SF fan in Poland "who is Isaac Asimov?" he or she will answer without any hesitation - "one of the greatest SF writers in the World". You might be surprised to learn that you are so famous in a country where only a small fraction of your works has been translated into the native language and the majority of people cannot read English. But an average Polish fan wouldn't be able to say much about Isaac Asimov as a person. What could you tell us about your life?

"Well, I was born in the Soviet Union in 1920, came to the United States with my family in 1923 and lived in New York since. I got my Ph.D. at Columbia University in 1948. I'm married and have two children from my first marriage. I started reading Science-Fiction when I was nine years old. I sold my first story when I was eighteen and my first book when I was thirty. Since then I have published 394 books. I have twenty five other books in press. Some of these are mysteries, some are children' books, others are on straight science, literary subjects, humour, mythology - on everything I can think of".

Can you tell us how your day time schedule looks like?

"This morning I did my weekly science column for the 'Los Angeles Times' Syndicate. I'm working on a novel - it is little over half finished in first draft. Pretty soon it will be time to write my monthly essay for 'Fantasy and Science Fiction'. I'm writing a big 'History of Science' and I've got up to 1945, so it is only little over forty years left, but they were very hard forty years... So I've got lots of work".

Do you have any time left for other things besides writing?

"All I do is write. I do practically nothing else, except eat, sleep and talk to my wife".

Is it a secret what are you working on now?

"The novel is called 'Nemesis'. It is not a part of any other series I'm doing - it is not as 'Foundation' nor robot novels. It's something completely different".

What are your plans for the future? What topics are you going to explore?
 "I don't have any specific plans. I just keep turning out novels. Often publishers ask me to do something and that's how I know what I'll do next".

Have you ever written any screenplays for SF movies?

"No, I've no talent for that and I don't want to get mixed up with Hollywood. If they are going to do something of mine, they will have to find someone else to write the screenplays".

Have you heard about any plans concerning screenplays for 'Foundation' novels?

"Oh, every once a while somebody talks about doing it, but so far nobody has ever managed to dig up enough money for it".

Do you like the covers of your books? Do you have any input in their design?

"No, I don't have any input into that. Publishers take care of that entirely. They never ask any questions and I never offer any advice, because my artistic talent is zero".

Do you have a favorite SF painter?

"Well, there is a number of painters that I like very much. To name just a few: Michael Whelan and Boris Vallejo are between my favourites. I'm impressed by them, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything - I don't know that I have any taste in art".

Have you ever tried to paint something yourself?

"No, I can't even draw a straight line with a ruler".

What do you think about current trends in SF?

"Well, to tell you the truth, I was brought up in an earlier, simpler day and I have never broken away. In other words, the novels I write in nineteen eighties are very much like the novels I wrote in forties and fifties - they tend to be a little old fashioned. Fortunately the readers read them anyway..."

Do you like Fantasy? Tolkien stories?

"I like Tolkien himself - I've read it five times. I don't read much these days, honestly. When you write as much as I do, you don't have enough time for reading. Oddly enough, when I do read, I tend to reach for murder mystery and I look for old fashioned murder mysteries. I'm a very old fashioned person..."

What about comic strips? Would you agree with an opinion that this is also art?

"Yes, it is. I don't have anything to do with it, but if somebody wanted to convert one of my stories into a comic strip, I'd only ask that it be a good one. That's all".

What sort of SF do you like most?

"What I like most is rather old fashioned science-fiction. I find it difficult to understand modern stylistic experimentation, so, I'm afraid, I look for simple stories of the kind I write myself".

Most of the readers are also looking for this kind of writing...

"I'm glad if they are, because they can find it in my stories and I will be able to make a living".

Do you have any favourite SF writers?

"My favourite is Arthur C. Clarke. I also like people like Fred Pohl or Larry Niven and others who know their science. I like Harlan Ellison, too, although his stories are terribly emotional. But I don't consider myself a judge of good science-fiction - not even my own".

What about mainstream writers?

"Mainstream writers I don't read much of, I'm afraid. I read mostly non-fiction: new books on science, mathematics, things like that. Most of the stuff I write, except for my novels, is non-fiction. I have to keep up with science. And that is most of my reading".

Do you have any vision of what the near future of Mankind has in store?

"I have several - some bad, some good, depending on what we do. I can see a computerized world, with robots doing most of the dull work or a space centred world with people moving out into orbit about the Earth and reaching the asteroids. But I can also see a polluted world in which the quality of life sinks and one in which there is a nuclear war and we destroy ourselves. There is nothing that MUST be, everything depends entirely on what we decide to do. Naturally I would like to see Civilization to continue and improve. I think everyone would. But still, people tend to do things that harm Humanity".

I wrote in my letter that it is great to live in the world advanced fifty years in time (comparing Eastern Europe and the United States) you disagreed... Why?

"Well, you can always catch up with technology. One hundred years ago Japan put a mind to it and caught up to Western Europe. When there is a model to follow it is easy. However advancing, as we do, means also that we probably pollute the environment more than any other nation does and we use up more resources more wastefully. These things are not particularly admirable. Not all 'advancement' is advancement".

Who do you think will be the next president of the United States? Will this be good or bad for the United States?

"Oh, that I can't say. I know who I'm voting for - I'm voting for Dukakis. But I vote Democratic all the time. Sometimes I win, sometimes I don't. I'll vote Democratic this time".

If you were to choose a place and time to live in, when and where would you choose? And why?

"It would be right now, right here. I'm used to this world. I know how to get along in it and it has some things in it I don't want to give up - like modern medicine. Without it I would be dead now. My angina was very bad and I didn't think I had long to live. I've had a triple bypass surgery and now I feel fine... I had half of my thyroid taken out sixteen years ago, because it was cancerous. If not for that I'd probably be dead by now. That's why I don't look towards a simpler life without antibiotics, without modern surgery, anesthetics etc. In this simpler life in the Past there are also slaves. Who knows? I might have been a slave. So I'll take it right now, with all its faults".

What do you think is the most difficult barrier to overcome in figuring out the methods of interstellar travel?

"The most insurmountable is the speed of light limit. As long as we can't go faster than the speed of light we can't reach any but the nearest stars in our lifetime. In a case of speeds close to the speed of light it may seem to the people who are travelling that in less than lifetime they can reach a distant galaxy. But here, on Earth, millions of years will pass -

so that they'll never be able to come back to their own world. And I'm afraid there is no way of beating that..."

In your novels people are travelling faster than light...

"That's true! But that's in the novel. You must never confuse your dreams with reality. It is easy to dream and it is fun to dream. But if you actually think that reality is got to fit your dreams, then I'm afraid that you are not quite sane.... I'm sane. I know what is real and what is a dream".

Our perception and knowledge about this world is based on Einstein's General Relativity theories but these can be replaced in the future with better ones, just like Newton's theories were...

"I know, and in my books I'm always careful to point out that there are things we don't know and that Einstein's General Relativity belongs to this Universe. Perhaps you can get out of this Universe. Perhaps there are deeper laws that we don't yet understand. Perhaps... I say all that, because I'm a good science-fiction writer and I don't just make things up without trying to justify them. But I don't really believe it".

Is it true that you don't like travelling?

"I don't! I never take airplanes and I don't like to be away from home for long. It simplifies life - means that I turn down all invitations to travel long distances and I don't often travel short distances. I stay here with my typewriter, my books and my quiet life. And I like it".

Do you know anything about the Polish Fandom?

"Not a thing. You are my entire knowledge of it".

You might be familiar with the history of Poland...

"Oh, yes! I know the history of the world generally. Yes! First partitions 1772, second partitions 1793, third partitions 1795, Great Duchy of Warsaw under Napoleon, revolt in 1863 against Russia... I have it all".

What about our history before partitions?

"Absolutely! I know Jadwiga and Jagiello getting married and Poland being a large country at that time and Jan Sobieski who saved Vienna in 1683..."

Talking about history - do you believe in the theory of the 'Wheel of History' - in other words, that people tend to repeat their mistakes over and over again?

"Unfortunately they do. In many respects people don't learn from the past. They fight civil wars and always call the outside forces to help one side or the other. The outside forces help them and take over the country. Happens over and over again. And they never seem to learn the lesson".

Do you think the human species will change radically in the course of evolution?

"Well, unfortunately that is almost impossible to predict. Right now, I think, the chances are that we wipe ourselves out before we'll have a chance to undergo any startling changes. Also, we've reached a stage where we change environment to suit ourselves, so there is less pressure to fit the changing environment. Secondly, now we can handle genetic engineering, so we might change ourselves without regard to the environment. Just change ourselves the way we want to, which may not always be wise. That's why I think we reached a point where things of the Future, as far as evolutionary changes are concerned, are absolutely unpredictable".

Do you think that some people might survive the nuclear war?

"I hope it won't be me! Honestly I doubt that - I'm getting too old. But I think that people that will survive will be the unfortunate ones. After

what we have done to the Earth, consuming its resources, destroying its forests, upsetting its soil, adding to that the effects of fallout, radioactivity, enormous fires, enormous deaths - so it may be impossible to rebuild in anything shorter than geologic ages... To be a part of a small group of human beings struggling along before the final curtain is no great pleasure..."

I've never heard about any story written by you with an action set in the past...

"That is true. And the reason for that is that I've never been able to find a time to do the necessary research. Jean Auel who wrote the 'Clan of the Cave Bear' and 'Mammoth Hunters', did a lot of research first and put years of work into it. That's why all my fiction is set either in the present or in the future. And if it's set in the present it's a present I know about. I don't look for exotic locations - all my murder stories take place in New York".

Have you noticed that there are many similarities between the Roman Empire and the United States?

"One can think up things like that. I've often thought, for instance, that Nazi Germany took the place of Sparta in Europe and I've had a little fun during World War II trying to compare the European situation with that in an ancient Greece in the time of Peloponnesian War and to see if I can explain what happened now, what happened then... History is so complex that you can do it in thousand different ways. Toynbee tried to show that all these different civilizations follow the same pattern, and I think, he failed. He chose the pattern that the Classical Civilization used and then forced over rest into it. So while he was popular in his time, now he is dismissed as someone who didn't really succeed".

In the novel 'Prelude to Foundation' I found many characters and situations unique to the United States. Would you agree?

"You have to understand that the only culture I know and I'm at home with is the United States. I can't really use another cultures as my model, because I simply don't know enough about them. How much ever I know about Polish history it's all from reading. I've never lived in Poland, I've never experienced Polish culture. If I tried to present future society that has similarities to present day Polish culture, anyone who was in Poland would laugh! So I don't try. It is important to know what you can do".

Don't you think that "Prelude" is much more food oriented than your past novels?

"Is much more what oriented?!"

Food oriented...

"I didn't notice that! But it is possible! Not on purpose though. If it happened, it just happened. Now when I think of it - might be. I was anxious to show different cultures and one way in which you can show a different culture is by the different things they eat, whether they eat alone or with people, you know, things like that. I can't talk very much about things like art or sport because I know nothing about them but like everybody else I eat".

And what is your favorite kind of cooking?

"Well, let's see now... I'm in a constant struggle to keep my weight down and one of the reasons is that I love virtually all food. I like Chinese, French and Italian cooking, as well as Polish sausages... I don't know what a typical Polish meal is but if someone feed me one, I'd probably love it! So there you are. Oh, I also eat in Russian restaurants - we have here in New York all kinds of different ethnic restaurants and my wife and I, we know a large number of them".

What about the junk food?

"She won't let me. I love hamburgers, hot dogs, all that stuff - I'd gladly eat it - but she won't let me".

Why is that?

"Well, she wants to keep me alive".

Which character in your novels is, in your opinion, most closely associated with the type of person you are?

" I suppose it would be Elijah Bailey in the 'Caves of Steel', 'Naked Sun' and 'The Robots of Dawn'. He is a person with virtues I wish I had and faults I know I have".

Do you believe there is a place in Mankind's immediate future for robots?

"Yes, I think we are going, if we survive, to be developing robots and the robotic world of the future will be a little bit resembling the one I wrote about forty, Gee... almost fifty years ago".

What motivates you to keep writing novels?

"One of the things that motivates me is that the readers seem to like them and I get innumerable letters saying: 'will you write another novel?', 'please, write another novel', 'we are waiting for another novel'. Another thing is my publishers' who tell me that they will kill me if I will not write another novel and the third is that I get a little money for it. I've got to make sure that if I'll die my wife and my children are well off".

Don't you find pleasure in writing?

"True. But I enjoy my non-fiction more than fiction. And in fiction I enjoy mysteries more than science-fiction. The more I enjoy writing something particular - less money I get. So while I enjoy least writing science-fiction novels, I get most money for...science-fiction. What can I do?"

Please, keep writing!

I will.

Thanks a lot for this interview!

"Please, when you get back home, tell all the people in Gdansk and Poland that sometimes I wish I did travel, so I can meet my fans in Poland and indeed all over the world. But unfortunately the truth is I don't travel. So it has to be done this way, by the miracles of modern science: my voice in the recording device and someone travelling in a plane to come here and see me..."

 The Last Hitchhiker: In Conversation with Douglas Adams
 Interview by Matt Newsome, reprinted here with kind permission.

Douglas Adams was born in Cambridge in March 1952. He created The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy series of books, which started life as a BBC Radio 4 programme, aired in March 1978. The phenomenal success of the follow up book made it the Number One in the UK Bestseller List and in 1984 Douglas Adams became the youngest author to be awarded a Golden Pan. He won a further two. His books include The Restaurant at the End of the Universe (1980); Life, The Universe and Everything (1982); So Long and Thanks for all the Fish (1984); and Mostly Harmless (1992). The first two books in the Hitchhiker series were adapted into a 6 part television series in 1982. Other publications include Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency (1987) and Long Dark Tea-time of the Soul (1988). In 1984 Douglas teamed up with John Lloyd and wrote The Meaning of Liff and after its huge success The Deeper Meaning of Liff in 1990. One of Douglas's all-time personal favourites was written in 1990 when he teamed up with zoologist Mark

Carwardine and wrote Last Chance to See - an account of a world-wide search for rare and endangered species of animals.

He sold over 15 million books in the UK, the US and Australia and was also a best seller in German, Swedish and many other languages.

Douglas was a founding director of h2g2, formerly The Digital Village, a digital media and Internet company with which he created the 1998. Douglas died unexpectedly in May 2001 of a sudden heart attack. He was 49. The film of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy was released in 2005.

In March 1998, I had the honour and pleasure of interviewing Douglas Adams, author of many books, most famously The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy which has sold many millions of copies worldwide.

At that time, Douglas was launching his computer game, Starship Titanic, and I was working in my spare time for a now long-defunct web-based magazine entitled, Interactive Fiction Now. He was as wonderfully warm, intelligent and witty in conversation as in his books.

Tragically, Douglas died on 11th May 2001 while living in California and working on the Hitchhiker movie. I'm sure everyone reading would like to convey deepest sympathy to Douglas' friends and family, particularly his wife and young daughter.

On Thursday 12th March 1998, I attended the press launch of Douglas Adams' Starship Titanic, the first game from Adams' new company, The Digital Village, and his first computer game since the introduction of graphics. In this exclusive interview, I spoke with Douglas Adams exclusively about Starship Titanic, his previous work, future projects, dogs and cheese sandwiches...

Perhaps we could start by talking a little about how the game technology in Starship Titanic compares with that in the old Infocom games...

"(Laughing) Well, Starship Titanic has graphics!"

No, it's a long way in advance of [the old Infocom games] because effectively all you could do with the Infocom games was just sort of two word instructions, sort of "go left", "turn right" or "get red dagger" and the parser we have here now is capable of parsing much, much more complex sentences.

"So, you will gradually become aware as you play it that some sorts of input tends to get better reactions than others, so you'll begin to funnel yourself towards that, like when mastering any language".

So, would you say that the parser technology is in advance of the technology which Infocom used?

"Yes. Well another point to make, of course, is that, and in some ways this is a frustration. Simulating a conversation is essentially a three stage process. One is the input, one is the output and then there's the stuff in between. The stuff in between is the parser. Now the input, currently the way that works is that you type stuff in. If we were doing this in a couple of years' time, maybe we'd be using speech recognition, but speech recognition is not that good yet that it wouldn't just create enormous frustration. So, we went for simple text entry".

Again, at the output stage, I was hoping that we might be able to use text-to-speech.

"The trouble is that text-to-speech was developed - the best system, I think by quite a long way, was developed by Apple a few years ago. But having developed it, nobody had found a use for it, so it kind of set there languishing. It really wasn't good enough yet to sustain an awful lot of dialogue because all of the characters end up sounding

like semi-concussed Scandinavians. So that becomes very wearing on the ear. So we had to go to pre-recorded dialogue. And, the advantage of text-to-speech is that you really can do stuff on the fly and it can start to feed back parts of the player's actual input. If you do it pre-recorded, you can't do that. On the other hand, the way you solve the problem of making it as responsive as possible, of making sure that the player really feels they are engaged in the conversation is just to do an awful, awful lot, which is why we have something like ten thousand - ten thousand - individual responses, maybe a word, a phrase, a whole sentence, a part of a sentence. Because part of what you'll get back is a whole sentence but when it works best, you'll be getting sentences composed on the fly with modules in it that get replaced according to context. So really you have the sense that conversations can go on and on and on, and you'll be surprised at some of the things they know about".

So do you get situations, as in an Infocom game, where you talk to a character, and you get the feeling that they perhaps didn't quite pick up what you were talking about?

"Oh yes, I mean you will get that because at the end we are simulating the conversation - there is no real understanding here. I mean we are engaged... Put it this way, it's rather though if someone goes up on stage and saws a woman in half and puts her back together again, they are not actually engaged in a major exercise in medical engineering. They are in the business of illusion, and we are in the business of illusion. We have not created Artificial Intelligence - so far nobody has. But the illusion is really tremendously good for an awfully long time. You will get periods when you're off on some little line of questioning that the game really won't get, but you will quickly learn that, ok, this is obviously a dead end, so we'll try something else".

So, assumedly there is an assumption on the game's behalf that the player is asking meaningful sentences.

"Oh well if you talk complete gobbledegook, then you're liable to get not very satisfactory answers, but they'll be along the lines of all sorts of variations of characters essentially saying, 'I don't understand what you're talking about,' but dressed up in all kinds of nice, polite kinds of ways. So you will find that if you're talking gobbledegook, it won't understand what you're talking about and there will be certain areas of conversation where it won't be able to understand you, but I think people will be genuinely surprised, even startled at how good how much of it is".

One of the impressions I got from reading previous interviews with you was that, of all the things you have done, Hitch-Hiker's the game, and Bureaucracy to some extent, were the things that you thoroughly enjoyed, and chiefly because of the computer aspect.

"Yes".

Were you tempted this time to give Steve Meretzky [see footnote] a ring and say, "Steve, come and get involved."

"No, well, Steve has his own company out in Massachusetts called Boffo Games, but I haven't actually laid eyes on Steve for many, many years now. But I think that, doing Hitch-Hiker's guide, because it was text-only, it was just the two of us. And normally, of course, it would be one of us writing the entire game, and this time it was two because I was not a coder, I was not a professional games designer in the way that Steve was. So I had to bring my limited understanding, though, of course, it grew very rapidly. I was evolving the material I was coming up with and Steve was really helping me through that process and, I guess, being George Martin, I guess, except that he was the one actually playing the instruments as well! So one person, or in this case two people, was the usual way of doing a

game. In the case of Starship Titanic, now you have enormous additional levels of complexity, you have the graphics, the animation, the sound, all this stuff, and it's dozens of people, I mean between two and three dozen people working on it, over a period of two years. So, at the end of it, my role is not auteur at all. It sounds like that, it starts out as me saying, 'this is how the game is going to go, this is how the script looks like, this is what I've decided,' but really, from the first moment that code starts hitting silicon, we're off into territory where everybody who is working on the project is making decisions, is having a fundamental creative influence on the game. So really, it has been a team job".

So the gameplay in Starship Titanic, is it comparable, would you say, to Hitch-Hiker's? One of the things I've felt increasingly as time has passed is that with the advent of graphics, sound and all the other things, the complexity of the task of ensuring good gameplay increases. "I think people will recognise a certain mixture of puzzles. Some puzzles are fiendishly clever and complicated, others that are plain silly, and everything in between".

Anything as hard as the babel fish?

"I would hope not because that really was probably too problematic. Not only was it too problematic, but it happened too early in the game. An awful lot of people said, 'I loved the game, I thought it was terrific and wonderful, and I really enjoyed it, but I got stuck at the babel fish and couldn't do any more.' And I think well you missed two-thirds of it! And unfortunately, it was a bottleneck, I mean, you had to do it. So it's one of the things we learnt from. It's something we actually discussed an awful lot when creating this game, because how you come up with something whereby there are no bottlenecks, there are all sorts of fiendish puzzles. The interesting thing is that with the Hitch-Hiker game, nobody spotted that the babel fish was going to be this fiendish key to the whole thing, it was just simply another puzzle on the way. But an enormous amount of attention eventually gets focussed on this because it is a bottleneck, and because it is as complex as it is. So, my view is that we don't have anything of that fiendish complexity in the game. But ask me again a month or so after the game has been out and we suddenly find that there's something that seemed terribly obvious to all of us involved in the game but people out there are really racking their brains about. We also decided that wherever there is something fiendishly complicated, there is usually a simpler way of doing it. So for most of the puzzles, there are usually two or three ways of solving them".

No giving cheese sandwiches to dogs, then?

"Dogs and cheese sandwiches?"

Yes, in Hitch-Hiker you have to give a cheese sandwich to the dog outside the pub...

"Oh, yes, I beg your pardon, of course! It's so long ago! Yes, for instance, there are a lot of problems you can solve by getting one of the characters to solve it for you through the dialogue. But that may or may not work for a lot of people, so there will be physical ways of doing it - switches you have to push, or whatever. There's usually, as I say, a different way of doing it. One of the things I personally feel particularly pleased about, because it was very much my puzzle, one that I got stuck more deeply into the implementation of than anything else, which is a music game.

In one particular room, the music room, there are a bunch of robot musicians, and they're all playing the parts they've got, but they've all got out of synch with each other. So some of them are playing their parts too fast or too slowly or at the wrong pitch or back-to-front or upside down presumably. You have to go and adjust all

of these different settings until they're all playing together. Then you have to go and record that piece of music and take to another part of the ship where it enables you to do something else. Creating that particular puzzle was something that I was much, much more involved in than any other part. I wrote the piece of music, I designed in great detail how everything worked. I'd always loved the idea of doing a puzzle where the player not only has to be a genius, but also has to master harmony and polyphony at the same time! As always, there is a back-door route, but I'm not going to tell you what it is!"

Yes, well, you played guitar with Pink Floyd, didn't you?

"I did, yes, although not on a regular basis, I have to tell you, but merely one guest spot, and to date penultimate performance which was on the tour they did about three years ago now. It was a forty second birthday present to me from Dave Gilmore".

On which track?

"Brain Damage and Eclipse, the last bit of Dark Side of the Moon. It's that little guitar fingering that any seventeen year old guitarist can play".

Well, that's not my understanding, I understand you to be a very competent guitarist.

"Well, essentially my route as far as playing is concerned is folk music finger picking. I'm not and could never, ever be a blistering lead guitar player. But give me something to finger-pick and I can usually finger my way through it".

Perhaps we could take this opportunity to ask you for some definitive answers to some of the questions being asked on USENET as the moment?

"OK".

Firstly, what is Avatar Forest?

"Avatar Forest was a television project which actually I wasn't involved with. It was one of the projects which The Digital Village started going on and then basically, while were trying to do a whole range of different things, it was one of the ones that moved to the back burner and then fell off. Avatar Forest is, as of this moment of speaking, non-existent, but who knows. But, as I say, it's not my project anyway".

Dare I say it? "Salmon of Doubt" / "Spoon too Few"?

"(Laughing) Spoon too Far. Or was it Spoon too... We had a number of silly titles and Salmon of Doubt was meant to be a silly title, but my editor thought it was rather a good one. Salmon of Doubt was a Dirk Gently book, but I got about a third of the way through and thought, 'this isn't working'. So that was really kind of, not a crisis moment for me, but, I thought, 'I really don't feel I want to sit down and make another book work. I need to do something different, I need some mental crop rotation'. Because, when I started out I was doing radio, television, this, that - all sorts of different things, I loved moving from one thing to another. But I felt I had allowed myself to become painted into a corner where all I did was sit in a room typing. I just kind of lost it. Now that we've got this out of the way, I have essentially two projects down for this year. One is getting going on the Hitch-Hiker movie which is now up and raring to go with Disney. The other is an all new book, which is not going to be the Salmon of Doubt. This new book, I won't even give a title to it... the current working title is The Different Engineer, but it won't be that, that's just what I'm calling it.

As in Difference Engines?

"Yes, it was a reference back to Babbage at the very beginning, but then somebody pointed out to me that William Gibson and Bruce Sterling had written a book called, The Difference Engine, so really calling this book, The Different Engineer won't work. The thing with Dirk was that I felt I had lost contact with that character, I couldn't make that book viable, which is why I said, 'Okay, let's go off and do something else'. Then looking back at all the ideas that were there in Salmon of Doubt, I looked at it again about a year later and suddenly realised what it was that I'd been getting wrong, which was that these are essentially much more like Hitch-Hiker ideas and not like Dirk Gently ideas. So, there will come a point I suspect at some point in the future where I will write a sixth Hitch-Hiker book. But I kind of want to do that in an odd kind of way because people have said, quite rightly, that Mostly Harmless is a very bleak book. And it was a bleak book. The reason for that is very simple - I was having a lousy year, for all sorts of personal reasons that I don't want to go into, I just had a thoroughly miserable year, and I was trying to write a book against that background. And, guess what, it was a rather bleak book! I would love to finish Hitch-Hiker on a slightly more upbeat note, so five seems to be a wrong kind of number, six is a better kind of number. I think that a lot of the stuff which was originally in Salmon of Doubt, was planned into 'Salmon Doubt' and really wasn't working, I think could be yanked out and put together some new thoughts".

Yes, because certainly some people have heard that, Salmon of Doubt, was now going to be a new Hitch-Hiker book.

"Well, In a sense, because I shall be salvaging some of the ideas I couldn't make work within a Dirk Gently framework and putting them in a Hitch-Hiker framework, undergoing necessary changes on the way. And, for old time's sake, I may call it, Salmon of Doubt, I may call it - well who knows!"

I was wondering if Trillian's daughter in Most Harmless, Random Dent, was in any way inspired by the fact that, I understand, you have a young daughter yourself. Is that true?

"Well, no, because Polly, who is my daughter, came along after Random".

Right, because she's three and a half?

"That's right, yes, she's three and a half".

Oh good, well at least that bit of research was correct!

(Laughs)

Certainly in Mostly Harmless you can see aspects of Last Chance to See coming in, with the Perfectly Normal Beast, etc.

"Well, the thing that set me off in the direction of Last Chance to See was a trip I did to Madagascar in about 1984/5. And that trip certainly featured in Dirk Gently, although I recast it for various reasons as Mauritius".

Right, yes, the dodos.

"It's the same part of the world. And it was only subsequently that I actually went to Mauritius as part of Last Chance to See. Though, yes, all these different things sort of cross-fertilise each other, and in fact there is - I probably shouldn't say this - there are discussions beginning to take place about maybe extending Last Chance to See into television, which I must say I'd be thrilled to do. Where it fits into the schedule, god alone knows! (Laughs)"

Hmm. I remember Mark Cowardine saying that he felt radio worked particularly well for Last Chance to See and succeeded where perhaps television wouldn't have.

"We both felt that. I also felt this very strongly coming from a background where I felt very loyal and even evangelical about radio. And I made a very deliberate decision along with Mark that we would do this for radio rather than television. One of the effects of television is that changes everything it looks at - it's a kind of quantum device! And, even though that inevitably remains true, there have been very, very significant changes that have occurred in the technology since we did that in, what, 1988? You know, it's ten years later, and with modern digital cameras, they're very small, almost the size of the tape recorders we carried around with us for Last Chance to See when we did it. So, the possibility - I mean, I could never be non-interested in television, but you can be a great deal less interested. So I think there all sorts of things to explore there".

Well, perhaps I could finish off by asking you, Starship Titanic - why should people buy it?

"Why should people buy it? Because it's great! Because it's great! (Laughing) And because I spent two years of my life on it!"

Douglas Adams, it's been wonderful talking to you - thank you very much. We wish you every success with Starship Titanic and in the future.

I would like to sincerely thank Douglas Adams for granting this interview. I'd additionally like to thank The Digital Village, Zablac Entertainment and, most of all, Christina Erskine and Simon Byron at Bastion Marketing for organising it all.

Starship Titanic was released on 2nd April 1998.

[FOOTNOTE] Steve Meretzky co-authored the original Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy computer game with Douglas Adams.

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The Fall of the American Empire

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Isaac Asimov wrote his Foundation stories to show that every Empire, even the most powerful one, has to fall eventually. Everyone knows that America achieved its' peak power and world influence in the twentieth century. But how much longer is it going to last? It is hard to predict while it is still alive and reasonably well. But, as Asimov observed, there are certain signs that may give early hints that the end is approaching. One of them is a loss of technological knowledge. Couple of years ago I have learned from one of NASA's engineers that the know-how to build the rockets that took people to the Moon was lost. Repeated attempts brought failure after failure in spite of closely following blueprints. I knew that this time the funeral march is being played for the United States of America...

I thought that it might be worthwhile to look at other great powers of the past, that were similar to the United States and see how and why did they vanish. Long, long time ago - hundreds of years before America was discovered, there was a huge country in the heart of Europe. It was known as the Republic of Both Nations. Between fifteen and eighteen century

Republic was the largest country in Europe - extending from the Baltic Sea all the way across the Continent to the Black Sea. It was very different from its' neighbors. Unlike other kingdoms, ruthlessly ruled by royal despots, it was a democratic monarchy, where personal freedoms were respected and enforced by the law. For over six hundred years it was the safe haven for all people persecuted for religious or political reasons elsewhere. It was the first country in modern Europe to open public libraries, to establish the ministry of education and culture, to assure a freedom of religion and to adopt a modern democratic constitution. Citizens were not only allowed but obliged by the law to revolt against the King/Queen if he/she was not fulfilling his/her duties towards the Nation. Every citizen had a chance to become a King in popular elections. It became the second home for Jews - allowing for flourishing of Jewish culture and science unprecedented in the previous history of the Israel. It is not a science-fiction story. But it would cost you some time and effort to find it in history books - it doesn't belong to the official version of the history taught in the Western World.

Republic has been also known as a "Defense Wall of Europe" since all barbarians invading from the East had to face it first. That responsibility started with Mongol invasions in the 12th century and did not end until the demise of the Republic. A good example of how it worked: in 1683 The Ottoman Empire was on the successful quest to conquer Europe. Southern Europe was already in Turkish hands. The Ottoman armies attacked Republic, but after a couple of bloody battles they were forced to back off. Then they looked for an easier target -and they have found one: Austria. Western armies were not a match for the enemy - they have been plagued by the lack of discipline, poor training and a shortage of talented leaders. Outnumbered and demoralized by a string of defeats in the war with Muslims they were not able to stop the progress of the enemy. Ottoman armies reached Vienna. Fall of that city would open the way to the heart of Europe and would mean the end of Christianity and the Western culture as we know it. Austria and other European countries begged Republic for assistance. King Jan III brought his armies to rescue Vienna and was offered the command of united European forces. In a spectacular battle, the coalition defeated the Ottoman armies. To this day one can admire Turkish flags, tents and jewels captured after the battle and donated to the Vatican. Republic's armies didn't return home until Hungary was also freed from Turkish invaders.

The death of Republic in eighteen century gave a rise to a huge emigration waves from the whole Continent - there was no place anymore in the Old World to hide from the terror of absolute rule, religious persecution, witch hunts and pogroms... Fortunately a new, democratic country was being born while Republic was dying: the United States of America. And America proudly carried on the legacy of the Old Republic.... at least for a while.

Why did the Republic of Both Nations fall? The answer can be found right now and right here: in Washington D.C. It is hard to overlook corruption of the rich, legalized bribery, (nicknamed "lobbying"), demoralization of politicians shamelessly selling American secrets to foreign governments as soon as they resign from their office. Anyone can see growing divisions between poor and rich, white and black, native and alien... as well as growing national debt, inadequacy and incompetence of politicians, loss of influence and power on the world arena, decline in quality of life of an average citizen, social unrest. The list can go on and on... That is only one side of the coin. The Republic had also one important legal flaw, that turned against its' creators. "Liberum veto" - a constitutional amendment that was designed originally to protect democracy and individual freedom. It was supposed to assure that no law could be passed in the parliament unless there is total consensus, i.e. each representative had a power of

veto. As a result, there was no laws passed in the last two hundred years of the Republic.

America has also an equally lethal flaw: the design of the whole justice system. It was initially conceived to facilitate fair and speedy execution of the law. It ended up as a monstrosity allowing criminals to go unpunished, promoting the fall of the health system as well as rise of racism. America is the only place on this planet where one can sue and get sued for anything - and win, irrespectively of the truth, if one has a clever lawyer on his/her side. A new society, based on distrust and greed was born. Where can we escape in search of freedom and justice now?

The Old Republic is gone forever, but its' story still lives in a memory of its' descendants. They live dispersed through the ten countries that cover vast areas of the central and eastern Europe. But you might meet one of these proud people right in your own neighborhood. And if you'd like to read more about the spiritual predecessor of America, look it up in history books under Poland and Lithuania....

 Who Killed Science Fiction—Again?
 Article by George Zebrowski

Newer writers, readers, and critics unconsciously avoid the question, "What is to be done in science fiction? What is there to do?" They seem happily oblivious to the question, which prejudges, again unthinkingly, that there can even be an answer, which is unfair to sound thinking and careful observation.

I remember the thrill of having my question answered when, as a beginning writer, I heard James Blish sound a call to ambition in a speech that was later published as "A Question of Content" in *The Issue At Hand* by William Atheling, Jr. (Chicago, 1964). He asked that we ask of any work of SF, "Is it about anything? Nothing could be better for the health of our field than to let every science fiction writer know, beginning right now, that from now on there will be no escape from this question."

What he meant was that the works should reach beyond being about themselves only, to all the provocative and threatening concerns that bedevil our human life; yet so many writers do escape the question Blish posed—and the result is a trivialization of SF's inherently critical nature, which always says, even in its simplest works, that the future may be different in significant ways, for better or worse, and that futurity will judge the past.

The answers to my question, "What is there to do?" in SF are not a mystery, and have all tended toward the kind of answer given by Blish, despite commerce's insistence on the production of adventure entertainments having little to do with merit and writerly accomplishment. The question of what genuine SF should be has been so often sidetracked as to be nearly forgotten by a "don't ask don't tell" prohibition that lives unconsciously in the commercial writer's darkened soul.

One example of this longstanding conflict is to be found in the meteoric career of the beloved Stanley G. Weinbaum, whose stories appeared for just about two years, from 1934 until his death in 1936. What is interesting today is not only the influence his work had on later writers, but, less well known, how quickly his views of what he was doing developed away from purely commercial constraints, and came up against a wall.

Weinbaum wrote:

". . . most of our writers fail to take advantage of science fiction's one grand opportunity - its critical possibilities . . . it can criticise social, moral, technical, political, or intellectual conditions or any others. It's a weapon for intelligent writers, of which there are several, but they won't practice its use".

"For science fiction can do what science cannot. It can criticise because science fiction is not science. It is, or at least ought to be, a branch of the art of literature, and can therefore quite properly argue, reject, present a thesis, proselytize, criticise, or perform any other ethical function".

". . . it won't make a bit of difference to those readers (if any) who've plowed thru to this point. The younger writers will stand by their guns—or purple rays—and the younger readers will take as much delight as ever in super-scientists, Earth-Mars wars, antmen, tractor rays, and brave heroes who save country, earth, solar system, or universe from the terrible invaders from Outside".

"More power to 'em. I'd like to experience those same thrills again myself".

The ironic tone of these last lines are those of an author who knows he can't fit into the food chain of formulaic, commercial writing, because he knows that to do so constitutes the betrayal of a major literary form. He has discovered the classic struggle of the serious writer with the demand to cater put forward by profiteers.

It is unclear whether "An Autobiographical Sketch of Stanley G. Weinbaum" ever appeared in print during the author's lifetime. I came across it in the omnibus collection, *A Martian Odyssey and Other Science Fiction Tales, The Collected Short Stories of Stanley G. Weinbaum* (Hyperion Press, Westport, CT, 1974). It is a poignant testament of discovery by a writer whose tragically short life, and even shorter writing life, remains relevant but undiscussed today.

SF seeks to present dramatic stories that are linked, creatively, to reality, through our fallible human entanglement with a burgeoning knowledge. What this entanglement has brought us is a historical marriage between our biological evolutionary character and new means to express that character, for good or greed. The importance of a genuinely critical SF, as Weinbaum and others have glimpsed it, is that of a literature that explores this entanglement.

A view of SF's goals was never put better than by Stanislaw Lem, echoing with greater exactitude John W. Campbell's vision of SF as a literature of new horizons and human involvement:

". . . it isn't possible to construct a reflection of the conditions of the future with clichés. It isn't the archetypes of Jung, nor the structures of the myth, nor irrational nightmares which cause the central problems of the future and determine them. And should the future be full of dangers, those dangers cannot be reduced to the known patterns of the past. They have a unique quality, as a variety of factors of a new type. This is the most important thing for a writer of science fiction. But SF has meanwhile built itself into a jail and imprisoned itself within those walls, because its writers have not seemed to understand that the salvation of the creative imagination cannot be found in mythical, existential, or surrealist writings - as a new statement about the conditions of existence. By cutting itself off from the stream of scientific facts and hypotheses, science fiction itself has helped to erect the walls of the literary ghetto where it now lives out its piteous life". (Stanislaw Lem, in *SF: The Other Side of Realism*, edited by Thomas D. Clareson, Bowling Green University Press, 1971).

Many a writer has come and gone since Lem wrote this in 1969, and he and others have noted the always present exceptions who seem immune to the prison bars of commerce through which Weinbaum struggled to work. But few of us have failed to notice the non-fiction science writing renaissance of the last three decades, in books and countless articles of considerable literary elegance. This wave of talented writers has redrawn our imaginative conceptions of who we are and where we are, based on the many edges of science, in a way once begun by SF. There is more science fiction, one scientist has complained, in today's science, perhaps too much. And less science fiction in the books called science fiction. Arthur C. Clarke's "Second Law," that in order to know the limits of the possible one must go a little beyond the possible and then look back, is better applied in non-fiction than in the writerly works of SF that are certainly possible. One might explain that SF exists in many modes, satirical to realistic, as poetry, in music and movies, stories, novels, and theatrical works—so why not non-fiction SF? I'll leave that question open for the moment.

Quite by accident, I opened a 1971 book entitled *For Freedom of the Imagination* by Andre Sinayasky, the once imprisoned Soviet writer, and read the essay, "No Discount (On Science Fiction)" with keen interest, since it addressed the issues of ideological censorship. I at once realized that with the Soviet Union now gone, another kind of censorship had arrived, imported from market publishing—finer meshed but just as tyrannical: the demand to be entertaining above all other values. The last paragraph of the essay, now thirty years old, has not dated, and may well stand as the credo of independent science fiction:

"The development and character of our modern reality, the demands of the modern reader convince us that science fiction does belong among the phenomena of our time which are most viable and full of hopeful prospects. In order to enable this genre to take its rightful place, one has to enhance its rights and obligations. It means that one should boldly bring it to the level of the most genuine, the most worthy and greatest literature, and accordingly require that science fiction give no discount to artistic backwardness."

Pretentious? You bet. Keep in mind that it *has* been done, here and there, in the now nearly two-hundred year history of the field's multilingual existence. The tyranny of money and mediocrity still has cracks in it. One cannot guarantee accomplishment, but the walls of tyranny have enough cracks to catch the grappling hooks of invading innovators, which is all that is possible for honest fictional efforts—in contrast to those who are let in through the front gate by paid collaborators.

Ursula K. Le Guin once remarked to those of us who complain about market censorship and profit and loss blacklists that we still have the choice to do otherwise, that we can still say no and write what moves us. She's right, and many of us do so, and are even mistaken for commercially desirable products; others pay the price but still create their works. It's a hard prescription to follow—and more than one new Philip K. Dick walks among us. One left the field of battle a long time ago; another has just died; and yet another gets by and continues to create.

One might rephrase the question posed at the beginning of this essay, "What is to be done in science fiction?" with "What does an SF writer do?" In his introduction to Cyrano de Bergerac's *Other Worlds* (Oxford, 1965), Geoffrey Strachan writes that Cyrano's originality "was not that of the scientist or philosopher. It was that of a poet who listened to their talk and used it for his own ends, that of the science fiction writer." An SF writer will

not violate what is known, except if that is the point of the story, or for aesthetic dramatic ends, as in Wells's *The Invisible Man*.

It has been what seems to me only a fashion in critical circles to remain agnostic in the hope of finding a good definition of SF, but this reluctance is romantic grail hunting at best. Asimov's definition, properly put, does the job:

SF is fiction about the human effects of future changes in science and technology. The human effects, fictionally presented, make it literature, when it meets the test of writerly virtues and distinctive style; the future science and technology, without which the human effects would not happen, makes it uniquely SF. Now watch this: remove *future* and *science and technology* from the definition, substitute "changes"—whether past, present, or future, and the work can still be SF, if cast in a critical visionary way. We can see such "bits" of SF in many works of fiction—in Thomas Hardy, Herman Melville, Richard Llewellyn, James Hilton, and others.

It's nothing more than the "opening of the eyes" brought to us by an evolving, self-correcting scientific culture that brings us dangers as well as hope, and needs to be expressed in a literature that belongs to that new, still struggling culture. It is not an enemy of the past, but of the past's errors and confusions; the past's best is something that the new culture subsumes gladly.

When he was an old man of seventy-nine, in 1945, the year of my birth, H. G. Wells sat in his high-backed chair in his London house, where he had spent the war, refusing to leave for safer places, and drifted in and out of consciousness. Years earlier he had complained about how reality had "taken a leaf from my book and set itself to supersede me," in the wars he had predicted, in his glimpse of nuclear fission in 1914's *The World Set Free* (which coined the term "atomic bomb") and a vision of an arms race — and I imagined that I could traverse time to stand before him and ask about his child, "science fiction."

He would sit up and shout, "I created science fiction, and look what you have done with it!"

"You know?" I ask with shock. "You can actually see—from here in 1945?"

"Yes, I see into your times, and I know. It's shameful how you have taken a critical way of words, blazed by Swift and myself, and have made it into pointless adventures and games. I liked games, mind you, for the very young, but they never interfered with farseeing."

The issues raised by SF's very existence have been collecting for well over a century; these issues, which began with the questioning of a "literary sport" to be tolerated on special occasions only, now cut across cultural, historical, philosophical, and commercial realms (where they raise reactions of shame and disdain), are poorly understood, and are rarely collected in one basket, as I have done here.

The value of genuine SF, as eloquence and dramatic insight into unique, inevitable changes, to the very question of change, is inestimable, and poorly encouraged by the blind elephant gropers, who always get a different answer to their question, "What is it?"

"It's an elephant, you dopes!"

"Ah, but what *is* an elephant — and how much will it bring by the pound?"

I imagine one of Wells's giants from *The Food of the Gods* chasing the bean counters out of the Temple of SF, crying, "You have all the resources, all the wealth with which to do what needs to be done! But you turn away!"

The dollars don't care.

So it's up to us.

 Montreal Quebec: In Search of Les Voix D'Ameriques

Column by George Wallace

montreal, sunday morning july 31 - a chilly mid-summer morning in montreal along st denis street which is a bit winesoaked and bespotted after what seems to have been a typical saturday night in the capital of francophonic north america, among the descendants of rough-necked french adventurers who climbed out of their birch bark canoes settled down, took up a thing called work, put it down again, and just now figured out the best thing to do after forty hours labor is to parade down the sidestreets and boulevards of montreal eating and drinking and laughing, in groups of two to twelve.

i'm here to check out the montreal of the steak hache poets, a zany bunch of french canadians who show up each year at the lowell kerouac festival; the montreal of ralph alfonso, the part faux part fab bongobeat canadian beat spoken word artist whose montreal riff in 'this is for the night people' took my fancy the first time i heard it and hits me still ("i'm driving around aimlessly with my radio on/if it's montreal, i'm all alone on Sherbrooke Street...winding around little sleepy avenues where/everybody's tired, even the trees are tired/of holding up the sky tarpaulin").

the montreal of the festival voix d'ameriques, an annual spoken word event that comes around every february and has done for going on five years now, a festival that from all i've heard about it is a bang-up affair, catapulted to new levels of attention after having been nominated for the conseil des arts de montreal grand prix 2004 in the literature category.

this is summer, however a good time to get the lay of the land, to see what it is about montreal that makes it a place where such as these things tick. summertime, and montreal is for those who have stuck around town or are visiting it from more southern climes. it seems this time of year lots of montrealese leave town for the hinterlands, to camp and fish by a lake or otherwise beat a retreat from the canadian version of a crowd - not much by international standards, but you get accustomed to your own reality. this week, as it happens, there are chinese dragonboat enthusiasts, 'diversity fest' gay and lesbianers, practitioners of gallic pop music, olympic caliber swimmers from the world-over, 'juste pour rire' comediennes, and the like.

just getting here was, to put it mildly, an eye opener. i had heard that the amtrak trip from new york to montreal was one of the better train rides in the world, and of course being a new yorker i doubted it immediately - how could the hudson-lake placid corridor compete with the andes, or alps, or hindu kush. yet the hudson offers many vistas, from the palisades to the small upstate towns like newburgh and cornwall and kingston and sleepy hollow, where washington irving's haunting home still nestles. albany looms like a twentieth century architect's dream, a kind of brasilia in the vernal wilderness.

from there you trek upriver along the border of new york and vermont, where the universe turns into lakes and lakes and more lakes, meadows of low wet marsh stippled with loosestrife and punkgrass, deep thick woods of rocky outcroppings - unexpectedly giving way to magnificent and broad lake placid, a jewel in the adirondack plateau big enough to choke the morning song out of a voyageur.

a short stop in plattsburgh and then after that the trek to the canadian border is rather uneventful except for the long wait for customs and security. but then you cross over and you're the southern tier of canada, gorgeous open fields of corn and green soy bean, earth stretching for what looks like a hundred miles in every direction across a flat basin, rust-

orange young deer with no antlers yet leap through low fields of dark soy and even through the tall yellow topped corn like dolphins.

the ride up is all about eager viewing, gin rummy and patience, and patience is rewarded on the approach to montreal across the great st lawrence seaway (i swam the st lawrence seaway on the outskirts of town at lachine - where the original fur trappers first set up camp), a thing of rare beauty and frolic as it races its rapids past the old french city of montreal - gussied up a couple of times in the past thirty years for olympic and worlds fair moments - downstream under the railroad bridge.

first night out i got out to the latin quarter, which has as its center rue saint denis, a typical young adult hangabout of cafes, restaurants, bistros, bars, tibetan shops, head shops and intimations. the kind of place i tend to call home in any town where college kids and artists and drop outs can all mix before the place is discovered. at the moment saint denis st is one of the world's great places to hang out, very hip and young and collegiate, with all that implies.

there are a number of intimate and welcoming 'quarters' to this town, chinatown and little italy and the museum quarter and the mount royal hilltop (mount royal = montreal) quarter. and vielle montreal and the piersides and the underground shopping districts and an olympic village just outside of town with a biodome and nature park each of some interest.

to me though, of special interest were rues sherbrooke and st catherine and boul st laurent. central sherbrooke is museum row, st catherine has its seedy side but near the center of town is hq to a lot hip stores boasts some great old bookshops once you gravitate out of town some. best of all was st laurent with its old ethnic remnants - hebrew bakeries and hungarian butchers, any number of emigrant groups passed through the eye of montreal through this street. it was the saint laurent district that played host to the festival voix d'amerique, held at la sala rossa, at 4848 boul saint laurent; and casa del popolo, up the street at number 4873.

one area of saint laurent has gone quite yuppy, but i did gravitate to a great flophouse cum costume shop cum cafe/hangout called evas, a musty place with endless racks of theatrical costumes and cappuccino machines, all of it run idly along by kids staying there on the cheap under the watchful eye of an autumnal patriarch of a man who owns the place, a white-haired peter ustinov type who is genial and wise in the manner of canio pavone in sag harbor or george whitman at shakespeare & co in paris - when i walked in he was treating several pre-school kids who had wandered in to a free ice cream sampling contest.

speaking of paris, the franco-gallic thing is quite pronounced in montreal, there's nothing pasty or put-on about it, this is a french outpost down to its toenails, neither ingrown nor overly polished. montreal has an odd mix of urban largeness and small town about it. the parks are filled with sunbathers and couples necking and young people with their dogs throwing tennis balls and not particular paying attention when they'd been retrieved. there are the usual national galleries dedicated to visual arts, interpretation of local history and culture, and anthropology - but also quite a number of art museums with contemporary work (none of them too terribly crowded but in and around each groups of tiny vacation school children in their french caps mesmerized by the explanations of young curators confiding in them the secrets of french aesthetics and sensual civilization).

but this time of year montreal's definitely a street phenomenon. on friday night there was an enormous rock concert amongst the skyscrapers downtown,

some international names on stage but the volume was kept unaccountably low so that it was really the street vendors and the popcorn makers making the music with their hawking of trinkets and their funnel cakes. everybody shouting greetings to their friends in screwy quebécois and the mad-eyed playing of jaunty voyageur chanty songs on hand-made clay ocarinas (i bought one for my son teddy who promptly put it to lips and knocked off a ditty a la bretagne, while skipping light footed down the street fully possessed by the god pan).

of course kids from toronto come to montreal, they drive down the main drag of st denis in their proud convertibles and honk at skinny bearded pals who are trying desperately to hold each other up -- like college kids after midterm exams on every sidewalk in the world, having dowsed themselves with obvious beer and found themselves incapable of soaking it up with slices of pizza. like friday night in fresno.

meanwhile in vielle montreal which has walls of immense granite blocks, not just the cathedral but every next warehouse and former trading post, originally piled up to house beaver pelts and corn liquor, everything possesses a sense of frontier urgency in the loins of a people in possession of an untapped continent's worth of raw materials to batten up as strong habitation against the elements.

if it sounds weird and monumental and funky well it is but oh how the sound and light illuminates the heavy stone buildings of vielle montreal at dusk, and how the city comes alive with stained glass and good wine at night.

there is neither the majesty of the parthenon nor the austere counterpoint of paris' notre dame cathedral - in its solemn floating solitude - to this sound and light. no frippery or awe, only the coarse jovial papa-bear gigantitude of it, quarried by a lot of a log-splitting wet-booted canadian pappies for their kids, all laid out as a half-baked joke for the tourists and maybe even a joke on themselves, fodder for raucous kiddies to trip over after a half-drunk keg or a slapdash meal.

for all that there is a marriage of sorts going on in montreal, and to be celebrated. a marriage between massive stone walls and illuminated glass. between rough north american reality and european grace. something that makes for an airy otherworldliness. a very odd synthesis of gallic attention to sensuous detail and regal backwoods abandonment. the scent of men who no doubt have slept with the grizzlies and sired gruff cubs in the wilderness, men who know better than to put on airs.

you can see it in the natural environment, especially the river, an unsettled thing, no contemplation about it or tired elegance, the river doesn't flow here, it is more of a rapids, with shallow hazards and burbling enthusiasm and sudden unplanned snagging moments. like the river which runs through it, there is in the built environment of montreal that same sense of rough-hewn cut of architectural mayhem, slashed out of the forest in wide wonderful wooden slabs of oak, hoisted in massive chunks from the continental skull of raw rock, and made to dance.

not at all a bad place to find les voix d'ameriques in poetry, french culture tempered by the resilience induced by the north american continental experience. charming grace. rough hands. good old jazzy fun and a galloping french spirit.

like ralph says, 'this is for the night people - good night!' vive that, montreal!

The Ganga

Column by Andrew O'Donnell

Varanasi station was cold, much colder than I'd been used to the month previous, and, getting out of the train I could immediately feel the difference.

I'd been travelling south from Mumbai and had crossed India through the province of Karnataka, going east, eventually ending up in Chennai on the east coast. But in Varanasi, at that time of year (March?) the temperature was the same as Britain in October. Chennai had been hot and a massive contrast to Varanasi.

It was early, around five or six in the morning, when I stepped off the train. People loaded and unloaded bags in thick scarves and heavy cotton headgear. The train journey from Chennai to Varanasi had taken the good part of fifty hours and I'd relied totally on shopping from platforms whenever we'd made any semi-permanent stop along the way. Chapatis, various curries and bananas had been the only things I'd eaten. But the main thing I remember was the cold. While Mumbai stays a fairly steady 25-35 degrees centigrade year-round, Varanasi being much further north, is cooler.. it stands on a great plain by the river Ganges.. the reason I'd come to Varanasi in the first place.

To put it simply, Varanasi (it's old name is Benares) is the Hindu equivalent of Mecca and attracts massive amounts of people on pilgrimages from all parts of India and the world. The ghats (giant concrete emplacements used for a variety of different functions) are spread across the point where the city disturbs the river, and these are the main attractions for visitors. At the time I was there it was possible to find accomadation by the river for something like a pound a night.. so I planned to stay there a while.

I really don't know why I'm telling this story now.. but I've been thinking a lot about faith recently, I'm sure a lot of people have.. anyway, I think this was one of the most pertinent examples of religious devotion I've ever come across. I guess that's why I'm telling it now.

I saw my first dead body in Varanasi and, like so many things, it wasn't how I imagined it. It was actually just the sight of a pair of bare feet sticking out of a box that was being rushed down the street by a large group of people. They were all running along the side of the road amongst the heavy traffic that clogs up so many of Varanasi's thin streets. I didn't even realise what it was until a friend had pointed it out to me. The notion of 'lifeless body' only dawned on me very slowly. The body itself was covered by what looked like a ceremonial tarp of some kind. It was gold and red in colour and I couldn't make out if it was actually some kind of metallic material or whether it was actually something woven.

What interests me more, now, about seeing this sight is that, apart from one other occasion (of which I'll talk about in a minute) I've never seen a dead body since. What I can't help thinking about is how this reality of death effects the immediate surroundings. I think the attitude to death in areas where the dead are brought to a special place for a 'more honourable' cremation (the object of many of these pilgrimages), has an enormous effect on the people who live here (aside from many of them being perhaps more religiously devoted than in the west). In England, while death is real amongst surroundings that are usually filial or wholly administrative (hospitals, funeral services) in Varanasi devotion, to one extent or another, is an industry.

After staying in Varanasi a few days, and with a friend in tow, I decided to make a visit to the burning ghats where the cremations take place. Looking back I don't think I had any specific thoughts on what I was witnessing at the time. Cremations are performed outdoors on large funeral pyres next to the river. From what I could see, and from what I've read about, the body is then burnt as close to ashes as is possible and then the ashes are put in the river. The family are there as witnesses while the cremation takes place. What people sometimes forget is the significance of the river. This is why Varanasi is high on the list of pilgrimage destinations. The Ganges.

The Ganges (referred to in Hindi as 'Mother-Ganga') is seen as the source of life and so it's believed that it should be the recipient of the remains of physical life. It is also, to my knowledge, a weightier reassurance for reincarnation. When we watched a cremation ceremony at the ghats I had mixed feelings. Firstly, it felt like being part of something that, in the west, is irrevocably private. That's not to say it is not private for the family but is also obviously public in it being held outdoors. In short, it was like stumbling into an Anglican or C of E church when a funeral service is in full flow (we always need familiar correlations, don't we?) ..watching a body burn. Many would say a sacred, holy moment.

Walking along the edge of the Ganges later the same day it seemed difficult to square the burning of the body I'd just seen while knowing that people a mile down the river (those in front of me at the time) would be washing themselves in the water, or bathing as an act of devotion. At the time it was so contrary to all that I had experienced regarding faith up to that point. I tend to be a little bit more philosophical these days.. I believe that logic does not enter into the rationale behind acts like these. Religion is an engine purely for belief and, in many ways, the more contrary to logic an act is the more devoted, self-enforcing it is. It is not nice and it is not pretty for others to need the water for such practical purposes as washing while visitors claim it for a higher spiritual purpose. But this is what is so strange about the entire human comedy, what makes people human. The acceptance of death, performed in a ceremony like this, seemed to prove to me that perhaps there was more wisdom in this act than in a western ceremony. The symbolic value of the river, is of course, totally bound up in the act of cremation.

In the same way, in the west, sacramental objects are infused with a purpose that is purely symbolic and devotional and do not serve any practical purpose (no one eats communion wafers because they are actually physically hungry, we do not light candles in churches because it is dark etc) In these circumstances the two faiths draw a little closer. What was interesting about the Ganga was that the God or Godhead had crossed from the purely spiritual (our western holy ghost, I guess) to be encompassed by the actual physical attributes of the river. Having said all that, the overwhelming feeling, now, beyond all comparison and analysis, is an acceptance of difference. A feeling of still being interested in how the ceremony of cremation functions, of wanting to know how this affects attitudes towards death. It may be that if we can understand death a little bit better it may reverse a lot of attitudes towards life. As Larkin pointed out in 'The Mower' (written as he, himself, approached what he called 'the inevitable') -

'The mower stalled, twice; kneeling, I found
A hedgehog jammed up against the blades,
Killed. It had been in the long grass.

I had seen it before, and even fed it, once.
Now I had mauled its unobtrusive world

Unmendably. Burial was no help:

Next morning I got up and it did not.
The first day after a death, the new absence
Is always the same; we should be careful

Of each other, we should be kind
While there is still time'

I spent my evenings in Varanasi chatting to other foreign tourists. Many of them warned each other not to go in the water. Not to go near it. Everyone ticked off diseases in their heads.

Walking back the same day I slipped in a mud-channel that was connected with the river, getting one of my sandals all clogged with mud.

The next morning I cleaned my teeth with tap water. Ganges water. My teeth obviously didn't stay clean ..but the sandal kept that same mud (regardless of my trying to wash it off) for over a year after that.

I've also never seen a river wider than the Ganges. Which is something.

Welcome to Planet Sicily
Column by Dave Wood

At the beginning of decade 1988 - 98, I joined and started to tour internationally with community theatre co-operative, Word And Action (Dorset) Ltd. My main position in the work quickly fell to organising tours in Britain as well as to undergo the practical hands-on work of helping groups build stories and act them through to completion in a central space. It was exhilarating work that kept you on your toes (and behind the wheel of a car for long periods of time) and gave a richness of experience that, for me still lies unsurpassed in any other job.

One learnt to expect the unexpected, groups hotch-potching together highly original plays by responding collectively, vocally and abstractedly to a random question and answer process. Parts in the play were acted by the audience supported by ourselves. Everything was represented by people - tables, chairs, the moon (!) etc. Because of the speed of the story gathering process these often quirky statements revealed (through symbol) great insights into the groups concerned. But that (sorry) is another story.

It was through Word And Action, I made my first visit to Sicily. I'd previously been across the water to other countries that learnt English as their non-native tongue. Sweden was my first sojourn abroad and Italy (and Sicily) came later)

We got on with the job in hand; working in schools mainly; Scoila Media are the equivalent of our junior schools and the Liceo is where the ragazzi decide to spend their time in study proper in certain subject areas. For example, if someone decided to be a mechanic, they'd go to a Liceo Tecnico (and no doubt get a trademark spanner for the back pocket). When word spread, we began to work in Scoila Elementaire (or infants).

In the first year of being an apprentice to the work, utmost concentration had to be in learning a process which felt (and was at the time) completely alien to me. Along with learning came periods of stress, frustration and anger, usually projected on to my colleagues who were experienced in handling most battle periods in the growing pains of a newly initiated community arts worker. The processes of Instant theatre was digging its talons into me, asking me to respond quickly and fluidly to situations way

beyond my ken. Somehow I pulled through and stayed to enjoy and grow a further ten years. Christ knows how.

The company's dedication to the freeing up of language led me into poetry. I'd never really studied it except at school. As a child I went through a period of composing what I went on to call tum te tum verse, the kind of stanzas that would trip merrily along like you were bouncing on the back of a camel. My vision of poetry changed when I joined Word And Action. Regular gatherings run by the collective invited the reading out of poems previously written to the evening. There was no critical analysis just gentle proings to clarify and open out points in the lines. My own poetry by this time was run by the intellect and the heart hadn't quite brokered free as yet; I was writing it as 'part of the job' . I could hear my muse laughing her stockings off in the back of beyond. Nevertheless I persisted.

I left the co-operative in 1998 with notebooks bulging full of poetry covering my travels.

In 2005 I was invited to return to Sicily as part of Word And Action. I readily accepted. The blog will be a mixture of recent memory, distant reminiscence of previous visits and (eventually) stories from the schools we visited. Enjoy.

Monday 28th February 2005

Monday - I'd agreed last night to sort out the car this morning. I have to get the scratch cards for the vehicle's dashboard and to stop us being towed away. Though it would be difficult at certain times - there are places where the traffic is not just double parked but triple parked. So it was 8.15 I pootled off with my host to the local bar to get what's needed. To be honest, it's been so long since I've been out of this culture and away from the language, I was so nervous. Rosa's friend ordered at the counter and we had a quick shot of caffeine before I caught up with Sarah and Sue.

Many years ago, I was on tour with two other colleagues J and R. I was with J in a car following a tutor. R was in the passenger seat with the tutor and we were following. It was that scary moment when you think you're following and another car creeps in between. And then - of course I think I know where they went. Wrong, wrong, wrong - we find ourselves on a busy road not knowing where the others had gone and having about a half serving of Italian between us. The fact we didn't get on anyway didn't help. We were but two planets lost in the universe that is and will remain so Palermo. Yeah yeah, things are changing but you have to allow me a little dramatic language.

There was no mention of where they were going on the itinerary. It was a last minute performance organised with the local tourist school. So, we sat and tried to work out what the hell to do. From what I remember we were due to get the boat back to mainland Italy soon - so we were, I suppose you'd say in a pants situation of double proportion.

J didn't say a great deal - just complained really. I asked the nearest shopkeeper for some change for the public phone. At least I could call home and see if R had left a message there. No such luck. Mr Shopkeeper wanted to help. Not much he could do really - unless of course he could fry us up a couple of comforting panini mellanzane (maybe a bit too much to ask at this juncture).

By stroke of luck (the gods were with us obviously) and two hours later, R and the contact passed by. J was sprawled across the bonnet in a her jogging bottoms and my hair was looking a little unsexy to say the least.

We talked about ways we could have taken out of the mess. Going back to the hotel was numero uno. I sheepishly fumbled at the receipt with hotel address on.

Anyway, R had to do the performance on his own, a process usually reserved for three actors. J thought it was most unfair that we had to soak up the dust of the Palermo road system (my paraphrasing). Best be careful J, I said.

Wanted to tell you that story, not to scare you, just to give you a flavour of how the city bites back sometimes.

It took a long time to sort out which room was to house our session, but eventually after wandering back and forth, we gave three performances at Rosa's school. Their standard of English, even at this age is high compared with (yes, I know I've used this phrase far too much) other visits. Though the middle group particularly struggled, the Sicilians seem to love the process of firstly telling the story (highly vociferously) and joining in the fun of the central drama. My problem was my voice - it was shaky because of the flu, so (if anyone remembers her) I was beginning to sound like Frances de la Tour chewing gravel.

Rosa took us to lunch. Sicilian lunch proper is one to make your eyes pop. There's an array (hooray) of side dishes you'd normally see as English main courses - penne with melanzane (aubergine), lots of vegetables oozing with olive oil all along side the crustiest, loveliest looking bread...'The whole lot please and make it snappy!'

There's something smooth and slick about service in Italian bars. The care taken over the display of the food is passed on through the handling and the exactness. The bar staff/baristas adorned in matching jackets and waistcoats (not a single button loose or off) are happy to be photographed for the archives.

The bar swept round in a semi circle. Our half was a small restaurant with simple but smart looking tables. Around the corner the lengthy bar faced windows with Easter displays of huge Kinder Easter Eggs, cuddly toys and silvery gold ribbon. I don't think it's a chocaholic society we're in, just one that adores the visual and likes to treat its children with absolute worship.

Coffee? Oh - go on... It seems Lavazza is out this year though. Is there something we're not being told?

Our quest now is to say goodbye to Rosa (but we'll be back, honest!) then somehow find the road to Milazzo, further along the north coast to the east. We've booked a small hotel (Albergo, I think), which we're told is on the main road in. I suspect there may be some direction asking to be done.

We stop on the way. Petrol and spremutes ("spraymootas"). Not to be confused; one is petrol and the other is a drink made entirely of juiced fruit (blood orange, grapefruit or if you have facial cheeks of asbestos - lemon). Don't mistake the two.

Passing through the mountains (Sue says it reminds her of Africa) we stop to ask directions, somehow doubting the simplicity of the instructions for finding our bearings once we hit the coastal town like true English (oh and one Scot).

We turn up just as it starts to get dark and we have to find someone to help us again. Most cars are dragged up and on to the pavement to allow

other traffic to pass and hence park further along on the causeway themselves. We find a spot around the corner from the hotel and just fifteen metres from the street seller with his Ape van and his vegetable. I have to say, just in case you didn't know, Ape is pronounced "Appi" and is basically a three wheeled van with the steering of a motorbike. They're rugged enough - they have to be to carry the amounts of stuff I've seen them laden down with but they seem to be the equivalent of the German trabant or the Morris traveler. This is where I start to get hate mail from the veteran car collectors association, I can feel it in my water-tank. We drag our luggage to the hotel entrance. Sue was hoping that her sleeping bag will have been delivered here (you remember the saga of the sleeping bag? - well if not - go read the first article again)

No one in. We ring both bells. A yappy dog does what it does best at people - yaps. We're there for a good twenty minutes until we give up. Sarah ventures over the other side of the road to (ready to join in?) Hotel California. I'd stayed here before, many years ago and I remember it wasn't much to sing about then. We book in, hand over passports and brave the dampness of the room. Good shower, though probably dryer to sleep there than the beds.

Remember the story of the sleeping bag? It was to be delivered to the hotel we were originally going to staying in. Plan B - we meet the contact - ask her to explain the situation to the other hotel keeper and grab the sleeping bag quickly leaving a trail of smoke and shouts of yippee (in Italian) as we gibber manic-ly.

Nothing ever works out perfect. Contact made, apologies for desertion to other hotel are said and the sleeping bag? It's been sent back to Catania airport...

Right - where's the nearest restaurant? We English (and one Scot) love to comfort eat.

 Secret Longings
 Column by Helen Shay

Whilst a fan of P K Dick's writing, I confess I really wanted to be his wife - well, one of them. With his dark looks and Orson Wells' voice, he rivalled Henry VIII with partners. Nor do I let being petite and blonde stop me from clinging to my fantasy. It is clear that his type was tall, skinny and brunette, preferably undergoing a nervous breakdown. (What woman could resist the chat-up line of his protagonist in *We Can Build You*, telling the heroine he has fallen for her mental health history?) Yet, if I cannot manage 'tall, skinny brunette', I can throw in some quality neurosis.

Now that is something, in which P K Dick himself excelled. Convinced he was at the centre of conspiracies and under FBI surveillance, he became paranoid after his home was ransacked in the early seventies, although nothing went missing. Although, he remained unsure who was responsible, it may not be irrelevant that he was largely surviving on industrial quantities of speed at the time. The more I reflect on the mystery, the more I feel whoever did it must have known much about his habits, his belongings and his safe. One person fits the bill - P K Dick.

That's not to say that I doubt his sincerity, but he was capable of brief intensity of emotion and also of forgetting (especially anything too 'real'). He lived amongst surreal hallucinations, where a tea towel might attack him or a man with two heads (or two men with a shared body) visit him, or a visionary revelation, based on intricate numerology, occur at a

garage. In short, he lived within the full power of his imagination. There can be no greater trip than that. I would like to have been along for the ride.

Reviews

Almanacs by Jen Hadfield (Bloodaxe Books, 80 pp, ISBN 1-85224-687-1, £7.95)

I'm a fickle reader. I want to be grabbed from the first page, the first word almost. Contrary to what you may think, I hardly ever read thrillers. I have read several books of poetry that have made me stand up and laugh, wake up and cry, made me angry even. I enjoy poems I understand through and through, even if I have to work at them a little. This is why I think Jen Hadfield's first collection - Almanacs - is too good for me. I must plead guilty, as it is clearly my stupidity, and only my own, that is preventing me from enjoying the poems to the full, to interpret their meanings and unravel their mysteries, because I am convinced there is indeed a lot of meaning to be had in Hadfield's collection.

Almanacs is not a summer read, which I confess is what I'm looking for this year. Maybe that's the prejudice I'm making. If it were February, raining every day and I was sat at my table with my dictionary at my elbow, the book would maybe be making more of an impact on me. This said, I've never been to the Shetland Islands, and the book's central collection of poems, that read very much like a road trip, made me want to go explore them. Without understanding the meaning of every poem a reader can still perceive the changing of seasons as he or she progresses through the collection through the way nature is described. The quotations taken from songs, books and sayings also add richness to the poem and often offer clues as to what the authors is on about.

I also enjoy the way the poems all have different formats, the author sometimes using strict meter and at others a more prose-like approach. Expressions are stripped down to the bare minimum, which is a style I appreciate in both poetry and prose. It is clear a lot of work has been put into each poem, in which case it can be argued there is a lack of spontaneity.

The notes at the end of the collection are helpful and made me wish I'd found them before finishing the book. But there are still many words I've never heard, like 'rhodos', 'skua', 'diode', 'sook', 'bladderwrack', 'teaseweed', 'swimbladder', 'tugsome', and I quote but a few. I am not saying that unusual words should not be used in the poetry, or even invented words, but generally it is helpful if the meaning of those words are hinted at in the poem itself. My favourite verses of the collection I take from a section of the poem 'Fool Moon Voices':

'I said to Tommy
(who was shifting stone)
watcha doing
and he said playing
at Nelson Mandela
what does it look like?'

It is the only joke, only allusion I fully understand, which is why I like it. Once meaning has been wrenched out of one of the poems from Almanacs, the reader can expect a feeling of triumph, of veritable conquest over the unknown. If that is what you look for in poetry, Almanacs will amply satisfy you, and I recommend it warmly. The book definitely improves on second, even third read. After all, if you don't succeed, try, try again.

Emilie Connes

Hot Spot edited by Barbara Cardy (published bi-monthly by Erotique Books, 96 pp, £5.99)

Hot Spot is a sexually explicit anthology of fiction, thin on plot and fat with four letter words, produced every two months with women as a target audience, if not exclusively than at least as part of a shared reading experience with the man in their lives.

Words alone are used to excite. There are no pictures, apart from the monotone front cover, not even tasteful drawings of the Alex Comfort *Joy of Sex* variety, and the content proves that, despite the universality of sexual desire, prose is still a clumsy way of expressing the vibrancy of physical intimacy.

It is, though, unreasonable to apply the usual literary standards of criticism to writing which is intended to be read in a certain way by a self selected audience for a specific purpose. However, as a reviewer reading in the cold light of day the shibboleths of pornography (panties instead of knickers, cum instead of come) is intensely irritating, as is the dreary repetitiveness of the language - I never want to see the phrase 'greedily sucked' again. Yet, I recognise that its very predictability is part of the attraction. The reader can anticipate the inevitability of what is being enacted on the page much in the same way as a devotee of Mills and Boon romantic fiction relishes the masterful appearance of the Mr Darcy character because she knows in a hundred pages or so he will submit to the charms of the heroine.

When the Black Lace imprint first appeared in 1993 it emphasised that it was producing female erotica written by women. Hot Spot authors appear to be as mixed as the readership it is aimed at. The editor is female but of the 14 separate stories published in volumes 3 and 4 only two appear to be written by women, although others give a female point of view, and there seems to a female majority in the 'true life' confession corner.

I say seems because there has to be a question mark about authenticity simply because within these pages there is no marked difference between male and female sexual fantasy. There is a sameness about the tone, as well as the content, which is strangely disquieting.

It would hardly be controversial to suggest that they are sharp distinctions between cultural expressions of masculine and feminine identity. To take just one example, in a poll on the 10 best films of all time conducted on a gender basis there was no overlap between those chosen by women and those by men. Yet within the pages of Hot Spot there is a cosy agreement about what constitutes sexual stimuli. I don't doubt that women do contribute to this series of anthologies but I can't help feel that, unconsciously or otherwise, they are writing what they are expected to write, in affect regurgitating images of masculine desire. There is no female voice attempting to articulate a genuinely alternative erotica and perhaps it could be argued that we already have it. It is to be found, not sitting on the top shelf of newsagents (where Hot Spot resides), but more comfortably at eye level in High Street stores and in dog-eared bundles sold at church jumble sales and in charity shops. Germaine Greer is not the only feminist to have described romantic fiction as pornography for women. She argues that it is both soothing unction for the soul and a masturbation aid as there few things more erotic than a masterful man submitting to a powerless woman.

When it comes to erotic fiction for women, it could be argued that Jane Austen got there first and we have been re-reading *Pride and Prejudice* in various disguises ever since.

Bridget Whelan

Interzone #197, editors: Andy Cox; Jetse de Vries; Peter Tennant (TTA Press, 66 pp, ISSN: 0264-3596, £3.50)

Since the change to TTA publishers, 'Interzone' has become refreshed, yet still retains the charm of its heritage. Like other TTA titles, there is a slick, assured look and in-house style, a breadth to its scope and - as its always had - a sense that the magazine comprehensively rounds up what's going on in the world of sf and fantasy.

This issue features five new short stories as well as the regular features of David Langford's *Ansible Link*, Martin Hughes reviewing the world of videogames, Nick Lowe's *Mutant Popcorn* and a generous selection of book reviews. There is also an interview by Andy Hedgecock with the writers Susanna Clarke and Colin Greenland.

Mutant Popcorn, Nick Lowe's column, is one of the most splendidly-written examples of film criticism. This month he turns an erudite pen on the baleful phenomenon of half-term films. "They are not the family films of the seasons we know, the Pixars and Lemony Snicketts, but something altogether stranger: films that for one or another reason can only slip out to do their business in this twilight time between the seasons we know." *Mutant Popcorn* is probably more fun in a few thousand words than the edited highlights of the three or four movies elegantly dissected within.

The interview with Susanna Clarke and Colin Greenland focuses on their relationship and its effect on their writing. It's a healthily practical arrangement of swapping domestic chores rather than fuelling and fusing each other's narrative preoccupations. The balance of the interview is tipped towards Susanna Clarke, as her novel 'Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell' is currently garnering acclaim from critics and readers, but manages to provide overviews of their careers and also discuss the provenance of fantasy fiction.

The short stories featured in this issue begin with a lengthy piece called 'Dee-Dee and the Dumpy Dancers' by Ian Watson and Mike Allen but things really only get going with Scott Mackay's 'Threshold of Perception.' This neat little tale is set in 1910 and in the Meudon Observatory only Percival Lowell has noted an incremental shift in the trajectory of Halley's Comet that will be sufficient for it to hit the Earth. It is accompanied by an impressive illustration by Kenn Brown. Next there is Christopher East's story 'A World of His Own', where a small humanoid plasticine toy - a Puddy Buddy - replicates itself as numerous peebees until they have taken over the hapless owner's apartment before going on to over-run the entire block. East's style is deceptively mild, with sure pacing, laced with an impressively deadpan wit. "The phone rang. Joe summoned it with a quick shout. The receiver raced across the coffee table to him, dodging peebees attempting to scavenge its battery pack. The phone had been on the run for days." There is also 'Kivam' by Dave Hoing, a well-written but somewhat perfunctory piece of fantasy set in a place called Echoes. It is extrapolated from a novel-in-progress called 'The Myth of Bones' and carried some sense of having been lifted from a larger narrative structure. The issue's last story is 'The Kansas Jayhawk Vs The Midwestern Monster Squad' by Jeremiah Tolbert. This is at the opposite end of *Interzone's* spectrum, being contemporary sf, and follows a "monster storm" that is excitedly tracked by "monsterologists" eager to witness the big fight. The premise is left unleavened however through pedestrian writing and is not as enjoyable as some of the other pieces of fiction on offer this month.

Jake Elliot

The Incwriters Society (UK) Recommended Read: Surfacing by William Park

Surfacing by William Park (Spike, 64pp, ISBN 0 9518978 7 X, £5.99)

Admirers of William Park's poetry have waited a long time for the publication of this, his first full-length collection. The wait has been worthwhile. SURFACING is a collection of poems in every sense of the word. The kind of meticulous attention Park brings to individual poems is brought to bear in the ordering and presentation of this book which opens with the beautifully oblique and delicate lyric *Angel* which sets the tone for the rest of the collection. Those coming to Park's poetry for the first time will be struck by the intensity of the language and the transparency of the images; those familiar with it already will now be in a position to see individual poems in a context - and to make a considered judgment of the poet's achievement to date. It seems to me that Park is possessed of a unique voice, which in itself reflects and articulates a unique sensibility. Everyday experience is filtered through this sensibility and refined by it into statements of true insight, which resonate long after they've been read.

While some of the poems - *Train*, *Against Sleep* and *The Brass Lamp* - are minimalist concentrations of observation and experience, others - *Mirror-Talk*, *The Farmhouse* and *Nomads* - are expansive, narrative driven explorations of various emotional states refracted through situation and character. Throughout there develops a precise tension between a lyric sensibility and a narrative tendency, which makes for a poetry that is as engaging and challenging, as it is satisfying. Because Park's voice is so idiosyncratic it's difficult to detect influences although I feel very strongly the presence of the great French Imagists when I read something like:

'Little is trapped:
emptiness
and a fly,
its form, not essence
imprisoned.'
(*Arachne's Web*)

As with so many of the poems in this collection, the words are scrupulously chosen and laid out in such a way that they appear not so much as poems as artefacts. Park consistently resists the temptation to explain his poems away by providing too much context or background; rather he allows the poem to speak for itself, trusting it to make intellectual and emotion sense. This, of course, puts extreme pressure on the serious reader while, at the same time, endowing them with a sense of trust. The closing poem, *Screen-Life* emphasises the poet's indebtedness to the visual language of cinema and there is indeed a cinematic quality to many of the poems which is in evidence, not merely through the succession of vivid and precise images, but also in the way those images are allowed to develop in a narrative sequence. This is particularly evident in poems like *Tipped* and *The Damned*, which have a surreal quality, possessing the illogic of a dream.

Despite these influences, William Park comes across in this very fine first collection as his own man - and his own poet too. At a time when poetry runs the risk of being driven by market forces we have here a poet writing with dedication out of a life committed to poetry and the implications that entails. William Park is a true poet with a sure, distinctive, highly attuned voice. This collection shows him in his best possible light and should make available, at last and to a wide public, the work of a remarkable writer.

Ian Parks

The Third Alternative #41, editor: Andy Cox (TTA Press, 66 pp, ISSN: 1352-3783, £4.00)

This issue of TTA (Spring 2005) contains seven short stories alongside the features of book reviews, comment, Stephen Volk's film column and an

interview with writer Phil Rickman. Things are prefaced by Joel Lane's guest editorial - an interesting and thoughtful piece on the inheritance of slipstream writing and recent trends in genre fiction. Lane writes convincingly about the 'restless innovation' that characterises the pulp tradition and the necessity of "tidy plots" being "overgrown with mutant strands of narrative". Elsewhere, the level of reportage isn't as high, The Dodo's 'tongue-in-beak' column reduced to a discussion of pensions, possibly not what springs to mind as a topic for the dark, edgy material celebrated in the editorial.

Andrew Hedgecock's interview with Phil Rickman offers some insight into what led to Rickman's series of 'spiritual procedurals' featuring Reverend Merrily Watkins. Rickman is an articulate commentator on his own work and the process of writing and explains how he managed to go from being Wales' Current Affairs reporter of the Year to a celebrated author.

The fiction in this issue begins with 'SS' by Nathan Ballingrud, a story about a boy's involvement with white supremacists that is skewed by some extraneous and gratuitous horror concerning his crippled mother's eating habits. Next there is Cody Goodfellow's 'A Drop of Ruby' that is a little gem of clear prose with a central concept of sentient blood that could sustain a novel. Scott Nicholson's story 'In the Family' concerns a son who is forced to take drastic steps when his mother plans to sell the family funeral business, forcing the son out of what has become his vocation. It's sharply written and reads like a tale from the 'Pan Books of Horror' crossed with 'Six Feet Under.' Chaz Brenchley's 'Going to Jerusalem' is about a couple who walk the Jerusalem Mile maze in a bid to start a family and the consequences of putting a foot wrong. This issue's standout story is 'The Return' by Conrad Williams. This is a fine example of Williams' work, a compelling short story full of subtle narrative effects and striking details. "She'd fallen into the canal and was face down in a broth of oil, her arm twisted behind her back. I could see the resin flower on her finger. A great bloom of red had blossomed at the small of her back. I waded in and fished her out, knowing she was already dead. I touched the blood. It wrinkled, much like the sugar test my mum used to perform on a saucer when making strawberry jam." Martin Simpson's story 'The Sixteenth Man I Killed' is a crisp tale of a contract killer haunted by his most recent victim and Patrick Samphire's 'The Western Front' is composed of the diary and letters of a World War One captain waiting for the order to begin the push who discovers something strange and impossible growing in no man's land.

As is usually the case with *The Third Alternative*, the standard of artwork accompanying the stories is high. In particular, Mike Bohatch, Vincent Chong and Robert Dunn produce impressive illustrations while the cover is a debut piece by David Gentry - hopefully he'll be back.

Jake Elliot

[What if Our World Is Their Heaven?](#) **The Final Conversations of Philip K. Dick, edited by Gwen Lee and Doris Elaine Sauter (The Overlook Press, 204 pp, USA \$16.95)**

Blade Runner was based on a book called *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* The sheep in question don't feature in the film yet form an important part of the hero's motivation in the book. Philip K Dick, the author, points out that 'animals aren't really a factor in the movie at all. The sacredness of animal life. That's out.'

The book *What If Our World Is Their Heaven?* is produced as verbatim conversations between Dick and his interviewer. At times this lack of editing slows the pace. For example the quote above actually reads:

'Uh, the animals are left out, the electric animals. They, uh, the imitation animals are left out. Uh, in fact, the animals aren't really a factor in the movie at all. The sacredness of animal life. That's out. And, uh -'

The advantage of this uncut version is that the reader can access the full enthusiasm and fluidity of Dick's thoughts. His enthusiasm for Blade Runner - for the sets, for the special effects, for Harrison Ford - is childlike and excitable.

However, at times this representation becomes tremendously convoluted, and I for one wondered why I was still reading! For example, where Dick tries to explain how he can write characters who are more clever than himself. 'I was finally dealing in concepts which were too difficult for me to, to understand. Although I had conceived of the concept in the first place.' (68-69) Er.... yes.

Dick finds his writing process mystical and goes on to discuss mathematics, music, light waves and synaesthetic effects. This passage folds in on itself like one of those late night conversations you have when you're drunk. Next morning you wake up, and find that the answer to the universe has fizzled to cold porridge. *C'est la vie*. Except Dick seems to think it isn't over; he believes he's really onto something.

This includes various premonitory characters he wrote into books *before* meeting them; the beam of pink light that led to God talking to him for a whole year; and his being told of his baby son's hidden medical condition... The latter two incidents are used in his book *Valis*, but the protagonist, Horselover Fat, later decides it might not have been God beaming the ideas into his head but far away forces of intelligence. However, in *What if...?* Dick does not appear to have that degree of distance from his possibly psychotic/ breakdown experiences.

Incidentally, Dick's interviewer asks if he keeps a tape recorder by his bed to record night-time revelations. His reply? 'Well, I'd have to listen to all this clap-trap is what I'd have to do....' (p82) If that's what he thinks of it all, then how come the editors let us plough through it?!

Tim Powers explains in the foreword that two months after the interviews were taped Dick was dead (a series of strokes killed him in 1982). Power tries to debunk myths around the writer 'the image of a crazed, mystical hermit-genius is [an] attractive and easily swallowed' (p4), but Powers claims that Dick was 'too briskly realistic to permit [himself] the cocooned egotism of insanity'.

Such a statement is possibly unfair on the insane, but that aside, Powers is happy to *continue* the myth of the artist driven to exhaustion by his muse, which to me might be one measure of insanity: the insanity of not looking after yourself properly. Or being so pig-headed that you won't let someone else look after you (some of Dick's wives tried to do).

'I believe he wrote *Valis* in twelve days; he must have eaten and slept during that time, but I'm certain it was not nearly enough,' says Powers (p5). Dick admits that 'when I got finished I was living on aspirin, scotch and potassium tablets.' (P6) The loss of a female character, Angel Archer, is seen as the cause of his bleeding. 'The pain was so great at losing that woman as my friend that after I sent the manuscript off I discovered that I was hemorrhaging, gastrointestinal bleeding. From the pain, from sheer pain.' (p60)

To me this is a strange analysis of a situation which might have been a result of the previously mentioned aspirin and scotch!

What we later discover is that Dick's belief in the 'tortured artist' has actually provided material for his next book. He describes a world where aliens cannot experience sound and therefore conceive of sound as a mystical-religious experience. (What if our world is their heaven?) Such an alien enters our world and is able to hide on a 'biochip' and get implanted in a composer's brain. Said composer is a boring hack, but the biochip/ alien is driven to make him seek our more and more stimulating music.... I won't spoil it for you, but it gets quite Faustian. Dick admits that he sees his own creative process as one that is burning him out. Perhaps the 'next book' was to have justified his process?

'What if....?' gives us access to Dick's wild and wandering thought-processes. But it does trouble me that the 'martyred writer' role (even the potentially alcoholic or ill writer?) is not challenged. I see large numbers of sci-fi fans reading this and idolising their hero not only for the books he left behind but for the way in which he wrote them, the crash and burn.

'I imagine that when he was young he thought of his writing as working for him ... but before the end he had come to realise, and accept, that in fact he was working for his writing, and that if one had to be sacrificed to the other, it was his work that had to prevail.' (Powers, p6)

Don't do it kids! There are many healthy ways to write that do not destroy a person's creativity, or kill them. We should make it our mission to discover them. In the meantime you can always read this book.

Cath Nichols

Life Mask by Jackie Kay (Bloodaxe Books, 64 pp, ISBN 1-85224-691-X, £7.95)

What makes us what we are? When are we most ourselves? 'When you love,' asks Jackie Kay, 'does it show on your face?' Can our complexities be caught in a work of art? How do we respond to images of ourselves and to rejection by others? Throughout her new collection of poems, Kay tackles such questions of identity and confidence. Even the list of contents highlights an interesting contrast between representation: *Clay, Model, Wax, Bronze, Plaster*, and concealment, or the assumption of a role: five of the titles include the word 'mask'. And, of course, poems can act as masks too. Kay says that the sequence about the life mask developed from having her head recreated in bronze by the sculptor Michael Snowdon. In *Pencil, Knife*, a poem inspired by her experience of being drawn by Joyce Cairns, Kay is 'lost and found' as she confronts the almost magical power of the artist, 'You will draw me till the day I die, you say/You will draw the face I had before I was born.' Viewing the artist's creation, she writes 'You draw the person inside me out. She says, hush, hush.'

The impact of love on the self is a central theme of *Life Mask*. In the opening poem *Late Love*, lovers grow 'tall', become 'filmic', 'important' while in *High Land*, the lover surprised by love describes a blurring of self, relevant to all sexualities, 'I don't remember who kissed who first,/who touched who first, who anything to whom', but most complete perhaps in a lesbian relationship, 'your legs open; mine too'. Kay explores the changes resulting from the loss of love; in *Notice*, the rejected lover loses control over the ordinary, 'This is my second parking ticket since her affair'. The focus on domestic detail, the ruffled spare room bed or the making of 'choppy' tea, makes these poems very personal but pertinent to us all. The ensuing disorientation amounts almost to a loss of faith, and it is not surprising that the persona in the poem *Clay* prefers to keep love at a distance, 'to catch things before they happen'. For Kay, the journey away from her lover towards herself involves probing her own complex roots, visiting the Africa of her birthfather, the 'old red land'

where her father wears a number of masks and may or may not love her. Although Kay shows the destructive effect of loss, 'you harden, your voice brittle, breaks/your once lovely eyes, hard as flint', in this collection, brave, witty shoots of spring keep breaking through; renewal and regeneration are essential elements, as in the spirited ending to *Mid Life Mask*, 'The day is breaking; the light/in the dark sky is cracking through;/a new woman is out and about. Watch out.'

From the poignant to the mundane to the exotic, the range of Kay's diction and imagery is engaging. In *Rubber* the language has been pared right down, 'When I opened my eyes/my lover was not the love of my life;/ she was the love of somebody else's life;/'shit happens,' she said, 'that's life.' In *There's Trouble for Maw Broon*, the pain of betrayal aches through Maw's raw, often comic, rhyming voice, 'He lost interest in fitba./He started eating his veggies raw./ It wis mair than I could stand./I'd find masell at the sink wey shaking haunds'. The muted sibilants of *Husky* 'hoarse, packed with loss/like snow that never melts' are startlingly countered by the rising energy of *Two Autumns*, 'Here I am/open-eyed, beginning, beginning all over again,/astonished by the naked girl in the exhilarating rain.' Kay's love of words is dealt with directly in *Old Tongue* where she laments the loss of both words and accent in moving south to England, 'My dour soor Scottish tongue/Sing-songy. I wanted to gie it laldie', and she pays tribute to what she has lost in *I Kin See Richt thru My Mither*, using her mother's sing song phrases, 'she was the first to notice/if I was peally wally', 'if I was peesie-weesie or perskeet'. In *Skyscraper*, as love breaks down, Kay breaks down lovers' talk into literal nonsense, 'Dar pump sweet kin heart ling,' and in *Spoons*, she exploits monorhyme, so that the same vowel sound can ease lovers 'sleeping like spoons,/ under the bowl of moon' from full harmony to hollow discord, 'Rusted, the sleeping spoons/under the empty moon/scrap soon, scrap soon.'

This is a rich, clear sighted and tender book. The title poem, which is placed last, provides a perfect conclusion to the journey Kay has taken, and the experience we have had as readers. It ends with a simple statement of human optimism, 'I sat up with my pale face in my hands/and all of a sudden it was spring'

Caroline Drennan

Contributors:

Helen Shay

Helen Shay is a solicitor-turned-writer. She has reviewed for magazines, Reading Lights and Print Radio. She writes fiction (drama and performance poetry) and non-fiction (mainly on legal subjects, with the third edition of her *Writers Guide to Copyright & Law* now out, ISBN 1-85703-991-2). She is currently completing a novel as part of an MA in Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Dave Wood

Dave Wood began his travels ten years ago with the international co-operative, Word And Action (Dorset) www.wordandaction.co.uk. He is now involved poetics, visuals and the sculptural quality of language. He has been writer in residence, Waterstone's, Nottingham and regularly leads workshops.

Andrew O'Donnell

Andrew O'Donnell was born in Blackpool in 1977 and spent his youth drinking Kestrel lager on the streets of Bromley Cross and Egerton, the 'posh end' of Bolton, Lancs (where the moors creep in on the urban sprawl that is Bolton and Manchester.) He studied Literature and Philosophy at Staffs University before travelling around India and Nepal. He has (sometimes tenuously) lived in Kobe, Osaka (Japan), Pokhara (Nepal), Vancouver and

London. He has been writing poetry and prose since he was about sixteen and has had poetry published with a handful of literary magazines and websites in England, Canada and the U.S.

George Wallace

George Wallace, author of eight chapbooks of poetry, is editor of Poetrybay www.poetrybay.com, co-host of his own weekly poetry radio show www.wusb.org, and was the first poet laureate of Suffolk County, New York. A regular performer in New York City, he frequently tours America with his poetry. Internationally, his work has been read in Paris, Copenhagen, Vienna, and particularly in Italy and the UK - including Italian appearances in Rome, Parma, Verona and Trento; and in the UK, London, Cardiff, Belfast, Bury St Edmunds, Norwich and the Lake District. His work has been translated into French, Spanish, Italian, German, Korean, Bengali, Russian and Macedonian. Latest collections include Burn My Heart in Wet Sand (Troubadour, UK) and Fifty Love Poems (La Finestra Editrice, IT). Matt Newsome is formerly a DPhil/PhD student working in the Systems Software group at (also formerly) the School of Cognitive and Computing Sciences (COGS), University of Sussex, UK.

Andrew Oldham

Andrew Oldham writes for Stage, Television and Film. His credits include BBC1's Doctors, BBC R4 Go 4 it, Piccadilly Key103 BTCC Christmas Campaign, the short film Divine Blonde and The Charlie Manson Room (showcased by Theatre and Beyond at Brighton Pavilion, part of The International Brighton Festival 2002). He is prior recipient of a Writers Award from the ACE NW (UK), a Peggy Ramsay Award (UK) and a nominee of the Jerwood-Arvon award (UK) and has been nominated for the London International Award. Publications include the crime story, Spanking The Monkey, in: Next Stop Hope (Route ISBN 1 901927 19 9). Poetry in The Interpreter's House (UK), Gargoyle (USA), Poetry Greece and Poetry Salzburg (Europe), Grain (Canada) and Dream Catcher (UK) to name a few. He is an academic and journalist.

George Zebrowski

George Zebrowski's thirty-five books include novels, short fiction collections, anthologies, and a book of essays. The Washington Post said of Zebrowski: "You can trust yourself in the hands of certain masters, and George Zebrowski is one".

His novel Macrolife, was described by Arthur C. Clarke as "A worthy successor to Olaf Stapledon's Star Maker. It's been years since I was so impressed. One of the few books I intend to read again". Zebrowski's stories and novels have been translated into a half-dozen languages; his short fiction has been nominated for the Nebula Award and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. Stranger Suns was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year.

The Killing Star, written with scientist/author Charles Pellegrino, was praised by The New York Times Book Review as "a novel of such conceptual ferocity and scientific plausibility that it amounts to a reinvention of that old Wellsian staple, [alien invasion]...". The Washington Post Book World described the novel as "a classic SF theme pushed logically to its ultimate conclusions". Brute Orbits (1998), an uncompromising novel about the future of the penal system, was honored with the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for Best Novel of the Year. Cave of Stars, a novel that is part of the Macrolife mosaic, was published by HarperPrism in 1999, also to widespread acclaim. Swift Thoughts, a collection of twenty-four stories, with an introduction by Gregory Benford and a wraparound painting by Bob Eggleton, was published by Golden Gryphon Press in early 2002.

Slawek Wojtowicz

Slawek Wojtowicz, grew up in Gdansk, Poland, before immigrating to the United States in 1990.

While in Poland, he was a member of the SF Club of Gdansk and the art director of Collaps, the most famous Polish science fiction zine. He maintains the Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction, Fantasy and Surreal Art on the internet at <http://www.slawcio.com>. His science fiction art gallery on the web won multiple awards, including USA Today's hot site award in 1998.

Slawek has illustrated numerous books, book covers, CD covers, magazine covers, Rifts Collectible Card Game and his art was used in the 2002 movie, In the Neighborhood.

He lives in New Jersey with his wife and two children and works full-time as an oncologist in the pharmaceutical industry.

Emilie Connes

Emilie Connes was born in France but has lived in England for six years and considers English her first language.

She has been writing from the age of twelve, starting in fantasy and science fiction. After starting two novels in high school, which she attended in London, she completed a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing at Lancaster University, experimenting with short stories and poetry. She followed with a Masters in Creative Writing at the same institution, her final portfolio was a substantial collection of short stories. She will be pursuing a career in publishing in London after graduation.

She has been a regular contributor to newspapers and magazines for several years as a feature writer and a reviewer of books and plays. She is a regular contributor to Lancaster University Student paper; Scan. Her monthly column on publishing in the North of England can be found in InPrint, the Society of Young Publishers (SYP) newsletter. Creina Mansfield Creina Mansfield teaches part time at Manchester University. Amongst her Literature courses, she runs Book discussion Groups where students read and discuss a variety of contemporary novels. She also teaches Creative Writing. She first began to write when she moved to Dublin with her family as she was unable to teach there. She has published six books for children. Her seventh- My Spooky Neighbours will be published in the autumn and is a sequel to her humorous novel My Nasty Neighbours. She has degrees from Cambridge and Manchester universities.

Caroline Drennan

Caroline Drennan was born in Malaysia and brought up by Irish parents on the South Coast of England. She has always been passionate about literature, studied English at Oxford, and has taught English, and some Drama for about twenty years. Mostly, she has worked in London but spent five years as Head of English at Bruton School for Girls in Somerset. At present, she is Head of Sixth Form at the Godolphin and Latymer School in Hammersmith.

An avid reader, Caroline is also committed to writing. In the past, she has produced both poetry and plays, and her play, Green Silk is thicker than Water, was performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1995. Currently, she is concentrating on prose, having just completed a sabbatical year on the MA course in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. Ongoing projects include a novel set in London, and an anthology of short stories for schools, to be compiled with an ex-colleague. She was short-listed for the Harpers and Queen/Orange Short Story Competition 2005.

Caroline's other main interests are Art, Art History, and Travel. Peru, Cuba and the Sinai desert are her most memorable destinations.

Jake Elliot

Jake Elliot is a graduate of the Creative Writing MA at the University of East Anglia (UK). He is a regular contributor to the magazine Flux and has also written on film for trade publications. He has had stories published in the magazines Spiked, Cafe Irreal and the journal of Cornish writing Scryfa, the anthologies Paper Scissors Stone and Wildthyme on Top, and broadcast on BBC Radio 4. He is currently based in Norwich where he is teaching and studying for a PhD.

Bixby Monk

Bixby Monk his half Scottish and half Czech, he was born in 1968. Named by his father after the jazz musician, Bix Beiderbecke, he spent a disappointing childhood in the Edinburgh school system before leaving for the army. He splits his time between Edinburgh and Prague. His claims to fame are being the last war correspondent to cover the Gulf War and being the first war correspondent to leave Kuwait. He writes for several press agencies and writes under various pseudonyms in the UK and European Presses. He is the editor of Incorporating Writing (ISSN 1743-0380).

Cath Nichols

Cath Nichols is a former freelance journalist who now works for the Dead Good Poets Society (DGPS) in Liverpool. In 2004 she founded the DGPS Poetry Readers' Group in collaboration with the Libraries services, which is soon to expand 'over the water' to Wirral. She is great advocate of reader development, and wishes that more poets took the time to read other poets' work.

As a writer Cath has received two development awards from the Arts Council of England, plus various project-based awards. Her first poetry pamphlet, Tales of Boy Nancy, will be published by Driftwood in the autumn. Tales of Boy Nancy is also being developed into a multimedia installation with musician/ composer Helen Maher, and film-maker Joelle Lefeuvre. This project has been funded by Creative Communities through the Liverpool Culture Company.

Cath lived in Manchester for eight years: co-hosting BBC GMR's Gaytalk; co-founding the fetish club, Club Lash (which she ran for five years); and editing the cult magazine Queer Soul. She moved to Liverpool in 2001 and put her organisational energies into poetry.

Andrew Oldham

Andrew Oldham writes for Stage, Television and Film. His credits include BBC1's Doctors, BBC R4 Go 4 it, Piccadilly Key103 BTCC Christmas Campaign, the short film Divine Blonde and The Charlie Manson Room (showcased by Theatre and Beyond at Brighton Pavilion, part of The International Brighton Festival 2002). He is prior recipient of a Writers Award from the ACE NW (UK), a Peggy Ramsay Award (UK) and a nominee of the Jerwood-Arvon award (UK) and has been nominated for the London International Award. Publications include the crime story, Spanking The Monkey, in: Next Stop Hope (Route ISBN 1 901927 19 9). Poetry in The Interpreter's House (UK), Gargoyle (USA), Poetry Greece and Poetry Salzburg (Europe), Grain (Canada) and Dream Catcher (UK) to name a few. He is an academic and journalist.

Ian Parks

Ian Parks is a Hawthornden Fellow 1991, he has travelled through the United States of America on a Fellowship in 1994. His poetry has received accolades and awards, including the Royal Literary Fund 2003, the Oppenheim Award 2001 and 2002 and the John Masefield Award 2001. Ian was a National

Poetry Society New Poet in 1996 and was a prior Poetry Editor for Dream Catcher (issues 7 -11). His collections include, *Gargoyles in Winter* (Littlewood, 1985), *A Climb Through Altered Landscapes* (Blackwater 1998), *The Angel of the North* (Tarantula CD 2000). *Departures and Rendezvous: Love Poems 1983-2003* is due for publication in 2005. His next collection, *Shell Island*, will be available from Way Wiser (USA) in 2005. He teaches at Leeds University.

Bridget Whelan

A freelance journalist, Bridget has been an agony aunt, a researcher for investigative journalist Paul Foot and contributor to Miriam Stoppard's Daily Mirror health and personal advice column.

Born within walking distance of Fleet Street, she left school at 16 to join the staff of a small weekly newspaper and later studied for a degree in Irish history in evening class while her family were growing up. Winning \$4,000 in an international short story competition gave her the confidence to study for a Masters degree in Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths College. She is now working on a novel about the London Irish community of the 1960s and lives on the south coast with an encouraging husband, two handsome sons and a fat cat.