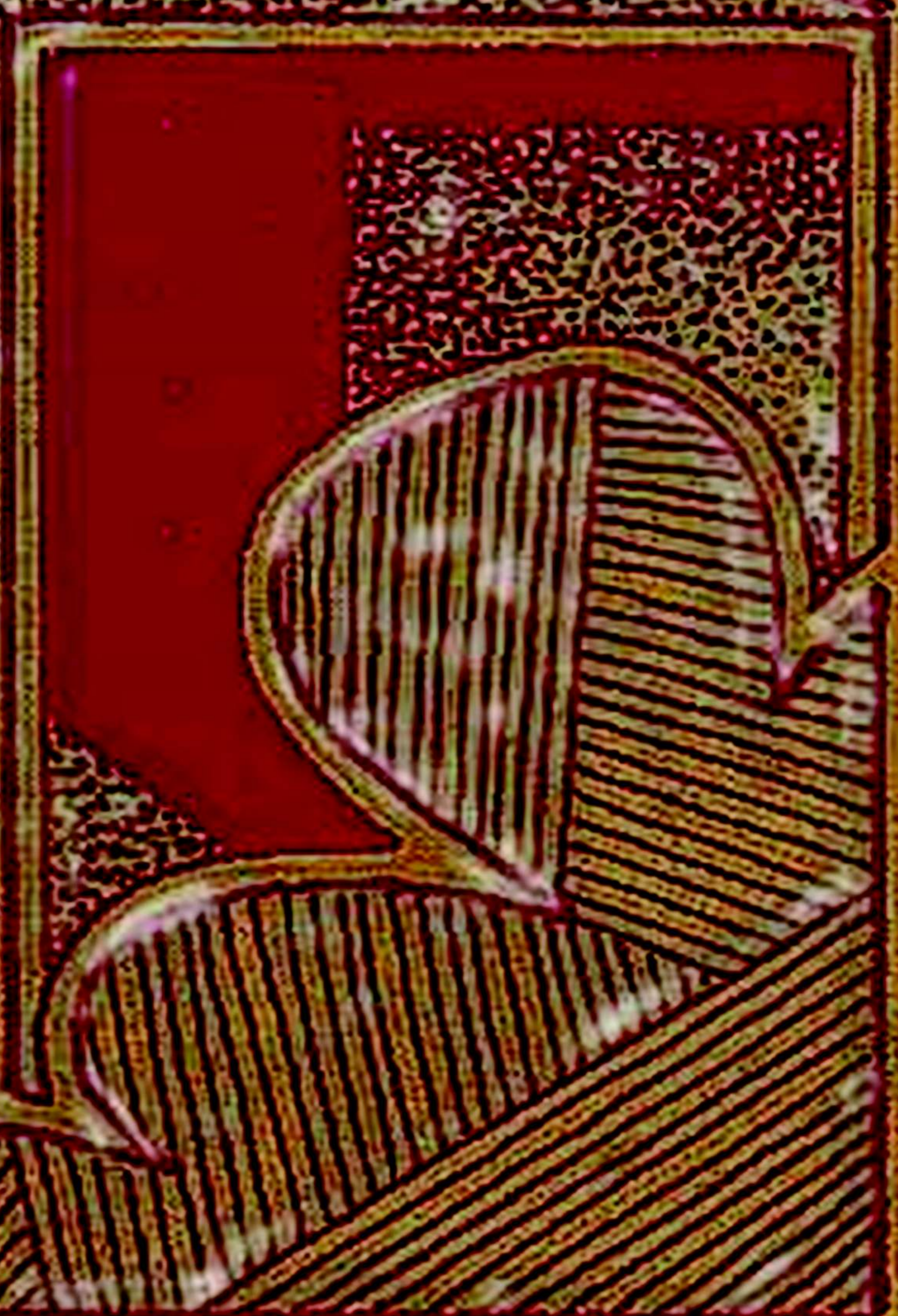


PROBE

1988



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PROBE 198**December 2023**

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Editorial

Gail

While putting together this issue of PROBE, I have done a lot of contemplation. As you will see the “Blast from the past...” comes from PROBE 25 in 1974. This was just a year or so after I joined the club, at the tender age of around nineteen. And next year I will have been a member for 50 years. It is incomprehensible to consider what has happened in those 50 years. I don't really feel very different (if you don't count the normal aches and pains that accompany the slowdown of age.)



But at that point I had just Matriculated, and was at the beginning of the wonderful years I spent at the University of the Witwatersrand. After the regimentation of school, Varsity was a revelation. I had an old little blue Mini Cooper, which was called “Bluebottle” (I loved listening to “The Goon Show”), and this gave me an amazing amount of freedom. I could go almost anywhere I wanted to and often did so, squeezing in 3 or four fellow students as well. I changed my direction after 2 years and finally graduated B.A. in 1977 and I still say that if I had had the financial ability I think I would have spent the rest of my life studying.

But I grew up, went out to work, got married, had two children, got divorced, got remarried 6 years later. My children grew up and I now also have a 10-year old grandson. But enough of selfish introspection.....

We have just had another end of year function with the marvelous Digby Ricci as our speaker. This year he gave us a talk entitled: “Dune - A New Look” Who would have thought that he would find Dickensian echoes in Frank Herbert's writings! It was a most entertaining talk and is saved on the “Zoom” talks on www.sffsa.org.za if you would like to listen to it. And then 21 SFFSA members, and Digby, went out for a really good supper and lots of great conversation.

Chairperson's Note

As you get older time flies by so much faster – I guess it is our hectic/stressful lifestyles – which becomes a shock when you realise that there are only 39 days left until Christmas. I always look forward to my holidays - I get a month's break as I work in the construction industry and the builders break starts from the middle of December and goes up until the second week of January.



What can we say about 2023. So much has happened this year around the world that there is sometimes information overload especially with regards to events that leave a negative impact such as wars etc and it is a struggle to find some positivity. With regards to the club as I look back, we have had some interesting meetings with fascinating talks on various subjects but an overriding theme was AI – we had two meetings where talks regarding AI were given by James Sey and Arthur Goldstuck respectively. The subject of AI will always be fascinating whether you have strong opinions for or against AI. There is a fear that the creative arts will be negatively impacted by AI (there is evidence that this has already started happening) – the replacement of actors in films/TV, scripts and books written by AI, art created by AI and so on. Science Fiction fans jokingly bring up Skynet from the Terminator movies as a warning to guard against AI. I am sure that there is a place for using AI in certain industries – scientific and medical fields comes to mind however I am fearful for the future of the creative arts as people will probably fall into the trap of thinking that they are now writers or painters etc by using AI to create their works. For me that is not art at all.

Until next time.

Carla

Magazines Received

Stapledon Sphere (formerly the newsletter of the Middle Tennessee Science Fiction Society [aka the Nashville SF club])

Reece Moorhead reecejm@gmail.com

Issue #76 September 2023

Issue #77 October 2023

Issue #78 November 2023

Ansible David Langford

September 2023 436 <http://news.ansible.uk/a436.html>

October 2023 437 <http://news.ansible.uk/a437.html>

November 2023 438 <http://news.ansible.uk/a438.html>



Books Received

JonathanBall

Jennifer Saint Atlanta Headline R355.00

Rebecca Yaros Fourth Wing Little Brown R380.00

Shannon Chakraborty The Adventures of Amina Al Sirafi Harper Collins UK.
R360.00

Mark Lawrence The Book That Wouldn't Burn Harper Collins UK R380.00

Shameez Patel Papathanasiou The Eternal Shadow Simon & Schuster US
R370.00

From the authors

Michael J. Lee Robo Rage day of the machines **MYEBOOK**

Michael J. Lee and Bruce Matthew Chrysalis **MYEBOOK**

NOVA 2022 Finalist Gary Kuyper

THE HISTORY LESSON

Flin, Professor of Natural History stepped through a side entrance into the vast, recently constructed, amphitheatre-come-auditorium. The general hubbub emitted by the immense crowd began to diminish as he lumbered across the smooth, level, area. By the time he reached the podium the audience were rapt and still.

He cleared his throat and the perfect acoustics allowed Lee, seated on the outer circumference of the multi-semi-circled construct, to hear the cough as if the professor were mere feet away. Lee activated his small but highly efficient recorder.

“I recently read a witticism on the Internet,” began the professor. “It asked, ‘What was the last thing that went through the bug’s head when it struck the windscreen?’”

There was some scattered laughter from various sections. “Ah, I see some of you are already familiar with the punch line.” He waited for the mild disruption to fade before continuing. “For the uninformed majority, the answer was, ‘Its arse.’” The majority now burst into a cacophony of raucous laughter. The professor again waited for silence before saying, “This brought to mind a thought about what...quote ‘uncivilized savages’ unquote...had deduced at the approach, or should that be *encroachment*, of the so-called civilized societies.

“What do you suppose went through the minds of the Australian Aborigines when they saw the first large sailing ships appear on the distant horizon? What do you suppose went through the minds of the North American Indians when they saw the

first steam train rumble down newly-laid tracks? What do you suppose went through the minds of the indigenous jungle-dwellers in the Amazon rainforest when the first plane passed overhead? And what do you suppose went through the minds of the people who looked up at the great Krellin mothership as it eclipsed the sun? So great was its size and mass that it profusely affected the tides of the oceans.” He paused for dramatic effect, as well as allowing the gravity of his questions to sink in. “I would believe that all must have had one common thought...not too dissimilar to what that unfortunate bug must have had as he saw the fast-approaching windscreen - ‘Screwed!’” This time the outburst was deafening. “History!” he exclaimed, making the crowd silent again. “‘History,’ it is said, ‘is written by the conquerors...the *Victors!*’ The ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs record many accounts of their great victories. Victories over invading enemies, as well as victories of conquest – the seizing or annexing of foreign soil as their own.” He shook his head. “You will not find a single account about any defeat. Not *one!* No nation ever built a great monument to commemorate a *defeat*. Well, you may claim that the fort at the Alamo proves that statement to be false. But let us not forget that the fort was built *before* the defeat, and thereafter remained as a symbol of bravery – not too unlike the many war memorials that are scattered around the Earth; not only reminders of the lives lost but also in *honour* of them. The one in Hiroshima certainly comes to mind. So now there stands a dark legacy to the foolishness of men; man destroying his fellow man. Something that *we* have long put away ever since we established the *United Front* ruled over and guided by its many *Grand Councils.*”

Even across the vast distance Lee could swear the professor had an expression of disgust.

The professor gave an indignant sniff and continued, “Many of us know and understand how the so-called *civilized* people used their religion and cheap beads to soften and dupe the savages so that they became pliable clay that could be moulded into whatever the *intellectually advantaged* required them to be. Yes, the victors used their...perverted reasonings to not only justify their crimes of conquest but also to excuse any actions that may be considered cruel, callous or even *brutal*. They call it politics. *Policing when and as is necessary* is a more appropriate expression.

“All these aforementioned indigenous...*people* were systematically displaced from what was rightfully theirs. Many times the choice between genocide or diaspora – death or displacement – ended in their total eradication.

“To ease their troubled conscience, the powers-that-be built not monuments or memorials to the dead...but *museums*. Museums filled with glass-fronted cubicles containing effigies of the *Destroyed- but-not-forgotten*...the unfortunate *Conquered*. Perhaps *mausoleums* would have been a more appropriate term.”

Lee made a hasty exit at the top of the amphitheatre. He could still hear the professor’s ranting as he approached his squad who had been waiting patiently in the alcove.

“If Hitler and his Third Reich had won the war do you think that History would have portrayed them as the monsters they were, or as...*golden-haired heroes*? The *Master Race* is what he called his blue-eyed *wunderkinder*...his *ubermenschen*.”

There was a noise at the top of the amphitheatre as several law officers appeared at the public entrance.

Lee, who led them, shouted at the figure on the podium. “Professor Flin, you are under arrest.”

“*What?* This is an outrage!” blurted the professor. “I’m in the middle of a very important seminar!”

“You are to cease all proceedings immediately and accompany us to the chamber of the *Grand Council!*”

“On what charges?”

“I would think it obvious! *Treason!*”

“*Treason?*” Flin was genuinely taken aback.

“You are accused of planting and fomenting seditious ideology and thoughts into the minds of your students!”

“Ridiculous! That is absurd! I speak only truth!”

After the professor had been escorted out of the amphitheatre the noise of the stunned crowd immediately rose to a disturbing level.

#

“Oftentimes *truth* is *not* what should be told...or *taught*,” screeched Blik, head of the Grand Council. “Oftentimes it is best that certain things remain silent...concealed!”

“*What?* Utter nonsense!”

“The fact that you are a professor of *natural* history would indicate that you have strayed somewhat significantly from your curriculum.”

“That is an item for debate.”

“Does the term *national security* mean anything...*nothing* to you?”

“Yes...I mean no. Of course! I respect and uphold our laws. I would not do anything willingly to undermine or disrupt our...well-organised society.”

“That is not what the reports on your seminars indicate.” After a short contemplation Blik asked, “Would you consider it a wise choice of action to inform the general public that a giant killer-asteroid was heading towards the planet?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It would throw them into panic. Chaos would ensue.”

“*Anarchy* is a better term. It depicts the fall of law and...*order*. The Grand Council is that *order*. Without us...*Anarchy* would surely reign.”

Flin dropped his large head in shame and agreement. “You are right, exalted one. I apologise most profusely for my foolishness. I regret that my thinking has been influenced...*tainted* by the abundance of...*questionable* information contained on the alien Internet.”

“Ah, you’re coming to your senses at last. Good! As a professor of natural history we want...would *prefer* if you simply inform your students as to the *when and what has happened* and refrain from the *why and how it happened*. Do you get my meaning?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Splendid! Still, we, the members of this particular Grand Council, feel that it would be beneficial for all, including yourself, if you were placed in a rehabilitation tube for a minimum of one zerk.”

“One zerk!” exclaimed Flin. “By Great Olax’s mandibles! That’s almost two cycles of this newly conquered, apologies, newly *acquired* planet’s moon.”

“We know, but it is obvious that your study of and exposure to these backward creatures has had a somewhat dire and negative effect on your superior intellect. What was it that you called their major library or knowledge storage facility?”

“The *Internet*. It is the name that the indigenous...soft-skinned, omnivores, used.”

Blik gave a shudder of disgust at the professor’s crude description of the creatures that were once the dominant species on the planet. “Yes, I believe they also ate smaller creatures that had an uncanny resemblance to us?”

“Locust...they called them *locust*. Yes, they ate them, but they also had a profound disliking towards them whenever they would swarm en masse and consume their precious crops.”

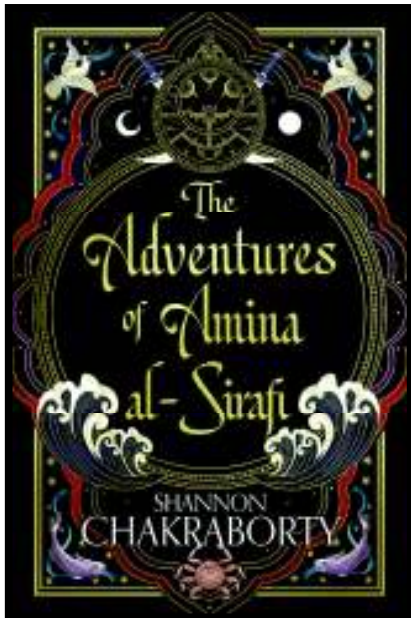
“Hmm, yes,” muttered the council member. “A most revolting species indeed.” Then he reiterated loudly, “One zerk!” He raised his large arthropodic form and spread his wings as an indication that the sentence stood. “You may be interested to know that yours is not a secluded case. In fact, the council have been debating as to whether or not it may be advantageous to limit or even completely prohibit the study of the material on this...*Internet*. Then again, it is in our...*curious* Krellin nature to learn all we can about the many alien species that we encounter as we spread out across this vast, diverse and interesting galaxy.” He folded his wings before announcing, “This council is now adjourned.”



Book Reviews

Janis Benvie

Shannon Chakraborty The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi



Amina is a retired pirate. She has been through several husbands, including a demon, but has now moved to a secluded spot to keep her young daughter safe from her enemies. She took over her father's ship and for years managed to keep her spirit of adventure and love of travel in check with her trips around the world she knew (based on the known areas around the Northern Indian Ocean). She has a minor magical adventure which leaves her a bit shaken, but then life seems to settle down again until she is approached by

a stranger. This woman comes to her home to try and persuade Amina to search for her granddaughter who supposedly has been kidnapped. When Amina declines, the woman steps up the pressure and reveals that the girl is the daughter of one of Amina's crew who was killed while in her service, and she also offers a huge reward which will allow Amina to keep her family for the rest of their lives. She reluctantly agrees and returns to get her ship which has been in the care of an old shipmate. Along the way, she fetches her friend Dalila who is a master poisoner and Majeda a master navigator.

She subsequently finds out that the young girl in fact ran away and was not kidnapped, and when she confronts the grandmother, she and her family are threatened so she has no option but to continue.

I don't want to reveal too much of the story, except to say it is well written and gripping. The story starts mostly in reality and the moves into a fantasy world which is well imagined and intriguing.

The book leaves the possibility of further adventures, and I for one hope they come along.

Gavin Kreuter

50 Science Fiction Tales, Gail Jamieson and Gary Kuyper (Eds)

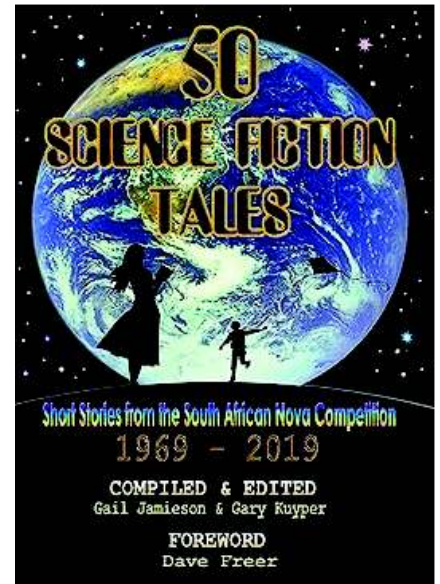
It is difficult to review a collection of short stories because of the diverse nature of their content. In the case of a novel, which one either likes or dislikes, it is possible to describe the plot, or the writing style, or the characters... but this is not possible for a collection of 50 Science Fiction (and a bonus of 6 Fantasy) stories. On the other hand, any lover of speculative fiction is sure to find many stories in the collection that they enjoy. Thoroughly. One thing one can be sure of is the high quality of the collection.

Many won an award in SFFSA's short story competition, Nova. And those that did not, still appealed sufficiently to an editor of Probe, SFFSA's magazine, that they were published for the enjoyment of the readers of Probe.

I read some of these stories at the time of their publication in Probe. While reading them, once again, in this wonderful collection, I felt as much – if not more – pleasure as the first time. This only happens when the standard is high. And of course, since the earliest story dates back to 1980, there were many in these collections that were new to me. Coincidentally, the selection includes a story for every year in the 1980s (with two from 1989, for good measure). It is a mark of the story writing that even stories written almost 50 years ago have not dated; they could well have been written today, and still found the same appeal.

In this collection one will find a spaceship that has run out of fuel, an alien indulging in gastronomic seduction, intriguing aliens, robots (and flatulence) and androids, travels through space and through time, explorations of memory, humour, drama, utopia, dystopia... all the ingredients beloved of fans of the speculative fiction genre.

As a bonus, there are fantasies where a father is a fox, a king who wants a dragonslayer as a son-in-law, a vampire, tiny muses, and a dream that was not a



dream. Whatever genres, plots and characters one meets, they leave a feeling of satisfaction.

The Lloyd Penney Interview

Lloyd Penny has been associated with SFSA and later SFFSA since the 1970's. He is the most loyal L.O.C. writer that PROBE has seen. I don't think that there has been an issue since he first came on board that he has not commented on.

But we only know what he has told us about himself in passing and it's about time to find out more about this committed Canadian Speculative Fiction fan.

GAJ: I know that you are currently very involved with being chief editor of Amazing, but what have you done professionally in the past?

LP: Most of my working life has been spent in some sort of publishing. I have worked on catalogues, newspapers, magazines, flyers, packaging, corporate documents, scripts, databases, and more. Working on Amazing Stories has been my first chance to combine science fiction and editing.

GAJ: I have read SF since I was a child, mainly because that was what my father read and what was available in my home. What got you started on this path?

LP: My mother was a typical housewife back in the 1970s, and to take breaks between chores, she would go to the local library to see about books to read. She started bringing home anthologies of science fiction short stories edited by H.L. Gold, Donald Wollheim, Terry Carr, and other collections. I picked them up, wondering what she was reading, and I got hooked.

GAJ: You have an extensive knowledge of SF&F. Is this more than just what you enjoy reading?

LP: I wouldn't say I have an extensive knowledge of SF&F, there's so much I haven't read, and I have not been able to keep up with anything in the past ten years or so.

The older SF&F is what I do like reading, although I have certainly enjoyed the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and Miss Marple.

GAJ: How did you come to find PROBE so many years ago? It was long before the general use of the Internet and Email. A quick look and I see you in an issue of Tony Davis's in 1988.

LP: I did get involved in fanzines in the early 80s, and of all the local fanzine fans I met, I did meet with Tony Davis, who at the time, and still does, live in Thornhill, Ontario, actually a short drive away from where I live now. A few chats got me onto the mailing list, and I can't think of the first issue I received, perhaps issue 20 or something like that?

GAJ: Coming from so far away I have only been to 5 WorldCons. Please tell us about your involvement with them? Also what countries have you visited?

LP: We have been to 17 Worldcons, but prices have gone up so much, they are now priced out of our range. Besides the Canadian Worldcons we've been to, we have attended Worldcons in the USA and the Netherlands. I wish we could have gone to London, Ireland, Finland and other European sites. For the Winnipeg and Montreal Worldcons, we ran the fanzine lounge, and for a few American Worldcons and their bids, plus other bids, we would often be their Canadian agents for memberships and other information and mailings.

GAJ: Who are your favourite authors?

LP: Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, David Brin, Poul Anderson, Richard Matheson, so many others I've liked over the years.

GAJ: And movies?

LP: Our favourite is the movie Somewhere in Time, with Jane Seymour, Christopher Reeves, and Christopher Plummer, based on the book of the same name by Richard Matheson.

GAJ: I know that your wife, Yvonne, seems to always be your support in your interest. Please tell us something about her and her interests as well?

LP: Like me, Yvonne has spent a total of 33 years on various convention committees, especially local conventions, She has been a masquerader, mostly because she is an experienced dressmaker and tailor. She is currently in the third and final year of running the cavernous Vendors' Hall at Anime North, our local anime convention. We have always worked together on various projects, and when we first left convention management, we worked together on other projects, which will lead nicely up to your next question...

GAJ: I see in the 50th Anniversary issue of PROBE, the picture you sent me of yourself and Yvonne, you were in period costume. Is this an interest of ours as well?

LP: It is. When we left local convention work after 30 years, we wondered what else we could do with ourselves. At our first local convention where we were just members, we saw a display from the relatively new Toronto Steampunk Society, and we were intrigued. We joined up via Facebook, and started looking into how best to participate. We made/assembled for ourselves a variety of costumes, and seeing how jewellery-intensive steampunk can be, I started making steampunk jewellery, and we became vendors at our local conventions. Yvonne makes her own costumes...for many years she was an excellent Queen Victoria, but Her Majesty has been retired, and Yvonne's current costume is that of a suffragette, campaigning for Votes For Women.

GAJ: Have you ever been to Africa?

LP: We have never been to Africa, but we'd love to come and visit with you.

GAJ: A tough one. What do you see as the future of Speculative Fiction and your part in it?

LP: I think as long as we have a future to wonder about, we will write about our speculations and potential futures. We wouldn't be human if we didn't. As for my part? In 2026, we will all celebrate the beginnings of modern-day science fiction, which coincides with the release on the April 1926 issue of Amazing Stories on

March 10, 1926. I would like to be a part of this momentous occasion, and I sincerely hope that by that time, we do have an actual, printed, paper magazine we can brag about.

GAJ: SF has always been a huge part of my life, but I have many other interests and involvements as well. Please tell us what other things attract your interest.

LP: My education was in journalism, and more than ever, I would prefer to be informed than entertained. I am interested in news, international, national and local. I like various documentaries, and have seen the entire run of Time Team, the British archaeological show. I also like the various Star Treks, especially the most recent ones, and we both enjoy the Canadian period police show Murdoch Mysteries. (Yvonne was a background actress in two of the episodes more than ten years ago.)

GAJ: Please tell us about Amazing and how you reached this really great position?

LP: I have been asked, how did you get this position? And, I always say...attrition. For many years, I knew about Amazing Stories as the very first of the science fiction pulp magazines, but could never afford to buy a copy, and never saw where I could do so anyway. In 2012, I saw that Amazing Stories would be returning to the public eye in the form of a website, but that didn't attract me. In 2018, publisher Steve Davidson announced that Amazing Stories would return to a paper magazine format, and it would be edited by Ira Nayman, who was a long-time contributor to the website. Ira is an old friend, and he lives in the north end of Toronto. I sent him an e-mail congratulating him on his new appointment, and did he need any help? He readily said yes, and for the most recent run of the magazine, I became its proof-reader/copy editor, having done so much of it in my working life. The magazine ran out of funds to keep going, and we tried a Kickstarter campaign to raise funds, but it was unsuccessful. Ira announced his resignation to return to writing, and publisher Steve Davidson had some family emergencies to take care of, so he gave the responsibilities of managing the magazine and website to our art director and webmaster Kermit Woodall. So that left me and Kermit, and he asked me that fateful day, November 2, 2022, if I would be willing to become the new editor-in-chief of Amazing Stories. This is the kind of position that you don't even dream about, for you know will never come to you...until it does. I am still having trouble with the idea of

being able to say that. With a position like that comes huge responsibilities, and I am learning a lot about the job.

GAJ: Anything else you would like to tell us?

LP: I got my start in science fiction fandom in Victoria, British Columbia, in December of 1977, so I have been around for coming up on 46 years. In all that time, I have been with fans in all corners of the world, involved with international groups staging Worldcons, made good friends everywhere, and most importantly to me, worked hard to make the good times happen. I don't think I would have stuck around as long as I have if it hadn't been for the work I did in those years. Involvement has been so important to me. Fandom gave me friends I treasure, Yvonne, to whom I have been married 40 years now, and a sense of accomplishment I don't think I would have in anything else I could have done.



Lloyd and Yvonne at a Halloween party dressed as "The Blues Brothers"
Photo by Char Bannon

Nova 2022 Finalist

Marthinus Conradie The Candle Maker

My last client of the day was always the hardest to help, because that was when my cat stopped burning properly. Don't freak out. Goblin is not an ordinary cat. Right now, he resembled an ordinary fire, burning inside an ordinary fireplace behind my chair.

“Mrs Blaauw,” I said to my teary-eyed client, sitting in a plush chair across from mine. “Thank you for your trust. Together, you and I can definitely alleviate your husband’s nightmares.”

Behind me, the logs under Goblin’s fire popped. He was consuming normal wood, like normal fires do, but he was also supposed to emit a subtle scent designed to soothe the frayed nerves of my clients, rendering them more receptive to my remedies. Right now, however, I was on my own.

“In fact, you and I can achieve this outcome by taking advantage of load-shedding, if you can believe it.”

That surprised her. She stopped wiping at her red, puffy eyes and lifted her chin. I offered my most comforting smile and my chest warmed when she returned it involuntarily. Evidently, I could still emit some soothing energies of my own, even without Goblin, and despite the steady diminution of my magical abilities over the last four years.

“Load-shedding? Really? I was wondering what’s up with the ton of candles you keep around the place,” she pointed at the black granite mantelpiece above the fireplace, where bone-white candles jostled for space, like children eavesdropping on our conversation. She looked around my consultation room, counting the number of silver candle holders fixed to the mahogany walls. “Seventeen... Is that an important number for therapists with... your background?”

“Actually, I meant the load-shedding in your neighbourhood. I have a selection of special candles with an exceptional track record. Light them during load-shedding, and your husband will have no reason to suspect that you’re attempting an intervention.” I rolled my smile out again and continued, “And once the nightmares have vanished, who knows...” A little warning bell inside my head chimed a caution.

Nightmares were one thing. I could deal with those. But the trauma that fuelled them wasn't in my league anymore. I needed to check my impulse to promise the once-possible and presently-impossible.

As if she could read the arc of my thoughts, Mrs Blaauw's smile fell and compressed into a tight line, like a zipper closing. She started clicking the nails of her delicate brown fingers together. "Paramedics live a hard life. Hell, the things they see, and I just know he doesn't even tell me about the worst of it." By the end of her statement, her voice had risen from a whisper to a near shout. Her shoulders tensed and her eyes clamped down on brand new tears.

Dammit.

I sank deep into my black wingback chair and looked at Mrs Blaauw, trying to see her aura properly. When my chest felt as if it might pass the right words to my brain, I leaned forward to rest my elbows on my knees. Shifting tone from jovial confidence to sombre empathy, I took my last shot. "And married paramedics do not bear the burden alone." If I missed now, she would leave feeling silly for consulting a *magical counsellor*, and dejected for failing to help her husband. "Things are clearly difficult, but they are repairable. Just ensure that your husband is exposed to the scent from the burning candles for no less than three hours a week. Your neighbourhood is scheduled for six hours of load-shedding every week. Keep it up for a month, then let me know if he still suffers from nightmares." For the third time in as many minutes, I rolled my smile out. "I will gladly eat my own candles if he does."

Mrs Blaauw did not mirror my smile this time. I simply waited while she chewed on my peculiar remedy. She click-clacked her nails, while Goblin's fire popped. Finally, she gave me a miniscule nod. Her mouth compressed again, but now with firm resolve, and I rose to fetch a month's worth of candles.

“Thank you, Dr Tiberius.”

“Please, call me Madison. Or Mad, if you like. And you may thank me when your husband has enjoyed a week’s worth of decent sleep.”

When she shook my hand, a rank odour struck my nostrils – potent and obviously magical in nature. I barely prevented my nose from wrinkling, but my smile was genuine, because the smell had just verified my hypothesis. Mrs Blaauw possessed tremendous magic of her own, and she was utterly ignorant of it.

Once she had paid and left, I strolled over to the fireplace to check on Goblin. I caught a glimpse of my own face, reflected in the mirror suspended over the fireplace in an ornate onyx-and-gold frame. That face could have been cast as Professor Snape, given its hooked nose, pale skin and straight black hair, along with a chin that could stake vampires or, at least, open letters.

Suddenly, the firelight winked out, and something small and furry pressed itself against my ankles. I clicked my fingers to ignite a few more candles around my consultation room, and looked down to see a slim tomcat grooming its face behind my legs. His fur gradually faded from hellfire-red to nearly-natural ginger, to black, to ash grey, at which point he sauntered lazily to the chair recently occupied by Mrs Blaauw, launched himself into it and turned his Mountain Dew eyes on me.

“She has it – and in spades,” I answered his unvoiced question.

“And you? What will you do about it?” Goblin spoke in a deep basso voice completely at odds with his slim physique.

I rubbed at my eyes and rifled through the pages of my brain. “I don’t have what it takes to break through anymore. There is no doubt that Mrs Blaauw is carrying fantastic magical potential of her own. If she’d consulted me four years ago, I could have opened her eyes to it, trained her to access it, and then she would be healing

her husband's trauma on her own, without any help from me. Now, all I can supply is a fistful of candles imbued with barely enough power to ensure her husband gets some decent sleep, and," I looked up to see that I had banged my fist into the centre of the mirror, "And I still don't know why the fuck my capacity to help is ebbing away."

"Language," Goblin admonished.

I examined my hand. Mercifully, my skin was uncut, but the mirror had cracked as if struck by a hammer. I ran my index finger over the jagged web of fissures and restored the silvered surface to a pristine condition.

"At least I can still manage simple domestic tasks," and the acid in my voice shocked me, so I took five deep breaths to calm down. "Doing my sour milk impression isn't helping anyone, is it?" Goblin must have said something, because he hissed to catch my attention. "What? Sorry, what were you saying?"

"I was asking," Goblin said, drawing each syllable out like a string of yarn, "Mrs Blaauw's aura; it smelled like all your other clients with magical potential, yes?"

My nose wrinkled at the memory, "Like you wouldn't believe. When she shook my hand, the air around her reeked of pigeon crap."

"Ah. Same as all the others, then. A clue. That is what you would call it, not so? Our friend Delia; she is arriving soon, yes?"

"Any minute now."

"Good. Since last week, she might have learned something new. She is younger, smarter and prettier than you, after all."

I turned away from the mirror and smirked at my cat despite my murky mood. "That is a purely subjective assessment."

“So it is, by human standards, but subjectively the entire universe concurs with me,” he resumed grooming his face.

“One thing is objectively true. I’m feeling sorry for myself when all this must be far harder on Delia. She only discovered her magic five years ago and now, despite being just twenty-five, she’s losing it. I, at least, had some fifteen years to enjoy my peak.”

“Light a normal fire to keep all three of us warm. My ears are going to get scratched while Delia shares what she has uncovered, yes. I have left enough wood uneaten. Get to it, chop-chop.”

I must have complied without thinking, because when I looked down, my right index finger was pointing at the fireplace and new flames were curling into life around the logs.

Our doorbell rang and Goblin launched himself out of the client’s chair, shooting straight towards the sound, calling, “Open the door! Open the door!”

“Your wish is my command, your furry majesty,” I smiled, made a theatrical bow towards the front door and snapped my fingers. In response, the lock clicked, unlatching itself, and Goblin cried:

“Delia!”

Seconds later, Delia Khojane was sitting across from me in the client’s chair. Her brown, almond-shaped eyes glittered with enthusiasm as they regarded me from above cheekbones that made my chin look as blunt as a fist. The sleeves of her bomber jacket were pulled up to her elbows to display the tattoos crowding her forearms. Most of her *inks*, as she called them, were quotes from Tolkien’s works, but written in that author’s Cirth runes and thus unreadable to all except aficionados of the clinically certifiable variety. Even the shaven sides of her head had been

inked, all the way to the edges of her thick black Mohawk. Goblin was curled in her lap and purring contentedly while her long, black-painted nails stroked his ears.

“I think I’ve uncovered a lead,” Delia announced while I proffered a shot glass filled with one part Amarula and one part coffee liqueur, as per our personal tradition.

“Fuck that tastes good after a long day.”

“Language,” Goblin reproached from his seat, “and start on my back, now. Right there. Yes. The spot, that’s where it is.”

“Just keep your nails out of jeans, your highness. Anyway, here’s a question for you Mad. When you find clients with magical potential, do you ever see visions?”

“Visions?”

“Flashes of images. Not movie-like narratives or anything coherent. Just images. Whenever I touch someone with untapped magic, I see visions, and it’s pretty consistent: Horse legs, horse heads, old style hats, rifles and even spearheads. They’re always grey or brown, like they’re made of stone or bronze.”

“No, I’ve never experienced anything of the sort.”

“He smells guano,” Goblin supplied.

“Bird sh... crap?”

“Technically, pigeon crap is not guano, but yes. Just before some clients leave, I can smell it in their auras.”

Delia’s eyes widened, brightened and her entire body vibrated with such excitement that I thought she would send Goblin flying, as she leapt up to perform a victory dance. Instead, she stilled, looked down at him and addressed the cat, “If I didn’t love you too much to disturb you, I’d be leaping for the ceiling now.”

“That is as it should be.”

“Delia, what are you on about?” I asked. Her excitement was contagious and before I could stop myself the candles around the room burned brighter and hotter, until I pulled the reins on my magic.

“Keep it down, Mr Magic Muscle. Hell, sometimes I wonder what you were like at your,” she bit her tongue.

“At my peak?” I tried to smile, but it fell flat, so I gestured for Delia to continue.

“Put the two together. Think of the visions I get and the smells you get.”

“I’m trying, but I don’t have my Sherlock Holmes hat on.”

“Statues, yes?” Goblin opined while arching his back under the caress of Delia’s nails.

“Statues?” I repeated before I could contain my surprise and confusion.

“Statues!” Delia exclaimed. “Somehow, the statues around this city are blocking people from discovering their magic and it’s gradually draining our magic in the process. You’ve lived here longer than I have. You know the place is dotted with statues of... whoever from whenever.”

Goblin chimed in before I could, “How would a testimony to human vanity and self-aggrandizement achieve such a feat?”

“That,” Delia answered, still thrumming with excitement, “is what we need to discover next, but we’ll need some resources. So, we contact the Conclave, tell them what we know and get their contacts in the municipality to give us access to the statues.”

A sudden flare of heat grazed the back of my neck as the flames in the fireplace blazed into incandescence, fuelled by an uncontrolled stream of magic from Delia. I cocked an eyebrow at her and she averted her eyes in embarrassment, until the flames settled down.

“I would like to verify this hypothesis independently, before we take it any further.”

Delia rolled her eyes.

“Of course, you do,” Goblin opined, “He’s never been strong on intuition, this one, unlike you, Delia dear.”

“Your cat is smarter than you, Mad. You should listen to him. But I know what you’re like. I did not swing round expecting you to accept my hunch on the basis of visions and... crappy smells alone. Mister Goblin, if I may.”

Reluctantly, the cat shifted on Delia’s lap so that she could retrieve something from the pocket of her bomber jacket.

“Catch,” she threw a small, grey lump of something at me.

After studying the object in my palm for a few seconds, I groaned. “Is this what I think it is?”

“That depends on whether you think it is the end of a horse’s tail from one of the statues outside the courtroom. The one of general Who-Cares from No-One-Cares-When. Hell, it’s not like the horse is going to miss it. Now get on with it. Test it! Go on.”

Goblin rose from her lap, dropped to the wooden floor and padded several lazy circles around the lump of stone, while I retrieve a saltshaker from the kitchen. My cat, by dint of his role as Guardian of the Home, was creating a barrier against malicious magic that might otherwise escape from the broken horsetail if I agitated whatever curse Delia thought it might contain. When he had finished, I poured a circle of salt around it. By dint of my role as Legitimate Owner of the Home, I imbued the circle with my own power and promptly fell flat on my back.

“What happened? Are you alright?” Delia was behind me, cradling my head in her lap and I realised that she had just saved my noggin from smacking the floor and cracking like an egg. She must have slid on her ass to reach me in time.

“Nice save Jonty Rhodes.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Who?”

“Never mind. You’re dead right about the statues. They’re cursed. And connected. Literally, every single statue in this city is feeding on us. They’re the reason behind the steady diminution of our powers. We need to get word to the Conclave - today.”



“Contacting the Conclave was an unmitigated waste of time and I should have damn-well predicted as much. Seven days! Seven! Oh look! It’s the great and mighty Conclave – self-proclaimed overseers of all magic-wielders across all Southern Africa! Mighty wielders of ancient wisdom! Blah, blah, blah! More like the bloated CEOs of some corrupt company, if you ask me!” I became aware of the whiney, overly theatrical tone of my voice and decided to shut up when I saw the hurt in Delia’s eyes.

Dammit.

Involving the Conclave had been her proposal too. Of course, she would feel guilty. So much for my own wisdom as a counsellor. I opened my mouth to say something soothing, but her eyes turned to flint as she challenged me.

“Save it, Dr Tiberius,” she said and the acid in her voice stung, “I am not one of your clients so don’t you dare try any of your vapid counsellor’s clichés on me.”

“Platitude,” Goblin offered from Delia’s lap, “The word you are looking for; it is platitude.”

Delia’s eyes softened. “I’m sorry Mad. The honest truth is I think you’re spot on about the Conclave. We should just check the statues out on our own. To hell with their supposed resources.”

“Visitors approach,” Goblin announced. “Without ill intent.” He leaped from his perch and launched himself into the fireplace where he burst into a ball of hot flames. Seconds later, the doorbell rang.

Two representatives of the thirty members of the Conclave had deigned to drop by: Andile Mhlangu and Nareem Kaur. Delia and I admitted them into my consultation room and Mhlangu took the client’s chair without asking permission. His overweight gut strained the buttons of his black business suit as he sat down. His nose, which resembled a potato that had done time as a soccer ball, wrinkled when Goblin emitted a sour smell out of spite. Like me, Goblin did not like Mhlangu. The man was arrogant and verbose. He committed more malapropisms in one day than the average South African committed traffic violations in a year. Everyone else remained standing, straight and formal as the white candles arranged around the room.

While Mhlangu grated on my nerves, Nareem’s presence suggested that I might have been wrong about the Conclave, given her reputation for cold reasoning. Her swan-like neck and generally lanky proportions created the impression that Nareem

was perpetually looking down at all the world. Her crisp grey suit and diamond earrings sharpened that impression to a fine edge. The expensive perfume wafting off her skin jarred horribly with Mhlangu's sweat, and I noticed Delia struggling to keep her nose from wrinkling. Then, I saw Nareem's jaw clench as if she were chewing on glue. It did nothing for the knot in my stomach.

"The Conclave apologises for its delay," Mhlangu opened, "We understand you must have been on tender hooks since your discovery and while we had no intention to exasperate your anxiety, this is a delicate subject and it requires dough diligence. The good news is that the debate has opened and is currently under way."

Delia beat me to it, "Debate? About how to investigate the statues and what to do?"

"Not precisely, we-" Nareem started, before Mhlangu interrupted.

"The first order of business is to decide who is responsible."

That sent a spark up my spine. "You suspect some kind of magical terrorist group?"

Mhlangu frowned as if I had just asked him to divide fifty-nine by four. "No. I mean we need to debate who is responsible for fixing things. You see, we have no idea how the statues are draining magic or blocking new users from excising their new-sent powers." *Nascent*, I corrected in the privacy of my head. "So, first we must decide who should do something about it."

I switched my eyes to Delia and witnessed the same wild confusion in her expression. Turning to Nareem, I pressed, "Surely, dealing with this issue is in everyone's best interest?"

"We don't know what might happen if we start investigating the statues," Nareem replied evenly, as if reading from a prearranged script. "First, our contacts in the local municipality must secure access to all the statues in the city, without alerting public

suspicion. Even then, what if tampering with any of the statues hurts whoever conducts the investigation? The Conclave is presently debating who should undertake the risk, and we are still waiting for a reply from our counterparts on the Baltic.”

I blinked.

Nareem frowned, realising that she had overestimated our knowledge. If I were a regular magical adventurer, I would have maintained a poker face, allowing Nareem to blabber on until I could assemble the puzzle on my own, but I am only a counsellor.

“They don’t know,” Mhalngu observed. “Nareem, they don’t need to know.”

But his colleague bristled and made her own decision, “The Baltic version of our Conclave discovered the wrecks of three Nazi warships off the coast of Lithuania. Apart from leaking oil and poisoning the maritime environment, the wrecks were also leaking some kind of magical contaminant. It has exactly the same effects on magic users in the Baltics as the statues are having on us.”

“You knew about this! You had a lead, and said nothing!” Delia erupted.

Nareem started to respond, but Mhlangu interjected, not wanting to be outdone now that the beans were being spilled, “We know the statues are draining our magic, like the wrecks in the Baltic. In fact, we are also waiting to hear from colleagues in the southern states of the USA, where their statues from the Civic War might be giving them similar problems, but we don’t how to handle the issue. Aggrieving the statues might be unwise. We cannot investigate until we know precisely what to do.”

“Yes,” Nareem rolled her eyes, “There is a danger of *aggravating* whatever curse resides in the statues. So far, no one has volunteered to take the risk.”

“I’ll do it,” Delia said in a voice that could have frozen Mhlangu’s nose off. Again, she’d beaten me to the punch. “I’ll investigate.”

“Me too.”

Mhlangu treated me to the kind of grin bears reserve for honey, until my stomach felt as if a grist of bees were buzzing inside it. “Dr Tiberius, your... counselling practise aims to discover people with undeveloped magic, not so? The Conclave understands that you have a vested interest in finding new people to train and so forth and while we are grateful that someone is trying to find new talents among the general populace, it also means that you are not exactly an objective personage. We need a clear mind that can show due dividends.”

My nose was up against his before I could think, “From that chair you are sitting in right now, I have helped hundreds of normal people with problems ranging from learning disabilities to depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and even erectile dysfunction! At least, that’s what I could achieve when my abilities were still worth something!”

I was dimly aware that a tight ball of frustration was unravelling somewhere in my gut. Like a steam locomotive, it was huffing up my throat, bypassing my brain and controlling my voice, but I felt utterly unmotivated to restrain it. “And all the trauma Mrs Blaauw’s husband is suffering will inevitably hurt their marriage, and if they have children, the trauma will get passed along to them like a fucking family heirloom! And you have no idea how many cases like that are out there! So, no, it’s not just about finding new magical talent!” The candles around the room flared as if they were Bunsen burners hooked up to propane tanks. The mirror above the mantelpiece cracked, although no one had touched it.

Mhlangu sneered and his eyes glittered like an oil slick. “Clearly unsuitable. Just as I predicated, Nareem.”

Hook. Line. Sinker. I had underestimated the bastard and danced to his tune without missing a beat.

Nareem said something and Delia responded in a raised voice, but a faint *pssstt* noise from Goblin’s fire caught my attention.

Grateful for the excuse to settle myself, I muttered something about tending the fire, before walking over to kneel in front of the flames. “There is something you can do,” Goblin whispered, “If you are willing to risk it.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Delia giving our guests an earful.

“The statues,” Goblin continued, “are feeding off all of you, like I feed upon these logs.”

“Right. So?”

“When I am sated, I can go for days, even weeks without fuel.”

“Yeah. I know. And eventually, when you need fuel again, that’s when firewood prices drill a hole in my wallet.”

“You still possess some power...” he trailed off, expecting me to connect the dots.

“Oh.” The bees in my stomach fell quiet, as a cold, lead weight sank into place. I felt sweat prickling on the back of my neck and tasted blood where my teeth bit into my own lip.

“I, uh, I was thinking you’d thought of some way to investigate the statues. Something... else.”

“The curse, you can sate it, possibly for a long time. Buy time for the others to contemplate a more permanent solution. Spur them to action. Unencumbered by the curse’s draining effects, they might reason more lucidly.”

Slowly, I stood up and backed away from the fireplace, feeling dazed and lightheaded as if my brain was shifting into a lower, more primordial gear. Fingers reaching into my pocket, I located my car keys, turned and headed for the front door. If I stopped, if I questioned, if I... anything, my courage might fail me.

I wanted to believe that the eight-meter tall, bronze statue of Nelson Mandela, surveying the city with his avuncular smile, was innocent of the sapping curse, but to verify that hope I would need to test it, and I had come here to follow through on Goblin's plan. Before the cowardice in the pit of my stomach could climb higher and numb my fingers, I seated myself by the statues' feet, crossed my legs, rested my hands palms-up on my knees and started.

I could attempt to explain the process to you; how it feels to ball your magic together and let it go, feeding it into the dark hole created by the curse, which was clearly perceptible now that I knew what I was looking for. But, in your own way, you probably already have a sense of what that is like; how it feels to surrender something you've been clinging to, even though you can feel it slipping away regardless of your white-knuckled grip. If you don't know what that feels like, then I am not sure how you've managed to live and avoid it.

When I opened my eyes, it was done. Goblin appeared in front of my crossed legs, and now my chest ached as if my lungs had turned into iron slabs and decided to try and mince my heart to paste. He had come to say goodbye. Without magic, I could not retain him as my Guardian of the Home.

He slow-blinked his Mountain Dew eyes at me and purred reassuringly. He could still speak. I could still speak. But neither of us could catch words to match the moment. My tears did the talking for me.

“I might be back,” Goblin said, falling prey to the temptation to resort to hollow platitudes. “It’s not entirely impossible.”

I closed my eyes and stroked his furry ears. They grew lighter and lighter to the touch, until it felt as if I were stroking wisps of cotton wool. Eventually, the sensation vanished altogether, and I could not bring myself to open my eyes until Delia found me.

The Bar Right After

by Nicola Catellani

Winner of the XXVII Trofeo RiLL (2021)

(translated by Paul Virgo)

You have just died, but you don’t know it yet.

Confused, you look around. You are standing in the foggy night in a city road you don’t know that is lit up by a row of flickering Art Nouveau gas lamps. You don’t know how you got here. Actually, you have great trouble remembering what happened to you before you got here.

Your memories end when it was the middle of the day. Now it is night, no doubt about it.

You seem to be in a city centre, between two rows of silent, locked-up houses. You have no idea what city it could be. The shops are all closed. You see no one around. You have two options: follow the road in one direction, or the other. Both directions seem to head straight into infinity. You seem to make out a lit-up sign a few hundred metres ahead of you. Still confused, you set off in that direction.

The sound of your footsteps is the only thing that accompanies you. You try again to remember what could have happened to you, but a dark veil continues to clog your mind. You touch your head with your hands: everything seems as it should be. No injuries, no pain, no bruises.

The lit-up sign becomes clearer. It's a bar. An open one.

You're lucky, you think.

The neon sign is the stuff of the 1960s and its slender tubes of dazzling reddish light intertwine to spell out *Bar Right After* in italics.

No sound is coming from inside. You can hardly make out anything through the frosty glass, but the faint lights leave no doubt about it: it's open.

Instinctively, you slide your hands into your pockets to find your money and your cell phone. Nothing. You'll have to ask the bartender the favour of letting you call someone. At the moment, however, you don't even know who you could call: aside from the time, you can't remember your friends' and relatives' telephone numbers without your mobile. Should I phone the police? No, maybe the ambulance service would be better.

Well, in the meantime, let's go in, right? No use standing outside here in the dark.

You push the door. It opens.

Good.

You poke your head in. Now there is some noise. A faint trickle of jazz in the background and a faint smell of coffee in the air give you the all clear to breathe a sigh of relief. You have found a lifeline to get out of your amnesia.

The bar is how you expected it. Almost too much so. You look around: you're sure that you've never been here before and yet, there is something familiar about it. You can't put your finger on what. Well, at the end of the day, many bars are similar. Five or six tables are spread around the room on the left. No one is sitting at the nearer ones, but there are a few customers at the faintly lit ones close to the opposite wall. You can't see their faces, just dark silhouettes.

Strangely, the walls are clogged full of hanging objects, but you can only make out the pictures. Actually, they look more like black-and-white photos of people and groups of people more than pictures. You suppose that they are famous people who have been here before. A classic feature of old bars.

The bar counter is on the right. The barmaid is behind the counter. You look up in her direction as you hear the door bell ring.

She must be at least 50 years old, 10 more than you, and she's a barmaid right down to her bone marrow. If you were to picture a typical barmaid, it would be her.

She greets you as you approach the bar. It's a business-like greeting, not a particularly warm one.

"Good evening. Welcome."

"Good evening" you mumble, uncertainly. You now have to explain the situation, but you don't know where to start without seeming a forgetful idiot.

She pre-empts you.

"You're a little confused, aren't you? It's normal, don't worry."

"What, sorry?" you respond right back, looking at her more closely.

A faint smile appears on her face.

“You don’t know where you are,” she explains. “That’s what always happens. Sit down, I’ll bring you something to drink.”

Confused by this reception, you opt not to ask for further explanations. You move towards the table next to you, which the barmaid pointed to. In the meantime she slips away to get something ready for you.

You sit down. A newspaper, which survived the morning in good condition, has been left on the table.

Good, it might help bring your memory back.

It seems to you that the date is right. You can’t remember what day it is, but the month and year are definitely right.

It’s not a local newspaper. But it’s open on the regional news page. There could be a clue to help you discover where you are.

One headline attracts your attention. *Well-known convict killed in shooting between rival gangs.*

There is a photo of your smiling face underneath.

You look at it twice, then three times. It’s you. You even remember when they took it.

It must be a mistake, right?

You get down to reading before the barmaid returns. Your heartbeat is racing. It skips a beat when your name and surname appear in the story. Yes, you are that convict. The information is not totally new to you: you remember your name perfectly well and you are well aware of the fact that you are a convicted criminal. A many-time-convicted criminal, actually.

But the rest of the article...

It is incoherent madness. The journalist has mixed real events with totally imaginary ones. He says you ordered, or carried out, several murders, and you know that he's right in part, even though you have never been convicted for any of them. You only went to prison for lesser crimes. But what about the other murders... No, come on, what are these accusations? It's libellous to say you are to blame for them too. Heinous murders. You never went so low. That filthy hack deserves to be next on the list.

You are so angry about this sloppy reporter that you almost forget the main thrust of the article.

You are dead. You've been killed, to be precise.

The barmaid comes at that very moment to rest a cup on the table.

"Coffee, an espresso lungo" she exclaims. "Macchiato with a sachet of sugar."

The woman amazes you once again. The coffee is your *usual*.

"How did you know?" you ask.

"Well, here certain things are well known." And she adds: "We are at the *Bar Right After*."

"Right after what?"

"This." And she points to the headline of the article.

"Right after the newspaper?"

"You still haven't taken in your plight, have you?"

It isn't easy to admit you're dead when you feel alive and kicking. A bit bewildered, for sure, but alive. You need concrete proof. You have to admit that the newspaper has unsettled you a little. Because of those lies, above all. But you can print a newspaper anywhere if you want to play a prank on someone. A horrible prank.

What other proof is there then?

You stand up without touching the coffee, and silently turn to reopen the door of the bar. Would you like to get out? Leaving the only place where you can get help wouldn't be a great move.

But there's no need to worry, as you wouldn't go far. There's nothing outside the bar. The city centre has disappeared. Its place has been taken by a uniform greyness with no shape or dimension.

Thick fog that has swallowed everything, including the sidewalk. You don't even try to take a step. You realize that it's not fog, it's a void.

You go back to the table in silence. The barmaid stayed there waiting for you. You drink your coffee.

"What is this place?" you ask in the end. The coffee was not bad at all.

"It's the *Bar Right After*" she repeats.

"And what am I doing here," you press on, and you dare to ask the question that, at this point, you can't help asking. "Is it like... heaven-hell-purgatory?"

"Not exactly. It's just a bar where you can have a chat before... what comes after."

"And what comes after?"

"It's not easy to explain off the top of your head. You should stay here with me a while. Anyway, you don't leave the *Bar Right After* until you are truly ready to."

"By chance are you...?" and with a look and your finger you point up "...or....?" and you point down.

The woman laughs.

"No, I'm just the barmaid." And she goes back behind the counter.

OK, you're dead. You start to accept it. Apart from the death part, you can see two positive sides to the situation so far. One: your self-awareness is still intact and you haven't dissolved into nothing. Good. As long as you know who you are, there's hope. Two: the bar isn't bad, considering that you can stay as long as you want too. You just have to work out what the hell you are doing here.

No, sorry, let's avoid the word hell.

Why are you here?

Your gaze spans the rest of the room and is drawn to the wall covered in objects and pictures. Having nothing better to do, you go to have a look.

Astounded, you recognize many of the objects hanging there.

They are yours. Or they are about you.

A gun. A fake ID. A dagger. A cheque signed by you. Your favourite hat. Granddad's golden pocket watch. The Padre Pio picture from your bedroom. And much besides.

The photos hanging there are not of famous people, but of you.

Your wedding. Your children. A mug shot of you.

A photo of one of your victims. And another. And yet another. And another still... no, not this one. You didn't kill this one, although you know who it was. What's it doing here? What's it got to do with the others. Or rather...

"What does all this mean?" you erupt, angrily, as you turn to the counter.

"A little welcome gesture" the barmaid replies, still smiling. "At the *Bar Right After* we care about giving our clients who, let's say, are passing through, one last look at the whole of their life."

"But what do you know about my life?" you snap, although you regain composure straight away as you remember where you are.

“We know lots of things about our customers at the *Bar Right After*,” she promises, winking.

You are about to answer back. You hold back. An idea suddenly leaps into your head. After all, you too have seen those films about the afterlife in which the lead character is in limbo where...

Could this be a test? Is it possible that your behaviour here will decide your final destination for eternity?

Now, you are well aware that, on the basis of certain – let’s say – religious parameters, your life has some major shortcomings and not a few faults. And you can’t justify yourself with your veneration of Padre Pio or your participation in some religious rites because, in truth, all these things are just tradition and superstition for you, certainly not faith. It has to be added that, aside from religion, you have not excelled when it comes to respecting rules and law and order either.

Anyway, at the moment you are still not sure whether these factors will be evaluated or not in this hypothetical test or if the afterlife is based on completely different assumptions. Should you risk making a move? Should you behave in some special way?

Should you perhaps... *repent* for your sins at the very last gasp? Could this perhaps be a chance for those you didn’t repent for when you were alive?

“You aren’t here to repent for your actions”

The barmaid interrupts your thoughts, as if she had read them. Maybe that is precisely what is happening, don’t you think?

“And not to be judged either,” she adds too.

“What have I got to do then?” you ask, almost hostile.

She smiles again, pointing at the wall packed with objects.

“Well, in the meantime you could tell me if you like this collection. We tried to bring together a collection of objects that represent important moments from your life. Can you see? Your wedding, the gun from your first robbery, your first arrest, your first murder and the most important other ones...”

“What robberies and homicides!” you shout, irritated. “I didn’t kill anyone! Yes, I did some robberies, and I went to jail for them too, but no murders!”

How dare this woman?

The barmaid continues patronizingly: “I understand your reaction, but, I repeat, you are not here to repent or to be judged, just to have an objective last look at your life. You know perfectly well how you behaved in the past, and why. And I’m not talking about good deeds or bad ones: we aren’t interested in categorizations like that here. We just want to show you the deeds themselves. I also realize that you instinctively try to deny some of the things you have done, those that, on the basis of some criteria of human thought, could be reprehensible, but this denial no longer has any sense here at the *Bar Right After*. What is done is done. Full stop.”

Her words don’t totally convince you, as you are used to not trusting anything or anyone. But you have to admit that – on the basis of all these objects – she does indeed know lots of things about you, including some that you wouldn’t want widely known. Or, better put, you wouldn’t have wanted widely known, *before*. Like the photos of the murders.

You think on it, observing all that material hanging there. She leaves you to reflect for a while, then she comes back, handing you a glass of a liqueur.

Yep: your *usual* liqueur.

You pick it up with two fingers, cautiously.

“I’m not trying to get you drunk,” she promises. “You can’t get drunk here at the *Bar Right After*.”

Naturally, you don’t believe her and you nurse the liqueur.

“You both looked wonderful at the wedding” she says, pointing at the photo. “Shame it didn’t work out.”

“I don’t think it’s any of your business.”

“You still haven’t got into the *mood* of the Bar. Here everything is *our business*, at this point,” she winks.

With absolute nonchalance she starts to rattle off the names of a series of women: you had almost forgotten some, while others you remember well. This list is one of the main reasons your marriage *didn’t work out*.

That irritates you. It irritates you because she remembers that list better than you.

You try not to show your annoyance.

“It seems that you know lots of things here.”

“It’s our job.”

The barmaid is a bit too much of a know-all, but you have noticed that something’s amiss.

“If you know everything, then what’s this photo have to do with anything?”

You point to the photo of that last guy. You know perfectly well that he was killed. But, unlike the other dead people on the wall, you have nothing to do with his murder.

The barmaid doesn’t hesitate to answer you. “You killed him last year. Being as you decided to pull this one off on your birthday, we thought we’d put it here for you...”

“No!” you react. “I didn’t kill him!”

“I’ve already told you that we are not here to judge or...”

“No! Judgement has nothing to do with it. It’s about the truth. I didn’t waste him! This one I did, OK” and you point to another photo. “This one too” and you point to another, and then another still. “But not this one! I won’t stand for being accused of things I’m not guilty of. Who told you it was me?”

For the first time the woman seems to lose the aplomb and superiority that she has shown so far.

“We have our systems. Anyway, it says so in the newspaper article.”

“That article!” you explode. If she hadn’t mentioned it, you would have. “It’s full of lies! You can’t accuse me on the basis of that trash!”

“It’s a serious newspaper, not a fake-news merchant. Honestly, there’s nothing wrong with you admitting to that murder too. At the end of the day, it’s just one more on top of the others. What difference does it make?”

“No!”

At this point, you’re pissed off. It’s absolutely not a question of judgement; it’s a question of justice. For you. “I know perfectly well who killed that man, and it wasn’t me. It’s not my way of working, not my method, and it’s not even the sort of person who...”

“Yet I guarantee you that we didn’t get this wrong.”

The barmaid backs away, slightly intimidated by your attitude, which is becoming aggressive. She moves back towards the counter. At that point one of the customers who had stayed in the shadows at the end of the room gets up from his table.

“I told her” he says, calmly.

He comes closer. He emerges from the shadows.

It’s the dead guy from the photo.

He sniggers: “I’ve been waiting for you to get here for a while.

This apparition is shocking, but you don't lose heart. There is clearly a plot against you here, but the truth will come out.

"You know who I am, don't you?" he asks you, stopping a few steps away from you.

Of course you know who he is, although you only met him briefly. And this is a good thing.

If you had killed him, you wouldn't be too relaxed about seeing him appear before you.

At least your conscience is clean about *this*.

But you don't feel relaxed anyway. You didn't kill him, but you know that he is dead.

And now he is here accusing you.

"I know who you are," you confirm, trying to show no fear. "And I also know that I didn't kill you."

"Liar" he hits back, with contempt. "You shot me in the back, like all the others. But, unlike them, I turned around at the last moment and recognized you".

In the back! If there's something I can't stand, it's being called a coward.

"You're a liar!" you can't hold back your voice and move menacingly towards him, dead man or not, you don't care.

"I don't shoot people in the back! I only shoot people to settle scores and I want the scumbags to know!"

"You shot them all in the back," he insists, sniggering too. "They passed through the bar too, you know. The barmaid knows all about it."

The woman says nothing, She doesn't seem to want to get between you both. She stands a few steps away. She seems poised to intervene. But not yet.

"You dirty liar!"

You really want to grab him by the neck and put him even further into the afterlife.
But you point at the photos first.

“You haven’t spoken to any of them, you bastard! I shot him in the forehead. Him in the chest. Him in the mouth. I unloaded a whole magazine in his stomach. Don’t you dare call me a coward!”

He keeps sniggering, undaunted. This infuriates you even more than what he says.

You go for him. He stays still and keeps smiling.

You throw a huge punch to his stomach.

And go through him, abruptly tripping over and falling on the floor.

The bastard is a ghost. You should have guessed.

The barmaid finally intervenes. “I don’t want any fighting here in the bar.”

Lying on the floor, you’re about to complain vigorously when...

The cavernous voice of a celestial being suddenly comes down from on high. It shakes the whole bar.

Even the glasses rattle.

“Very good. That’s enough!”

The sniggering ghost disappears.

“What happened?” you ask, still in shock, while the barmaid helps you get back up.

“What was that voice?”

“My boss, but not the one you think.” And right after she adds: “I have some bad news for you.”

After being killed and accused of a murder you didn’t commit from beyond the grave, what more bad news can there be?”

Maybe you didn't pass the test and you're about to end up in hell.

"Actually, you're not dead."

"Sorry, what do you mean?"

You certainly didn't hear wrong.

"You aren't dead. The *Bar Right After* doesn't exist."

The objects disappear one after the other from the wall, leaving it bare.

You look around, stunned.

"Where am I then?"

"Inside a neural simulation. You are lying on a bed and have electrodes attached to your head.

"You are experiencing this scene in your head."

You have never been into technological wizardry, so it's not clear to you what this means. The bar still seems real to you.

You picked up on a detail of what the barmaid said though.

"A bed? Am I... in hospital? In a coma? The shooting in the newspaper...."

"There was no shooting. And you are fine. Actually, you aren't even unconscious. At the moment, you are in your bed speaking out loud."

You still don't understand.

"So what's the bad news?"

"The bed is in a police station. You are under preventative detention and have just made a confession before several witnesses, including a court-appointed lawyer. I myself am a police officer."

You are struggling to get your head around what she is saying. Police? Confession? Witnesses?

But one thing is certain.

“I haven’t confessed to anything,” you burst out. “I didn’t kill *that guy!*”

The barmaid gives you sympathetic smile.

“We know you didn’t. We did it on purpose. In your frenzy to defend yourself from that false accusation, you confessed all your other unsolved murders to us and told us how they took place. Only the killer could know the details so well.”

A chill runs down your back. You think back to what you said.

Damn it!

“But how dare you? You can’t... can’t...”

“We can. Non-invasive simulators like the *Bar Right After* have been legal interrogation methods for a year. Everything you said was recorded live and brain scans of the scenes you experienced were taken and they are valid for the criminal investigation too.”

Those words scare you more than death. They mean life in jail.

You are about to open your mouth and vomit abuse, expletives and curses at her.

The *barmaid* stops you by raising her hand and concludes: “Now that you know what the situation is, I strongly suggest you remain silent until we are out of the simulation.”

The room around you starts to disintegrate, fading and dissolving bit by bit, uncovering the basic geometric shapes of the images.

When you are alone with the woman in a nebulous, blurry grey, she winks at you:

“We’re almost out. See you *right after.*”

But this time she doesn’t mean the bar.

Nicola Catellani was born in 1968 and lives in Carpi, near Modena.

He is a civil servant with an Italian public entity. An astronomy graduate, he is a great fan and big reader of science fiction.

Several of his stories have won prizes in literary competitions, as well as being published in anthologies and magazines.

In 2021, he won the XXVII Trofeo RiLL with “The Bar Right After” (which came first out of the 522 stories submitted). Moreover, he came second the same year with “Urne Elettorali” (Ballot Boxes), which is a noteworthy achievement, because no Trofeo RiLL participant had ever taken the first two places of the final ranking previously. In 2022 he won the Trofeo RiLL (XXVIII edition) again with “Quel Signore in Salotto” (That Gentleman in the Lounge).

He has also published two comedy science-fiction novels, “Via Lattea per Negati” (The Milky Way for Dummies, 2022) and “Pellegrini nella Galassia” (Pilgrims in the Galaxy; 2023), as well as “La Grande Impresa e Altri Racconti” (The Great Enterprise and Other Stories), a collection of his short-stories.

The Trofeo RiLL is an Italian literary award for budding speculative-fiction writers. The contest has been run since 1994 by RiLL - Riflessi di Luce Lunare, a non-profit club based in Rome. Each year the Trofeo RiLL features around 300-350 short-stories participants, from Italy and other countries. The winning entries are annually published in MONDI INCANTATI, anthologies that are edited directly by RiLL.

The Trofeo RiLL final awards ceremony takes place at Lucca Comics & Games, the Italy’s most important festival about comics, illustration, speculative fiction, games and animation, which since forever patronizes the Trofeo RiLL.

Info: www.rill.it; info@rill.it

Blast from the past PROBE 25 June 1974

Dear editor,

I can't write you an article.....

john j alderson

The whole point of this little epistle is to let you know that owing to your taboo about religion (Probe, April '73) I can't write you an article. Now I would like to. But the point is that we Australians are a lot of religious iconoclasts.

Admittedly, we worship strange gods, but then we are not that much better than the usual run of human beings. I remember a case where a fellow Victorian visiting Mildura, went over to Golgol - a one-pub-town in New South Wales - to try N.S.W. beer, which owing to a closed communion (tied-houses they call it) is not available in Victoria - we like to keep ourselves pure here'. So he bought a glass; schooners, middies or something heretical they call them there, and tried it (Now the only difference in taste is in the label) He said, "I don't much like this New South Wales beer." Whereupon the bigot at the bar beside him, put down his, glass and punched his nose.

But I have no wish to burden you with an account of the worship of "the amber evil" as it is known amongst those who have "proper gods". Nor do I wish to refer to certain types amongst us who follow "The Saints", "The Demons", or "The Tigers", nor the religious fervour of their worshippers, or the bacchanal excesses of beer and women that conclude the 'season' with trips away to seedy hotels where there is a blonde in every bed and booze for every meal.

And this is hardly the time and place to mention the worship of the HORSE, or to mention the prophets whose predictions fill the back pages of most newspapers and the front pages of the rest; nor the yearly quest for the Holy Grail, or as it is called with some conceit by the worshippers in that centre, "The Melbourne Cup". Nor is it the place to make mention of the offerings made by rich and poor alike who frequently "cast their very living' into the treasuries of the temple of the HORSE, (known as TABS) one of which is in every town of consequence. Nor do I wish to go into the fact that this is our State religion.

Nor do I think it appropriate to mention that odd religion of Comté which has many followers. For to a man, we put up certain asses every three years into high places, (where they bray exceedingly) and who think that they make the sun to rise and set by their brayings, and worse than this, so do their worshippers. I regret to mention, that one, John Bangsund, is a servant in one of those temples of insanity they call parliaments.

South Africa, as-the "last civilized country in the world to receive TV", (funny, I heard that in Scotland in 1952 and they invented the blasted thing) will hardly appreciate the abject worship this idol in the corner

receives. The hallucinants used in some ancient religions is not in it. Drugged and bemused the worshippers live from one session of worship to the next, until at last the mind and bodies of the poor creatures are so decayed as to have no health nor activity left in them. But though this is a universal problem of far-reaching implications with further ramifications proposed 'by most SF, writers, alas, I cannot write an article on it for Probe because I must not write on religion

I freely admit that I do not have intention of writing you an article on • Heinlein. You may not have read his "If These Things go on", or "Stranger in a Strange Land", or "I Will Fear No Evil", and indeed a lot of his other work, but I regard them as pretty shallow pieces of thought and rather shoddy writing ... so not really worth writing about. But I may like to write on Philip K Dick whose books recognise the necessity of religious experience. But you would disallow me to write any such article for. Probe for a lot of these books are essentially books considering religion, and to discuss them without mentioning religion would be like discussing Hamlet without mentioning The Prince. It cannot be done.

And there is a whole range of SF that I do not wish to write about because of its naiveté and dullness, which merely retell Biblical or other religious stories. So too, there is a whole range of simple moralistic tales, parables that are hardly worth discussing, even though they comprise almost the entire range of SF. But such themes are in any case, taboo in the pages of Probe.

On the other hand there is a whole series of books and stories like that piffling thing of Poul Anderson 'O Federation Chaos" which is essentially (and superficially), a religious story. Science fiction has become considerably interested, of late years in demonology. But all this, however, is taboo because they deal with religion.

But of more moment are the writings of Farmer. Not so much his Riverworld stories which have a basic religious theme, but his Carmody stories wherein he actually examines various dogmas of Christianity whilst

Carmody himself is a priest. These are very thoughtful stories and most worthy, of consideration, but alas, it cannot be in Probe. Similarly too, Lem's 'Solaris' is an important book, but again, the theme is unfortunately religious.

Now I know this is one of the inevitable things about sf. Like all literature, its main concern in the ultimate is the struggle of good and evil, or right and wrong, and it is, and must be, religious. Now, I could go into why this is religious and must be religious, but to what point if the subject is taboo? I know and I am aware that many people profess to have no religion, but the mere fact that they are spiritual anarchists does not make them non-religious anymore than political anarchists make them beyond politics by throwing bombs about ... else, why throw bombs. But of course this is taboo and I don't wish to tread on your toes.

But, I like to write on SF, but how can I, if the oldest science of all, theology is taboo. SF authors have not regarded it as taboo but have considered theology to a greater extent than any other science, but alas, they know more about rockets. But that does not alter the fact that they have considered the matter. Whenever one considers the world of the future, one must consider it as a reasonably whole and living society. To live it must eat and love, and work and worship, if only a TV set, and no society can be complete until the author has considered such things, even if they are not all mentioned, they must all have their place in the author's conception. And one must consider just what the state of theology will be in such a state, because it almost certainly will remain, extremely important. Even if all organised religion ceased in the future, even if all conscious private worship ceased, there would still be that unconscious worship of THINGS, but in such a world the author would have to reason how and why it even exists in this negative form. I have read many SF books where it is stated that no religion exists, but in the worthwhile books the results of that lack of religion was evident even if the moral was not pointed.

Bester's 'The Stars My Destination' is a profoundly moving book, and a profoundly religious one yet it is set in a society where religion had been outlawed and discredited. Some of these books are more deeply religious than 'Pilgrim's Progress'.

And I do feel badly about not being able to discuss Herbert's 'Dune' (and the other Dune books) because they too are taboo. For 'Dune' not only has a religious theme of which I am speaking, but a religious story which is quite another thing, and 'Dune' remains one of the greatest SF books yet written, of a world redeemed by religion.

So, dear editor, I cannot write an article for you because life and SF are so permeated with religion as to be unintelligible without its considerations. And *alas*, dear sir, the pages of Probe are going to be blank unless you either change your policy or you don't notice the religious element in the articles and stories, as perhaps you have not noticed the religious connotations of your taboo itself. How ironic this is!

The irony of the whole taboo is the result of not realising that others than just club members would be reading Probe. If I had realised that I would have qualified the taboo.

The reason for the taboo stems from an incident that occurred in the club. A member wrote an article about religion - from his point of view and his beliefs. The article never mentioned SF and had nothing to do with SF - it was purely personal. That is the reason for the taboo. Also the taboo is only meant to apply to articles or letters where a person tries to push or justify his religious beliefs or lack of them.

Religion in SF, as mentioned in the above article, is very common and would make a very interesting article. This would be acceptable for publication in Probe, provided it was well written.

I hope that this clarifies the position with regard to religion. It is only taboo when it bears no relation to SF, but is used to promote an individual's (not meaning SF author) belief or lack of belief. 'The same applies to politics.

tex.

Curiosity completes 4 000 days on Mars



WASHINGTON: Nasa's Curiosity Rover has successfully completed four thousand days on Mars conducting exciting science

The rover first landed on Mars' Gale crater on August 5th 2012, to study whether ancient Mars had the conditions to support microbial life.

The car-sized rover has been gradually ascending the base of the 5km tall Mount Sharp, whose layers formed in different periods of Martian history and offer a record of how the planet's climate changed over time.

Meanwhile, the Nasa team is preparing for a phenomenon known as solar conjunction, where Mars is about to disappear behind the sun.

What Curiosity sees looking towards Mount Sharp



