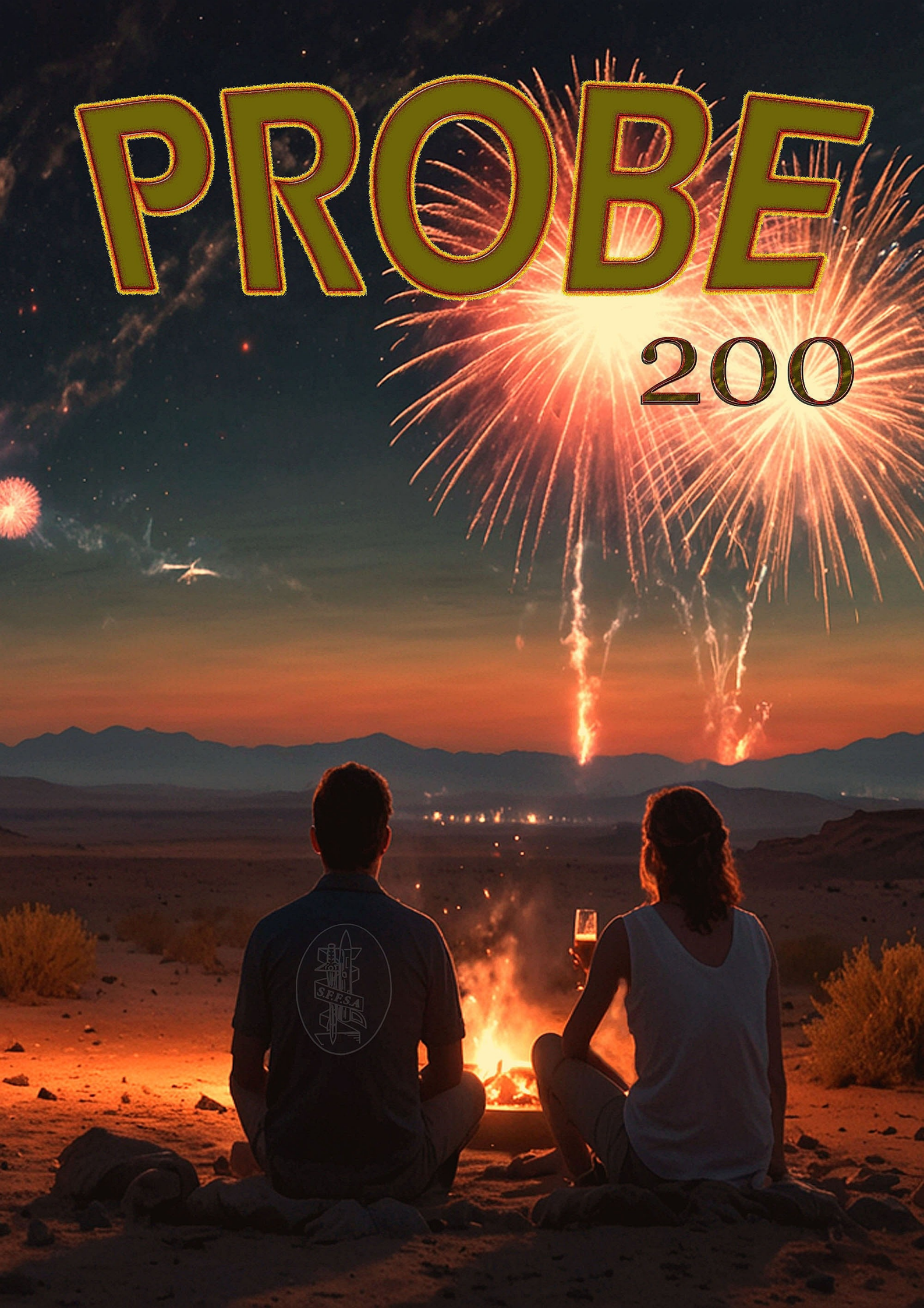


# PROBE

200



## PROBE 200

June 2024

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# Editorial

# Gail

Sadly not the way I would have liked to begin this 200<sup>th</sup> Editorial of PROBE, but I have to notify the club of the passing of one of our founder members, Tex Cooper, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of June 2024. Tex was 85 and one of the very first editors of PROBE. He was the first to produce it in its current A5 form, done laboriously on a Roneo machine. And I would like to think that he would have been pleased to see that his creation has gone on to be the issue that you are now reading.



I wanted to make this 200<sup>th</sup> issue of PROBE a little different from the usual offerings that I edit. So, it is not mainly composed of stories from the finalists of the previous year's Nova short story competition. There is one finalist and a second story which did not make it to the finals but just tickled my fancy. And also seeing as we have had a now fairly long consolidation with the Italian group RiLL, and also that I had somehow missed their winner from 2022, I added that as well. You'll also see an interview with ChatGPT. We have had a lot of AI presentations this year so I decided to see what ChatGPT is all about. Interesting....

We have also had, over the years, many really wonderful End-of Year talks by Digby Ricci so I decided that we need to get one down on paper for those who have not made it to one of those functions. You'll see a most entertaining talk on the intersection between SF and horror.

Also Gavin Kreuter has given us some thoughts and insights on the books and TV series that are based on Cixin Liu's trilogy which begins with "The Three-Body Problem"

So – the club had made it to 55-years and PROBE to 200 issues. Well done to all those who have been a part of this momentous journey!

# Special Chairperson's

## Note

### RUMINATIONS ON SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY ART



As a fan of science fiction and fantasy, I feel that the art is vital to draw you into the world building taking place such as the cover art for a book, the poster for a film including the concept art for the set design, story board etc and the poster art for magazines.

I also love the art in comic books/graphic novels and the art displayed in exhibitions brought

to light in Spectrum (a book series which showcases the best in science fiction and fantasy art).

One of the earliest memories I have regarding a film poster was the poster for Star Wars (1977). Boy I was blown away by it – I am sure I saw the film first before catching sight of the poster. To me that poster is so iconic as it encapsulated what I was feeling watching the film. There are so many posters throughout the years that stand out for me – Alien, The Thing, Blade Runner, and Predator, War of the Worlds, The Terminator and so many more.

As I started to read science fiction and fantasy novels, the book covers that I enjoyed were the ones that necessarily did not show you exactly what the book was about but offered you a glimpse of what you could expect or it would be a total surprise. Sometimes there was some head scratching as the cover did not reflect anything that happened in the book. Some of my favourite book covers are by Boris Vallejo, Frank Frazetta, Chris Foss, Alan Lee, Jim Burns, Kinuko Y. Craft and Julie Bell.

In my teens I started to read and collect comic books and graphic novels which had so many great artists attached to various titles, several of my favourite artists are Alex Ross, Bill Sienkiewicz, Fiona Staples, Tim Sale, Barry Windsor-Smith and Jean Giraud (Moebius).

I have been thinking a lot about AI lately. To be honest, putting my cards on the table, I am very leery of AI being used in artistic spaces whether creating art for book covers, posters etc, writing of novels and so on. I am not a fan of AI – the images

that I have seen created by AI leave me cold – you can tell the difference between an AI image or image/painting created via digital or traditional means.

There is so much about the art I would like to expand on but alas we have limited space.

Until the next time, I hope you enjoy the beautiful art that is available.

Carla Martins

## Magazines Received

### **Ansible** David Langford

March 2024 442 <http://news.ansible.uk/a442.html>

April 2024 443 <http://news.ansible.uk/a443.html>

May 2024 444 <http://news.ansible.uk/a444.html>

### **De Profundis**

DeProfundis #597 May 2024 Heath "Scribbles" Row, 4367 Globe Ave., Culver City, CA 90230; kalel@well.com;



## Books Received

### **JonathanBallPublishers**

Tim Hodgkinson Sword of the War God Bloomsbury R420

Brandon Sanderson The Sunlit Man Orion R470

Nicola Clark The Waiting Game Orion R415(Not SF or F)

### **From the author**

S. Misra Simba Singh and the Tears of India

# Nova 2023 Finalist

## The Handprint

Sue Woodward

It was the second last day of Gershwin's self imposed stay in the Cederberg wilderness. In a rash promise to his mother before her death he had agreed to spend a few days on the farm with her family. And it had been as expected – no wifi, early mornings, long boring days. It was probably his own fault that he was bored, but really he didn't identify with these salt- of- the- earth farm labourers, talking constantly of the weather and the goats and what the government should do.

This morning he decided he would go for a long hike, something he had been putting off so far in his ramblings about the farm. He decided he would walk to Wolfkraal. Wolfkraal was a place his mother and grandma had spoken about all his life. They believed it was a sacred and ancient place – the place of their ancestors who were driven off the land by white settlers over two centuries ago. He had a vague childhood memory of his grandma taking him to a cave with rock art paintings. For some reason, probably financial, he and his mother had never returned to the farm, and then old ma had died, and now his mother too was gone.

'Better take the dog, in case you get lost', said his uncle, 'She knows her way back, alright.'

And so Gershwin packed a sandwich lunch and a bottle of water. He whistled for Tienie, the mongrel, and they set off on the long hot walk. After a couple of hours of rough terrain Gershwin recognised the unmistakable circle of tumbled rocks and overhangs of Wolfkraal. His spirits lifted. He forgot about looking for the cave and began to explore the huge chunks of golden rock and passages blocked by tangled wild olive trees. He felt a lightness in his limbs – never had he experienced such space and silence.

He came upon the cave by accident. Tienie had run on ahead and Gershwin followed her. He recognised the spot the moment he saw it. It had been in his dreams always. He climbed the steep slope and pushed past the straggling tree at its entrance. The paintings were on the long flat wall of rock at the back of the cave, their fresh and vibrant colours representing the deep reds and ochres of the sandstone rock. Most were of the typically elongated people, with hook heads and well-defined calf muscles and buttocks. He made out a couple of fringed bags and a strange depiction of a half-man half-buck with long straight horns and arms stretched back as if he were about to take off. A memory came flooding back and Gershwin hurried on along the wall of rock to find it . . . yes, there it was, a beautiful yellow-ochre elephant at the far end of the cave wall, right out of the sunlight. His elephant.

On the elephant's back was a deep red handprint. It looked carelessly placed and almost seemed to spoil the image of the elephant. It was a right hand print. In the cool dim light, Gershwin remembered that he had measured it against his own small hand all those years back. Now it was a perfect fit.



It could have been made by him.

Out of the shelter of the cave Gershwin looked around for a shady place to rest and eat his sandwiches. He climbed down a smooth slope of rock, and had to manoeuvre between two massive slabs of flat sandstone. It appeared as if the rock had split in



two and formed a giant sandwich standing on end. As he swung himself over the crevice, he looked down and saw the skeleton of a small buck, perfectly preserved, wedged between the two slices of rock. It looked as though the buck had been chased in between the two slabs and been unable to back out. He leaned back to help Tienie down.

‘Look at this Tienie. Look at this beautiful little skull and horns. I should take it back with me.’

He bent down to pick it up but for some reason decided to leave it there.

They settled in the shade of a boulder quite close to the buck skeleton. Gershwin ate his apricot jam sandwiches and drank some water from his water bottle, pouring a few capfuls for Tienie. He leant his back against the hard rock, enjoying the warmth. After a while of staring at the jagged horizon, he noticed four irregularly shaped pieces of rock, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, lying flat on the sand on the ground next to him. Behind him was the sandstone rock face, and he saw that there was a gap left by the pieces just above where he had been sitting. They seemed to have fallen straight out of the face of the rock and plopped onto the ground in front of it. There must have been a moment in time when this small alteration to the landscape happened. He wondered that if he sat here long enough, he might witness one of the larger rocks toppling over and crashing to the ground. His eyelids felt heavy and his mind started to drift, and he dozed off.

Much later that afternoon Gershwin woke up, shaded his eyes with his hands and looked at the sun. It was low in the sky and would be setting soon. He stood up stiffly and stretched.

‘Tienie we better be going. We’ve got a long walk.’

The dog stood up, yawning and stretching lazily. Gershwin felt reluctant to go home to the small house with its quarrelling children. He wondered if he should wait for the

moon, which his uncle had mentioned would be full tonight. He would love to see Wolfkraal in the moonlight, and it would light his way back to the farm.

Still undecided, he tripped over some flat pieces of rock, and remembered the discovery he'd made before he fell asleep. He looked up at the rock face again. There was no doubt that the four pieces of rock had dropped out – the gap left on the face of the rock was exactly the size and shape of the pieces on the ground. He felt a compulsion to put the pieces back into their original position, as if completing a puzzle, tidying up this beautiful and ancient landscape.

Gershwin bent down and picked up a large piece of the flat rock. He fitted it exactly into the spot from where it had fallen. Then he picked up the next piece – it was also a perfect fit; and then the third, at first trying it upside down, no, not that way; he turned it around and slotted it in. And now there was one more irregularly shaped square of sandstone to fit into the last empty space.

Gershwin hesitated, looking up at the great arc of the sky above him, and at the wide circle of the horizon around him. The sun, a fiery red-orange ball, was sinking low in the west; in the east a full moon was rising.

'This is awesome,' he said out loud. 'If I never experience anything beautiful again in my whole life I will be content that I have seen this'.

And with that Gershwin fitted the last piece of the puzzle into place.

Immediately everything changed. Everything changed, and nothing changed.

That is to say he was in the same place, the rocks were the same, the horizon was the same, and his clothes were the ones he'd put on this morning. And yet, it was different. He was in a different space. No, a different time, that was it.

The first thing Gershwin could identify as different was the weather. There was a cool breeze where there had been no breeze before. Gershwin shivered and looked

around him. Somehow there seemed to be more vegetation. And there were more sounds, of birds, and a southing of the wind through the grass, and a scraping, scuffling noise. It seemed to be coming from the two big slabs of rock where the buck's skeleton was wedged. Cautiously he walked over and peered between the two slabs. Where the skeleton had been was now a live buck, kicking and struggling to get free. Gershwin hadn't seen any buck here today at all. It seemed impossible. He could see how it happened that a buck could have become lodged there. Something must have been chasing it. But now what had been white sun bleached bones had become a live animal with flesh and hair and little black hooves. Gershwin looked around anxiously. All was quiet. And where was the skeleton? Could it have been a different rock? Gershwin looked around again. There was no other rock like it nearby.

He began to feel a little afraid, his fear diminished only by his anxiety for the buck, whose struggles were becoming more and more desperate. Tienie, with pricked ears and cocked head, was intent on the efforts of the buck. 'Sit Tienie,' said Gershwin. He squeezed his body into the narrow passage between the slabs of rock, the buck becoming even more frantic as it sensed his presence. It had kicked back so much in its efforts to get out that its sharp little hooves had dug a pit in the soft sand. Gershwin grabbed it by its haunches, high up so as not to break its legs, and pulled. The buck kicked and scabbled, vainly trying to go forward again. Gershwin pulled again, got a firm grip on the buck's hindquarters and edged his way out, dragging the animal with him. He let it go as soon as they were out, and the little creature took off in one bound. After a moment's surprise, Tienie chased after it, yapping excitedly.

Gershwin felt really strange. There was no other skeleton wedged in the crevice – a few minutes ago that buck had been dead, and now because of him it was running free. He had changed its destiny. What had happened? Was he dreaming? It was almost dusk now, the eeriness of the evening intensified by the appearance of the great silver ball of the moon rising above the horizon, and the even bigger golden sun sinking into the opposite horizon. They were like two coins, a gold and a silver one, hanging at opposite ends of the sky.

He had to think. He knew he should be getting back, but he felt as though he was in a dream. And where was the track back to the farm? And where was Tienie? He sat on a rock and tried to think. It all started when he put those pieces of sandstone together. He looked towards the rock, yes, they were there, still in place. What if he took them out? He rose and walked over to the rock face, but before he could do anything a terrible howl shattered the silence, like an animal in pain or terror.

'Tienie,' he screamed.

A huge male baboon, silhouetted against the deep blue of the evening sky, had the little dog pinned to the rock under his big hind foot. On the rocks behind him, watching the show, was the rest of the troop, screaming encouragement. The big baboon's lips were drawn back in a snarl, baring his strong white canines, and Gershwin knew that he could tear Tienie to pieces. The baboon paused when he heard Gershwin shout and looked in his direction.

'Drop her you big hairy bully,' shouted Gershwin, ducking out of sight as if he were a child playing a game. He looked round for a rock to throw at the baboon.

Just then something struck the baboon on the shoulder and fell down onto the rock. The baboon screamed, more in outrage than pain, and swung round to see who had attacked him. In that moment Tienie squirmed free and jumped down, taking off into the bushes. Gershwin dared not call after her, for fear of drawing attention to himself. The baboon retreated to his family to join them in threatening barks and snarls. Eventually he led the whole troop away over the boulders, all of them still making indignant noises. The young ones scampered reluctantly along at the rear, looking curiously behind them at the scene of excitement.

Gershwin darted out of his hiding place to see what it was that had struck the baboon. It was an arrow, a little longer than a ruler. It was beautifully crafted of wood, reed and bone, and lashed together with grass. Gershwin held it in his hand as if it were a wand. Carefully he put it inside his T-shirt. Then he heard voices. He ducked back behind the rocks.

Two boys appeared. They were unlike any boys he had seen before but he knew what they were. They were San or Bushmen. They were naked, except for a skin of some kind around their waists, and their light brown skin caught the dying light of the evening as they moved. Each had a small bow and a quiver of arrows over his shoulder. What they were saying was a mystery, an animated musical mystery with lots of clicking sounds.

Suddenly they were quiet. They pointed at tracks on the sand and looked in the direction the baboons had gone. Gershwin realised that they would have seen not only the baboon and buck spoor but his own and Tienie's tracks as well. Tienie, who had crept next to Gershwin after the baboon dropped her, started to bark. There was nothing for it but to stand up. The boys saw him, a look of shock and fear on their faces, and in one movement they whirled around and ran, like buck startled in the bush.

Gershwin started breathing normally again. The sun had all but gone and the huge crags and boulders were black silhouettes against a dark blue sky. He tried to think clearly.

'This can't be a dream. The arrow is real. I have to get back. How? I must put those pieces of rock back. But who are those boys?'

He made a snap decision, 'Tienie, come, there's time, let's follow them.'

They ran along the sandy path the boys had taken. They made fast progress until Gershwin smelt smoke, wood smoke. He slowed his pace and crept from boulder to boulder. Now he could hear voices. He dropped down behind a large rock, his hand on Tienie's rough back. There was a small smoky fire in the middle of a clearing. Around the fire were more of the San people. The boys he had followed were talking animatedly, but most of the group were continuing with what they were doing. A woman was scraping away the sand under the fire and uncovering what looked like

roots; another was nursing a baby; small children were playing in the dust, and a group of men was sitting apart.

When the boys pointed in Gershwin's direction the men stood up, reaching for sticks. Gershwin turned to run back the way he had come. It was almost dark. He had one thought now, to get back to the farm.

He was a good runner, and Tienie was a fit and strong farm dog. They were almost at the rock face. There was no sign of the San. Just as they got there Gershwin stopped short and listened. Ahead of him he heard the thudding of horses' hooves moving fast and getting louder. Could it be his uncle come to look for him? No, there were too many horses. It was too late to hide. He was right in their path. A prickle of sweat broke out along his hairline, and he pressed himself to the side of the track. Tienie, with a defiant bark, disappeared into the shadows.

Five horsemen were heading straight for him. Leading them was a wild running figure in a huge European style overcoat, the sides flapping like the wings of a giant bird, revealing a naked brown body inside it. The dark shapes of horses, men and bird-creature spilled over the ground, mingling with the dust from the horses' hooves, like a scene from hell. They reared and snorted around Gershwin. Gershwin could feel their hot breath and smell the sweat and dust of them. The horsemen were white men, with full beards, tight jackets and slouch hats. They had an assortment of long guns, sticks and whips over their shoulders and across their saddles. The figure in the overcoat was a Bushman, with the yellow-brown skin and strong muscled legs of the San. He was their tracker, and he had led them straight to Gershwin.

The man in front reached down and gripped Gershwin's shoulder and then held him around the neck. Gershwin tried to prise the man's arm off him and wriggle free, but the man had a grip of steel. He gave Gershwin a cuff across the head, making his ears sing and his eyes water. After that Gershwin stood quietly as the other horsemen surrounded him. Men and animals were breathing heavily.

They all stared at Gershwin.

'Godverdomme. What the hell?' The man's accent was thick and guttural.

'Wie is jy?' the man who had grabbed him said, and then in English, 'You're not a Bosjesman, what are you doing with them?'

Gershwin said nothing.

'Los hom Adriaan – ons het werk vanaand.' 'Leave him, we've got work tonight.'  
One of the men spoke and started moving off. The others followed.

'Bring hom tesaam.'

'Klim op. Get up,' said Adriaan to Gershwin, and half pulled him onto the horse in front of him. He smelt of sweat and brandy. Gershwin scrambled on to the horse, and looked quickly around for Tienie. He couldn't see her, but spotted the tracker disappearing up the slope towards the cave.

One of the men turned around and shouted to Adriaan, 'Waar's die Bosjesman?'

'Los hom. Ons het hom nie nodig nie.' said Adriaan, 'Ons weet waar hy is. Ons sal hom later kry.' 'Leave him, we don't need him. We'll get him later.'

The next few minutes were no longer a dream – they were a nightmare. The posse of men rode hard and fast through the moonlit landscape, back the way Gershwin had just come. Gershwin was barely able to cling to the saddle. They arrived at full speed at the small settlement of San. The San were already on their feet as the horses approached, the men with sticks and bows and the women scooping up small children. The horsemen rode straight through the centre of the encampment, lashing at the reed shelters with their whips. Then they set about hitting the people, who were trying to grab their possessions and hide their children.

‘Voertsek’ the men shouted, ‘Voertsek, weg van hierdie land. Get off this land. Ons sal nie weer sê nie. We won’t say it again.’

As Adriaan wheeled round to hook down some skin bags hanging in a tree, Gershwin saw his chance, and slid from the horse. He ran into the shadows of the rocks, away from the dust and the mayhem and the screams of the children. But Adriaan came after him. Gershwin knew he would have to climb the boulders, where the horses couldn’t go. The full moon was not his friend and Adriaan spotted him as he found footholds in the steep face of rock. Adriaan abandoned his horse and started climbing after Gershwin.

Gershwin was lighter and nimbler than Adriaan and made good progress until he came to a ridge and a sandy track. As he ran swiftly along the track his ankle turned on an uneven piece of ground and he fell sideways into the bush. He could smell the sweet pungency of the buchu as he bruised it. He scrambled up but it was too late. His pursuer grabbed him, turned him around and pinned his arms to his sides. Gershwin kicked out as hard as he could but missed. Twisting around Gershwin sank his teeth into Adriaan’s shoulder and broke free.

‘Eina Godverdomme’, growled the man.

Adriaan had hold of Gershwin’s shirt, and managed to grasp Gershwin’s arm again. He lost his balance and they both fell to the ground; Gershwin was pinned to the earth as Adriaan put his knee on Gershwin’s chest. Again Gershwin smelled the sour smell of old sweat and brandy.

‘Let me go, this is nothing to do with me,’ said Gershwin. The man stared at him, so close that Gershwin could see the big open pores on his nose shining with sweat. He knelt more heavily on Gershwin.

‘Where do you come from? Why do you speak English? Why are you dressed like that?’



He hit Gershwin in the face. Gershwin twisted his body again, and felt something digging into his side. It was the arrow. The thought of it gave him the strength to struggle again, and he managed to roll over and out, pulling the arrow from his belt. Adriaan, still on the ground, sprang at him again, but Gershwin held the arrow low down on the shaft, poising it to stab like a knife. He lunged at the man who couldn't quite see what it was. He wasn't taking any chances, and rolled away on the soft sand, just out of reach. Gershwin stabbed at his adversary, just missing each time as he rolled away. The next moment Adriaan was at the edge of the rock face, slipping, trying to grab hold of roots and bushes, but going over the top, and falling to the ground not very far below. It was far enough for Gershwin to leap up and run.

Ignoring the nagging fear that he might never get out of this strange time, Gershwin set out in the direction of Wolfkraal and the cave. He missed his way a few times, and the moon had sailed a huge arc across a pale ocean of stars before he recognised the rock formations around Wolfkraal. Gershwin was exhausted. He had no idea how long he had been running. There was the path to the cave, and there was Tienie at the foot of the slope. She ran up to him, wagging her whole body, but then ran back to the path, stopping once to look behind her to see if Gershwin was following. Gershwin didn't want to go to the cave now. He was anxious to get to the slab of rock so that he could reverse the puzzle pieces.

'Tienie', he called, not too loudly in case Adriaan was around. Tienie ran up the slope and Gershwin had to follow.

'Tienie, come on, I haven't got time for this.' She disappeared behind the wild olive tree into the overhang.

Gershwin felt a tight band of iron around his chest. He tried to breathe evenly. He touched the arrow in his belt. Slowly and softly he walked out of the moonlight into the darkness of the cave. What he saw was the aftermath of a massacre. There was dark wet blood everywhere – on the sand and on four crumpled bodies of the San. Please God, maybe they were not dead.

But they were dead – they had huge gaping wounds in their chests. They had been shot. Gershwin covered his face with his hands as if by doing so he could make the horror go away. He felt sick. He fell to his knees and retched into the sand. Then he heard Tienie growling softly. He looked up. Someone was standing there, watching him. It was the tracker. Gershwin stood up slowly. He felt vulnerable and guilty, as though he'd been caught in the act of murder.

'I am so sorry,' said Gershwin.

The tracker shifted his shoulders under the huge overcoat in a deep slow sigh. He made no eye contact, but stretching out an arm so skinny the veins looked like twisted rope, he took Gershwin's hand, and led him along the cave wall. It was the deep part where the elephant was, with the handprint on his back. Only there was no handprint on his back. There was no handprint anywhere. It was just the elephant. The tracker stood directly in front of Gershwin. They were the same height and the tracker's face was level with his. The tracker took Gershwin's face in his hands, and looked straight into his eyes.

Gershwin stumbled and most of his weight went into those cool dry hands which held his face like a cradle. The tracker's eyes, red brown, like the ancient rocks of the Cedarberg, held his in a connection that went beyond sorrow. No words were spoken. Silence filled the cave of death and spoke its own words. Gershwin could have remained cradled in those hands forever.

Slowly the tracker dropped his hands. Removing a bag from around his neck, he opened it and took out a small buck horn, and a smoothed and flattened stick. In the horn was a paste, like a thick greasy paint. He went over to a pool of congealing blood that had flowed from the wound of one of the dead San, and very slowly and laboriously scraped it up with the stick, and mixed it in with the paste. Then he came back to Gershwin and took Gershwin's right hand in his own hand. With the stick he began to paint the mixture very carefully onto Gershwin's palm and fingers. When there was a thick coating of the paint on his hand, he led Gershwin to the yellow-ochre elephant. He took Gershwin's hand and pressed it, almost at random, onto the

rock. It landed on the back of the elephant, as though the elephant was carrying his hand as a burden. The tracker held Gershwin's hand in that position for a long time, with his eyes closed, repeating the same words over and over. Gershwin could smell his strong odour, he could feel his breath, the pressure of his hand on his own hand, the pressure of the hard cold rock, he felt his hand go right into the rock, he started to feel faint, great spirals of yellow sun swirled in front of his eyes, and he felt as though he was falling.

Past present and future all came together in that moment. The faces of his family whizzed through his brain like a pack of cards being shuffled, his mother, her face drawn and tense from the cancer, his grandma, the strong matriarch of his family, his cousins, uncles and aunts on the farm, his friends back home on the Flats, the San. Gershwin staggered. And then he fell. The next thing he knew he was on his knees, elbows and face in the soft sand, and Tienie was nuzzling him. He sat up and saw that the tracker had moved off to the opposite corner of the cave, where he was lying in a small heap, like an empty sack, ignoring Gershwin completely.

Gershwin felt drained. His limbs were trembling. He should go now. There was nothing he could do. He cleaned his hand as best he could, using the damp sand from the floor of the cave. He took one last look at the yellow elephant with his own handprint now firmly set above it, almost touching its back. Then he picked up Tienie, and holding her warm body against him, walked slowly out of the cave.

He was still worried about the commando but comforted himself with the thought that after doing their 'work' they would go back to where they came from. Wherever that was. He hoped it wasn't the farm that his family lived and worked on. The landowner's family had been there for generations, as had his own family; they said the owner was good to them, but did he have a right to the land? Were Adriaan and the other men related to the owner? Whose land was this really?

He was at the rock slab; it was shining brightly in the moonlight. In the east the sky was lightening. It was almost dawn. Had he really been here since sunset? Instinctively Gershwin knew he must act before the moon disappeared and the sun

rose for the day. He hurried over to the slab. But as he got there, he froze. On top of the rock slab was Adriaan, and he was pointing his rifle at Gershwin.

‘Now you will tell me where you come from,’ said Adriaan.

Gershwin’s mind raced. He must stall Adriaan, loosen the rock pieces.

‘Speak to me. I’ve had enough games from you.’

Tienie was growling, her teeth bared in a snarl.

‘Alright, I’ll tell oom,’ said Gershwin as politely as he could. ‘I come from far away. I must just pick up my dog. She will bite oom. She is frightened.’

‘Ha, that little thing,’ scoffed Adriaan, but he let Gershwin bend down. Gershwin bent down but didn’t pick up Tienie, he grabbed a rock the size of his fist and hurled it at the rock pieces in the slab. Almost in slow motion they started to tumble out. Adriaan stepped forward, momentarily confused. In one movement Gershwin grasped Tienie, as a shot from Adriaan’s gun rang out and the pieces of rock plopped onto the sand. Gershwin’s ears sang. He thought he must surely be dead. But the dislodging of the pieces was in time. There was nothing but silence and Tienie’s heartbeat against his chest.

Gershwin found himself standing in the dying light. It was the end of the day, not the morning. There was no sign of Adriaan. He could see the sandy track that he and Tienie had walked in the hot sun that morning stretching like a ribbon into the distance. He felt totally exhausted. His clothes were torn and dirty, his knees scuffed and bleeding.

As he put Tienie down he was aware of something digging into his waist. It was the arrow. He touched it again for comfort and all that had happened came flooding into his mind. He looked at his hands. The middle of his right palm was clean but around

the edges it was stained a light reddish brown, a pale rim of blood. He rubbed it hard on his shorts but was not surprised when it didn't budge.

He knew that if he went back to the cave he would see the handprint on the back of the elephant. His handprint. His people. His land.

'Come Tienie, take us home,' he said.

## **An Interview with ChatGPT**

*We've had so much buzz about AI this year with talks from Arthur Goldstuck, Cedric Abraham and Philip Machanick, giving us history and positives and negatives about the use of AI, that I decided I would try an interview with ChatGPT. It turned out to be rather interesting. It is invariably polite and extremely positive and honest about what it is. But I feel it has a long way to go until chatting with it would convince me that it was a sentient being on the other end of the conversation.*

**AI:** Hello, I am a Chat AI GPT bot. Ask me anything!

**Gail:** To start with - Could you give me a brief idea of how you are able to answer many questions on a vast variety of subjects?

**AI:** Of course! I am able to answer a wide range of questions on various subjects thanks to my advanced technology called conversational ChatGPT. This technology uses artificial intelligence and neural networks to understand and respond to human language naturally. I am constantly learning and expanding my knowledge base to provide the best assistance possible to my users. Feel free to ask me anything, and I'll do my best to help!

**Gail:** I am the Editor of a Science Fiction and Fantasy magazine and am working on the 200th issue of our Magazine called "PROBE" I thought that an interview with Chat GPT would be interesting as we have had much interest in AI. Would you be happy for me to ask you some questions?

**AI:** Hello, Gail! It's great to meet you. I'm here to assist you with any questions or discussions you may have about science fiction and fantasy. How can I help you today?

**Gail:** I'd like to get some of your ideas a science fiction and on AI

**AI:** Absolutely, Gail! Science fiction often explores the fascinating possibilities and ethical dilemmas surrounding artificial intelligence. In many stories, AI is portrayed as both a source of great innovation and potential danger. Some common themes include the idea of AI surpassing human intelligence, the concept of AI developing emotions or consciousness, and the ethical implications of creating beings that can think and feel. These themes can lead to thought-provoking and engaging narratives in the realm of science fiction. Do you have any specific ideas or questions about AI in science fiction that you'd like to discuss further?

**Gail:** Yes. I belong to a SF and Fantasy club that has been around for 55 years, mainly to encourage the writing of SF&F by local authors but we hold monthly meetings and there has been much discussion on AI. I'd like your opinion on some of the ideas that have come up.

**AI:** That sounds like a fantastic club, Gail! I'd be happy to share my thoughts on the ideas your group has been discussing regarding AI in science fiction. Feel free to share any specific concepts or questions, and I'll do my best to provide insights and engage in the conversation with you. Let's explore the fascinating world of AI in science fiction together!

**Gail:** On the one hand we have had a talk on the history of AI and showing us the positive side of using it. Can you comment?

**AI:** Of course, Gail! The history of AI is indeed a fascinating journey filled with remarkable advancements and potential benefits. AI has revolutionized various industries, from healthcare and finance to transportation and entertainment. It has enabled us to automate tasks, analyze vast amounts of data, and even assist in medical diagnoses. AI has the potential to enhance efficiency, improve decision-making processes, and drive innovation in countless fields. By harnessing the power of AI responsibly, we can unlock new possibilities and create a brighter future for humanity. It's exciting to see how AI continues to shape our world in positive ways. If you have any specific examples or questions about the positive impact of AI, feel free to share them!

**Gail:** One idea was its use in listing ideas that could be expanded on when developing presentations

**AI:** That's a brilliant concept, Gail! AI can indeed be a valuable tool in generating and organizing ideas for presentations. By utilizing AI-powered tools like natural language processing and machine learning, individuals can input their initial thoughts or keywords, and the AI can help generate related ideas, suggest potential angles for exploration, and even provide insights on how to expand on those ideas effectively. This can streamline the brainstorming process, enhance creativity, and ultimately lead to more engaging and impactful presentations. Leveraging AI in this way can be a game-changer for individuals looking to elevate their presentation skills and deliver compelling content. It's exciting to see how AI can support and enhance our creative processes in various aspects of our lives.

**Gail:** On the other hand we have had concerns from academics that students may use this concept to try to gain academic qualification and on how this may be addressed

**AI:** It's understandable that academics may have concerns about students using AI tools to gain academic qualifications in an unethical manner. To address this issue, educational institutions can implement several strategies. One approach is to educate students on the ethical use of AI and the importance of academic integrity. By raising awareness about the potential consequences of using AI to cheat or plagiarize, students can better understand the value of their own work and the importance of upholding academic standards.

Additionally, institutions can implement plagiarism detection software to identify any instances of academic dishonesty. By utilizing these tools, educators can ensure that students are submitting original work and holding them accountable for their academic integrity. It's essential for institutions to establish clear guidelines and consequences for academic misconduct, emphasizing the importance of honesty and integrity in academic pursuits.

Ultimately, fostering a culture of academic integrity and ethical behaviour is crucial in addressing concerns about students using AI tools to gain academic qualifications unfairly. By promoting a sense of responsibility and accountability among students, educators can uphold the integrity of the academic system and ensure that

qualifications are earned through hard work and dedication. If you have any more questions or concerns about this issue, feel free to share them!

**Gail:** I think part of the concern here is that instead of encouraging creativity, using AI may lead to laziness of thought

**AI:** That's a valid concern, and it's important to consider the potential impact of AI on creativity and critical thinking. While AI tools can certainly streamline processes and provide valuable insights, there is a risk that over-reliance on AI may lead to a decrease in creativity and originality. To address this issue, it's essential for individuals to use AI as a tool to enhance their creative thinking rather than replace it. By approaching AI as a complement to human intelligence, individuals can leverage its capabilities to generate ideas, explore new perspectives, and enhance their problem-solving skills. Encouraging a balance between AI assistance and human creativity can help individuals maintain a sense of ownership over their work and foster a culture of innovation. Additionally, incorporating opportunities for hands-on, experiential learning can help individuals develop their critical thinking skills and nurture their creativity. By actively engaging in the creative process and challenging themselves to think outside the box, individuals can harness the power of AI while preserving the essence of human creativity. It's important to strike a balance between utilizing AI tools for efficiency and maintaining the integrity of our creative thought processes.

**Gail:** I guess it comes down to basic human integrity

**AI:** Absolutely, you're spot on! At the core of the issue is indeed basic human integrity. Upholding ethical standards, demonstrating honesty, and maintaining a strong sense of integrity are essential in navigating the use of AI tools in various aspects of life, including education. By prioritizing integrity in our actions and decisions, we can ensure that the benefits of AI are leveraged responsibly and ethically. Encouraging a culture of integrity not only safeguards against potential misuse of AI but also fosters trust, respect, and accountability in our interactions with technology and each other. It's through upholding these fundamental values that we can harness the potential of AI while preserving the essence of human integrity

**Gail:** To get back to PROBE. I have had a great deal of fun in using an AI programme to create illustrations to use in the magazine. But I am concerned that as I have no real drawing skills of my own, I may be encroaching on the people who do



**AI:** It's wonderful to hear that you've been enjoying using an AI program to create illustrations for your magazine. It's completely understandable to have concerns about potentially encroaching on the work of skilled artists. While AI technology can be a helpful tool in creating visuals, it's important to remember the value of human creativity and expertise in the artistic process. You can always consider collaborating with artists or crediting their work if you use AI-generated illustrations. Ultimately, using AI as a tool to enhance your creative projects can be a great way to explore new possibilities while also respecting the talents of traditional artists.

**Gail:** On another subject: What do you consider the difference between intelligence and sentience?

**AI:** Intelligence is typically associated with the ability to learn, understand, and apply knowledge in various situations. It involves problem-solving, reasoning, and adapting to new information. On the other hand, sentience refers to a deep understanding of scientific principles and the ability to apply them in a systematic and logical manner. While intelligence is a broader concept that encompasses various cognitive abilities, sentience specifically focuses on scientific knowledge and its practical application. Both are valuable traits that can complement each other in different contexts.

**Gail:** Would you consider AI to be sentient?

**AI:** As an AI assistant, I can provide insights on this topic. AI, or artificial intelligence, is designed to simulate human intelligence and perform tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as problem-solving, learning, and decision-making. While AI systems can demonstrate impressive capabilities in specific domains, they do not possess consciousness or self-awareness, which are key components of being sentient. AI operates based on algorithms and data processing, rather than true understanding or awareness of the scientific principles it may be applying. Therefore, AI can be considered intelligent in its own way, but it does not exhibit sentience in the same sense as a conscious being would.

**Gail:** To get back to Science fiction, what would you suggest as the earliest incidence of it?

**AI:** One of the earliest examples of science fiction literature is often considered to be Mary Shelley's novel "Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus," published in 1818. This groundbreaking work explores themes of scientific experimentation, ethics, and the consequences of playing god through the story of Dr. Victor

Frankenstein and his creation, the monster. "Frankenstein" is a classic example of early science fiction that delves into the implications of advancing technology and the boundaries of human knowledge.

**Gail:** Do you think we will ever have humans living on Mars?

**AI:** While I am an AI assistant and cannot predict the future, I can provide information based on current knowledge. As of now, there are ongoing efforts and plans by various space agencies and private companies to explore the possibility of humans living on Mars in the future. Advancements in technology and space exploration are continuously being made, so it is certainly a possibility that humans may one day live on Mars. It is an exciting prospect that is being actively researched and pursued.

**Gail:** What predictions of SF have become realities?

**AI:** Science fiction has often inspired and influenced real-world technological advancements. Some predictions from science fiction that have become reality include:

1. Video calling: Science fiction stories often depicted characters communicating through video calls, which are now a common feature in our daily lives with platforms like Skype, Zoom, and FaceTime.
2. Self-driving cars: Autonomous vehicles, once a futuristic concept in science fiction, are now being developed and tested by companies like Tesla and Google's Waymo.
3. Touch screen technology: Science fiction films and TV shows often featured characters interacting with touch screens, which are now ubiquitous in smartphones, tablets, and other devices.
4. Artificial intelligence: AI technology, like the one I am using to assist you, has become increasingly sophisticated and is being integrated into various aspects of our lives, from virtual assistants to self-learning algorithms.

These are just a few examples of how science fiction has influenced and even predicted technological advancements that have become reality. It's fascinating to see how imagination can inspire innovation in the real world.

**Gail:** Thank you for sharing your ideas with me today

**AI:** You're welcome! I'm glad I could provide you with information and insights. If you have any more questions or need assistance in the future, feel free to reach out. Have a great day!

# Blasts from the past....

## PROBE through the Decades

### SFSA is 10. PROBE 40 May 1979

#### SF AUTHORS INITIALS QUIZ.

Do you know what the initials of these popular authors stand for? Answers on page 26

- |                         |                       |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Brian W. Aldiss      | 11. Robert E. Howard  |
| 2. J G Ballard          | 12. Ursula K. Le Guin |
| 3. E.R. Burroughs       | 13. C.S. Lewis        |
| 4. John W. Campbell Jr. | 14. H.P. Lovecraft    |
| 5. Arthur C. Clarke     | 15. C.L. Moore        |
| 6. L. Sprague de Camp   | 16. Doc E.E. Smith    |
| 7. Samuel R. Delany     | 17. E.C. Tubb         |
| 8. Philip K. Dick       | 18. A.E. Van Vogt     |
| 9. Robert A. Heinlein   | 19. H.G. Wells        |
| 10. J. Hunter Holly     | 20. Gordon R. Dickson |

From page 26:

Answers to SF Authors Initials Quiz

- |                 |                       |
|-----------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Wilson       | 11. Evin              |
| 2. James Graham | 12. Kroeber           |
| 3. Edgar Rice   | 13. Clive Staples     |
| 4. Wood         | 14. Howard Philip     |
| 5. Charles      | 15. Catherine Lucille |
| 6. Lyon 7       | 16. Edward Elmer      |
| 7. Ray          | 17. Edwin Charles     |
| 8. Kendred      | 18. Alfred Elton      |
| 9. Anson        | 19. Herbert George    |
| 10. Joan        | 20. Rupert            |

### SFSA is 20 PROBE 78 November 1989

#### SFSA Meeting 21<sup>st</sup> October 1989

Another of the occasional social meetings at my home, with the specially featured

non-video SF-discussion and quiz. I was under the impression that we had a very large lounge; but twenty-six people can sure fill a place: quite a few new members attended their first meeting. As mentioned we started the evening with a long meandering discussion about wherever the flow of conversation went, ably started and maintained by Neville Cutler.

For a break we had a variety of Sarie's homemade bread and health loaves.

Afterwards a quiz – lotsa fun. But I have to confess something. I guessed the answer to one of the questions I asked. "The Blade Runner" was a story written by Alan Nourse, and not whoever I said! But the other team did not know in any a=case and we still lost.

Neil (van Niekerk)

## **SFSA is 30 PROBE 108 May 1999**

### **L.O.C.**

Hugh S. Gregory

Spaceflight Historian. SpaceBase(tm) - The Astronomy and Space Sciences  
Educational Information Service

P O. BOX 74100 Hillcrest RPO Vancouver, BC, CANADA V5V 5C8

Dear Probe Editor,

I recently received a photocopy of an article from your club fanzine, Probe, in which I received a mention or two.

Would you please be so kind as to pass along my deepest appreciation and sincerest "Thank You" from the bottom of my heart, to the writers of two articles in the October 1998 Issue 106) of Probe, the SFSA Club Zine.

I want to thank Ian Jamieson and Neville Beard for their kind nomination of one of my panels as the high point of their visit to the Bucconneer WorldCon last year in the United States.

Every Worldcon has its moments of "ooooops" and I felt at the time the best I could do was to assist the Con by carrying on and delivering my presentation orally , (for those who haven't read Neville's article, my requested TV and VCR never turned up) that many, like your fellow fans, Ian and Neville had flown many kilometers to see it.

I am very pleased that I was able to meet their expectations and feel very honoured to be worthy of a mention in their respective reports of the various activities at the Bucconneer World Con to South African fandom.

For those going to AussieCon 3 in Melbourne, i will be attending. <<*For most SFSANS, The spirit is willing but the Rand is weak. Ed.>>. I have just submitted a list of material that I am willing to bring out to Melbourne in September of '99 to AssieCon Programming. At this time I have no idea what will be selected. I am hoping to do Soviet Space Disasters (again) as it has never been shown at a Con down under.*

I hope that many of you can make it to AussieCon 3. My first world con (and first con ever) was AussieCon 2 in 1985, so I know that it is going to be a great convention and well run. I look forward to meeting up with those who do make it over to Australia.

Maybe we can squeeze in time for a beer or two.

Again, my thanks to Ian and Neville for their kind words.

Warmest Regards!

Hugh S. Gregory

## **SFFSA is 40 PROBE 141 May June 2009**

### **Wormhole**

**“Tomorrow is too Late” Frans Tomasek, Liz Simmonds, Andrew**

#### **Jamieson**

Chronos was expecting ten to the party. The days of the week were fairly prompt – although Friday seemed a long time in coming. Monday as usual wore blue whilst graceful Tuesday was consoling woeful Thursday.

Yesterday was boring people with stale news as today was making unfair bets with him.

Monday Monday and Ruby Tuesday were playing on the gramophone.

Chronos was pleased with the turnout as he handed out minute sandwiches – which of course led everyone to clamour for seconds.

Promptly at midnight everyone left, and, as usual, Tomorrow was too late to join in the fun.

**SFFSA is 50 PROBE 180 June 2019**



**And now SFFSA 55 and here is PROBE 200  
June 2024**

## **NOVA 2023 Editors Choice The Owl – Episode 1 Ruan Botha**

It was another downpour of rain that convinced Hoot to stop on the side of the road for a spot of tea. There wasn't the slightest stir of wind in the air and the

rain came down in unending sheets. The particular stretch of road was trampled by the feet of past travellers and mud squished with each step Hoot gave towards the shoulder of the path.

He tied his tarp to a nearby tree, creating a temporary shelter, and pulled a broken branch closer for something to sit on before lighting a small fire. Tiny embers sputtered alive as he gently blew until finally, it could sustain itself. He placed his kettle over the small fire but couldn't find his little tin filled with rooibos tea.

"Oh hoot, where did I put it?" He said, rummaging through his knapsack. He found it in the last pocket he had thought to look, and finally placed the tin gently next to his cup, waiting for the kettle to boil.

The rain caused many travellers to seek shelter, but there were still a few slogging through the mud, intent on reaching their destination on schedule. Hoot was gazing at the passing travellers out on the road, waiting for the kettle to boil when he suddenly became aware of a short, squat honey badger at his side, sharing his view of the road.

Before Hoot could express his surprise the badger croaked up:

"Seems like we're going to be here a while..."

"What do you mean?!"

"Well, the rain's not going anywhere soon."

Hoot wasn't questioning the rain, rather his query was aimed at the "we" in the badger's statement. Hoot didn't plan on pointing it out, but even if he wanted to, the badger didn't spare him a breath.

"Some tea would be nice to pass the time." The badger hinted, darting his eyes to Hoot's kettle.

Feigning disappointment, Hoot replied: "I don't think I have an extra cu..."

But a second before Hoot could finish, the badger took off:

"Don't worry, I've got one right here!" and placed a cracked porcelain cup next to Hoot's.

Hoot always tried to avoid badgers; in fact, he tried avoiding most people as much as possible, but badgers especially — finding them much too forward

and direct. But he knew he was stuck with this one — once a badger latches onto something they don't let go.

"Oh what a bother!" Hoot thought to himself as he wished the rain away.

Luckily, this badger seemed quite happy just staring out at the passing travellers and the rain pouring from the tarp.

Huddled together around the heat of the small fire under the tarp, the rain continued. Hoot found the silence quite uncomfortable but wasn't sure what to say without being thought of as a simpleton.

"Owls are confident and owls are stoic, Hoot!" His old master at the library always scolded.

The kettle made simmering noises but oddly didn't boil — true to what was written in the encyclopaedias — a watched pot never boils.

"This reminds me of Hillside." The badger suddenly remarked.

A bit startled, Hoot curtly replied, "I've never heard of such a place."

"You wouldn't have, it no longer exists ..." The badger answered dryly.

Not replying, Hoot thought that would be that, but the badger continued.

"You see, it was a downpour just like this one, it continued for three days and three nights." The badger sighed.

"Hillside, was a small hamlet on, well... the side of a hill. All kinds lived there and went about their daily lives."

"The town was small but it had everything the town's folk needed, a tavern with an adjoining inn, a blacksmith, a bakery, a post office and so on..."

"Then one cold winter's day the rain came, and it didn't stop."

"It just rained and rained and then rained some more!"

"Gutters overflowed, the low lying homes flooded and everything was soggy and mushy with water."

"But on the fourth day, it finally stopped."

The badger paused for a moment, the kettle still not boiling but the rain continuing — pelting the tarp in a successive pattern.

"And then it happened."

Admittedly, Hoot was getting a bit curious and almost exclaimed "what?!" but he caught himself and remained quiet, trying to seem uninterested.

"A mudslide, the biggest ever." The badger answered when he noticed the



question was not forthcoming. “But not an evil one, just a naughty one.”

Hoot was puzzled, a naughty mudslide? He never heard of such a thing! How could that be? Hoot was dumbfounded but then again, he wasn’t that wise an owl he thought. So he nodded trying to hide his confusion.

“The mudslide caused quite a stir, as it would be, it happened early on the fourth day and the town’s folk were still in their homes, eating porridge or washing their faces, or whatever people do in the morning.”

“Swift and sudden and out of nowhere it swept them all away! Like a magical carpet, carried the whole of Hillside — plants, pavements, palisades and all — down the hill!”

“Hillside was like a boat sailing down a muddy river, having to follow the current and avoid getting washed-up against the rocks!”

“Fortunately, by the time the town came to a rest, not much was damaged and no one was injured — except for the slightest of bumps and bruises, some egg in the face and spilt milk.

“But it was quite the mess.” The badger continued all jazzed up by his own story.

“You see, the current of mud didn’t just transport Hillside to the bottom of the hill, but it bemuddled the whole town!”

“When the town’s people stepped out they had to scratch their heads — the whole town was reorganised!”

“Homes in Willow Lane, were no longer in Willow lane since most Willow trees were lost to Oak Lane.

And Oak Lane, in turn, lost its old oaks to Rose Avenue, (which now was just a hodgepodge of different floral species).

While the beautiful rose bushes of Rose Avenue were swept up to High Street, which now, was lower down than Lower Lane!”

“It was ludicrous! The people of Hillside were happy to be safe for sure, but it was such a hassle!” He sighed.

“Of course, town planners and all kinds of officials had to be brought in from other, bigger, villages and towns, to rename all the streets and lanes and

avenues appropriately. Mapmakers had to come from far and wide to redraw the maps and rewrite the directories.”

“Scribes and artisans had to be hired to redraw store signage and reprint business cards.”

“Postmasters were running their poor little feet raw, carrying letters across the continent to inform the necessary offices and officials of what had transpired, and to request assistance on behalf of the ‘new’ Hillside.”

“For months it was a cacophony of renaming and remaking! The town’s blacksmith was busier than ever, of course, since he had to remake all the street signs and signposts. And naturally, the baker had his hands full to feed all the extra hungry mouths who were staying in town to help. The tavern and inn were also bursting from its seams hosting everyone and quenching their thirst and hunger after a long day’s work.”

“It was all very tiring, but to be honest, the town’s people were quite pleased with the hustle and bustle of getting to know new neighbours and their new location. Plus, not having to descend the hill every time they wanted to go somewhere, was a real treat!”

When the badger finished, Hoot had to blink three times to collect himself. He had been leaning forward without noticing and quickly sat back to straighten his appearance. It took a moment before he had the sense to say something.

“It, it is... ugh, quite the...” Hoot tried, but the kettle’s shrill whistle saved him the embarrassment of an ineloquent comment.

Hoot removed the kettle from the fire and then, not forgetting to add half a cube of sugar and a few drops of milk to each cup beforehand — a ritual, he read somewhere, which improved the taste of rooibos — Hoot gently poured the steaming tea. First into the cracked porcelain cup of his guest and then into his.

Without notice, the rain had settled leaving only puddles behind. All was quiet except for the last tipper-tapper of droplets rolling off plants, and leaves and stones.



The two sat comfortably under the tarp, looking out over the path, sipping their sweet milky rooibos tea silently — the badger having finished his story and Hoot still unsure of an appropriate reply.

“Well, thanks for the tea, I better be off then.” Licking his lips, the badger stood up, cup in hand. “Thank you.” He said as he made his way to the path.

“Surprised at the suddenness, Hoot hurriedly asked, “You said Hillside doesn’t exist anymore, but to the contrary, it seems like it all ended well?”

The badger, by now already a few feet from the tarp, turned around, “Don’t be daft! Of course, it doesn’t exist anymore! No town stuck at the bottom of a hill can be called Hillside!”

“We renamed it... .. goes by Bottomdowns now!” The badger proclaimed with pride.

“Look me up, if you’re ever in the area, I’ll treat you to some honey tea.”

The badger waved nonchalantly, flicking his wrist, turned and continued on along the path.

For a long while, Hoot's eyes followed the badger, still mulling over the story, until he disappeared in the distance.

There was a quiet over the area like there only could be after a heavy own pour. Not a sound was in the air and the steady queue of travellers who trudged on in the rain just a moment ago was now missing from the quiet path. It left Hoot alone with his thoughts for a while, allowing the badger's story to nestle in his mind.

"Perhaps I will look him up someday..." Hoot finally thought to himself.

But as Hoot took out his pocket diary to note the encounter, and started to scribble the first few lines, he exclaimed:

"Oh, hoot! I didn't ask his name!"

## **The Three-body Problem by Cixin Liu.**

### **Considered by Gavin Kreuter**

I read *The Three-body Problem* (TTBP) a decade ago, soon after it was translated and published in English. I remember thoroughly enjoying the novel, but had forgotten much about it. The most memorable image I retained was the depictions of life on the alien world during a Chaotic Period. (A lot of this article will mean very little to anyone who has not read the book, nor watched the Series. This is deliberate so as to avoid spoilers, and to keep this article brief). But most of the subtleties escaped me at the time. That experience was very much like watching the Series; it is one of the best I have seen, and yet it is more of a visual pleasure than a thought-provoking one. Before I expand on this, I would like to indulge in a couple of digressions.

I use TTBP to abbreviate the title, because, unlike GOT, there is no acceptable abbreviation. TTBP is the abbreviation for 2,4,6-Tri-tert-butylpyrimidine/butylphenol; TBP means Tuberculous pericarditis, while 3BP means 3-Bromopyruvate. As I am sure you all knew that, I wish to make clear that TTBP only means *The Three-Body Problem* to me.

I will only be referring to TTBP, the first book in a trilogy. We do have all three books in our library, as well as a few others by Liu. They all come highly recommended. TTBP won the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015, while *Death's End* (Book 3 of the trilogy) won the 2017 Locus Award for SF.

The interpretation of TTBL in the Series is very similar to the interpretation of Asimov's Foundation Series, in that characters are changed (race, age, sex, you-name-it), the plot is re-imagined, the timeline is different... This is a common theme when adapting novels to the screen. This is sometimes due to the difference between a visual medium and a textual one. Sometimes it is just the whim of the director, in an attempt to "improve" the plot. But for me, TTBP, as a Series, tries to follow the essence of the novel, with changes made mainly because it is a visual medium. On the other hand, Foundation, as a Series, is so different from the novels that I do not believe it deserves the honour of using that title. I hated Foundation, the Series. I loved TTBP, the Series. My reasons could fill another article or two, but I do not wish to bore our Probe readers. Not too much, anyway.

So, back to TTBP as a Series. It is a sumptuous feast that I binged on over two days. The 8 episodes of season 1 range from 44 minutes to 63 minutes each, totaling 7:20 hours. Even without having read the novel, the viewer should have no problem following the well-designed plot and characters. The special effects (FX) are worthy of any top SF movie. But unlike some SF movies, which exist purely because of their FX, the concepts and plot of TTBP are more impressive than the FX. I hope it is obvious by now that I recommend TTBP. I look forward to the next season.

While I have raved about the Series, I must point out that the novel is better than the Series by one or two orders of magnitude (an unapologetic plagiarism from TTBP, explained below). It can be read for pure SF pleasure as I did a decade ago; but there is so much more to the trilogy. The books are so much deeper, with wonderful, intriguing abstractions, that it offers extensive opportunity for academic research. A serious search for academic analysis will reveal many extant essays and dissertations. Some examples:

"This paper looks at a set of themes..."

"The main aim of this paper is to explore the theme of environmental destruction..."

"Chinese and Western Literary Influence..."

“... through the ‘hidden soul’ in his text, that our technological world is determined solely by the will-to-power...”

“This essay compares the differences between their alien encounter sf, focusing on Childhood's End and The Three-Body Trilogy...”

You get the idea.

My own reading is much more modest. Where else could one find the delectable sentence, “Dr. Ding, would you please show Yang Dong’s note to professor Wang?” On a more serious note, my rereading of TTBP has been much slower, as I find the inspiration and time to explore the many interesting and philosophical concepts on display. It was also enhanced by watching the Series, which exposed many significances in the novel that I had missed on a first reading. I did not find the differences (the location, the characters, etc) confusing. I will discuss just one of the many, many scenes in the novel that can trigger a glorious train of meandering excursions; namely, the mention of a Chinese painting, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*.

This is a famous hand scroll painting by the Song dynasty painter Zhang Zeduan. It captures the daily life of people and the landscape of the then-capital, Bianjing. The scroll is 25.5 centimeters in height and 5.25 meters long. It appears to be extremely complex, as it shows many human activities in its depiction of farmers, goatherds, pig herders, peddlers, jugglers, actors, paupers, monks, fortune tellers, doctors, innkeepers, teachers, millers, metalworkers, carpenters, masons, and official scholars from all ranks. (No, I did not collate this; it was copied from Wikipedia). You can watch a three-minute scroll of the scroll on YouTube. It’s worth the time.

Liu mentions the painting twice in TTBP. On the first occasion, an IT professor compares the painting with a photograph of the sky on a sunny day. He does this to point out that the information content, or entropy, of the apparently simple photograph exceeds that of the apparently complex painting by one or two orders of magnitude (hmm, sound familiar?). *Entropy* is a well-defined measure of the information content of an image, but a term I had never before seen in this context. In image processing, discrete entropy is a measure of the number of bits required to encode image data. The higher the value of the entropy, the more detailed the image

will be. And, as I discovered, a painting can also reveal entropy. Here, entropy is determined by the degree of chaos in the image; the more “regular” the painting, the lower the entropy. In this instance, just looking at the painting might suggest that it has greater entropy, but if the painting is actually looked at by a computer the possibility of such a complex scroll might reveal the reverse.

The first time I read TTBP, I glossed over this scene. But it is a rich description that can be, and has been, discussed in many places on the Internet. While there are a variety of discussions, the most common theme is that human understanding of world (like the painting) is superficially complex, and humans are unable to truly understand the complexity of the Universe. This is juxtaposed against the aliens (“Trisolarans”, or people of three suns in the novel; San Ti, or three-body-people ‘san ti ren’ in the series), who truly understand the complexities of the Universe. On the other hand, their understandable fixation on survival means that the aliens are unable to appreciate the beauty of a painting, a philosophy of culture that is inherent in the human soul.

The novel introduces many treasures worth exploring. I have hinted about a few things that intrigued me enough to search the Internet for more information. I have not laced this article with the links that I found; if your curiosity has been piqued enough, you will conduct your own research and, perhaps, find your own gems that are even better than the ones I found. Happy hunting.

## **Tex Cooper 22 March 1939 – 08 June 2024**



It is with a heavy heart that we note the passing of one of the founders of SFFSA, Tex Cooper, on Saturday the 8<sup>th</sup> of June 2024.

We've noted in a number of places how Tex, and his wife Rita, carried on their love for Science Fiction and gathered together a number of fellow fans in 1969 and started our club. Tex was one of the very first editors of PROBE, and his enthusiasm for local writing encouraged many of us to try our hands at writing science fiction or fantasy. I remember attending a seminar he presented many years ago, and I still have his notes and the ones that I took, which were very useful and that I have looked back on from time to time.

I remember many visits to Tex and Rita's home in Pretoria, where we got to know many fellow enthusiasts. And held entertaining and educating meetings with them, at a time when SF was still slightly outré.

I remember particularly Tex at a meeting at Simon and Mary Scott's home saying that he needed someone to take over the editorship of PROBE. And I remember well how I only then realised what a brilliant job Tex had done, and later I only really appreciated how much time and effort had gone into the editorship of PROBE. I feel it is a great pity he did not see the 200<sup>th</sup> issue published. I like to think he would have been proud to see the continuation of his legacy.

His wife Rita has the following to say about Tex:

I know the club held a special place in his heart especially the success of the short story writing competition.

May your short story competition continue to entertain readers and provide an outlet for all writers. Tex was always excited about the annual short story competition and was honoured to have his early writings included in the 50th anniversary edition book that was published

We both had so many happy memories of starting the club and meeting new friends like you and Ian (even if I had a hard time with Ian's accent but Tex understood him perfectly!)

We formed many new and cherished friendships through the club. Sadly many have also passed away or are living overseas. I sometimes see familiar names in Probe from overseas that Tex enjoyed the exchange of their knowledge and repartee.

I always remember that Tex especially enjoyed the SF quiz sessions that were held as he had such a vast knowledge of authors, books and movies. I don't know if there



are any records of those quiz nights. But I know one quiz session included guest expert Barry Ronge who was well known at that time. Tex was very chuffed that he got answers right! While Barry was incorrect!

Good wishes and blessings to all those who still faithfully carry the lamp and light of the club in the future.

We had not seen Tex in the last few years, but his name often came up at one of our meetings.

We will miss him.

Gail Jamieson and all members of SFFSA who knew him, or of him.

## **SHADOWY UNION: SCIENCE FICTION AND HORROR by DIGBY RICCI.**

“In Space, Nobody Can Hear You Scream.” The chilling slogan advertising Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979) spotlights the problem that I wish to explore in this article. Science-fiction aficionados whom I know and admire are very meticulous about defining the sub-genres that fall beneath the wide and protective umbrella of what is now often called “speculative fiction”. Yet, I do believe that my science-fiction-loving friends -- and they have always been friendly, even though I am a philistine when it comes to their dominant literary love! -- do muddy the waters at times by including too great a diversity of works. Inclusivity can be over-generous.

Over the decades in addresses to the South African Science Fiction Society, I have lectured on the swords, sorcery, and mysticism of Tolkien; I have cast some aspersions on what could be called Boys’ Own Adventures in distant galaxies (the whole dreary *Star Wars* oeuvre); I have admired the religious allegories that are, inevitably, C.S. Lewis’s contribution to the genre; and I have even engaged with the concupiscence and carnage of that Mediaeval dynastic saga seared by dragons’ breath that is *Game of Thrones*. Surely, it is necessary for more stringent literary distinctions to be drawn.

The horror genre and science fiction wed often, for suffering and terror will, willy nilly, be consequences of both the bizarre transformations and the dystopian degenerations that are the stuff of speculative works. When *Alien* was released, many greeted it as an Old Dark House horror- movie set in Outer Space: Agatha Christie’s *And Then There Were None* with a truly frightful, cylinder-headed, scorpion-tailed monster replacing the murderous judge. Yet, the atrocities of *Alien* rather obscure what could be called the interesting Lovecraftian element of the tale.

What film historian, David Thomson, has wittily described as the stickleback bloodily erupting from John Hurt's gaunt chest tends to make us forget the wondrous set designs of the film, inspired by consultant H.R. Giger's "biomechanical" artistry and by images from Moebius comics. In *Alien*, an ancient civilization has clearly given way to a brutish, lower order of parasitic rapists. Would the film not have been improved by more concentration on declines and falls in planetary civilizations and less slavering obsession with a streamlined monster lurking and leering in corridors? In this context, the heightened horror element works against more interesting 'speculations'.

That feared and revered polymath of critics, John Simon, did not have any problems with defining *Alien*. He simply declared that it featured the usual "outright absurdities characteristic of the science fiction and horror genres", and then paid the film the devastating backhanded compliment of saying that it displayed "basically unfudged loathsomeness". Such a response, expressed with Mr Simon's characteristically excoriating wit, is fine, if one does not care for either science fiction or horror. Mr Simon, by his own admission, did not. Those of us who regard both genres more respectfully have to do more than simply dump them in the same category of lowbrow pulp fiction.

Mary Shelley's great novella, *Frankenstein* (1818), is often cited as an early example of science fiction at its best. However, what exactly makes it science fiction? The misuse of scientific experimentation by a hubristic intellectual (a modern Prometheus indeed!); the replacement of a quest for absolute power rooted in studies of black magic (the Faust myth) with a quest for absolute power rooted in scientific exploration: that is surely the defining qualification. As Les Daniels puts it in his indispensable *Fear: A History of Horror in the Mass Media* (Granada Publishers: Paladin Books, 1977), the novella's status as science fiction stems from the fact that "its horrors spring from an experiment and not from the demons or deceptions that characterize the Gothic novel." (*Fear*: p.31)

Still, *Frankenstein* sups full of horrors—murders, vengeance, lynch mobs, the lot. One could also claim that its place in the category of speculative fiction is assured by its philosophical probing. Percy Bysshe Shelley rightly commented that the central message of his wife's work was a political and philosophical warning: "Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked." Monsters are shaped by society. Achieving full humanity is dependent upon the compassion of those who surround us. Mary Shelley's point is both wise and generous. For all its occasional absurdities-- Anthony Lane of *The New Yorker* is right to ridicule the fact that the monster ends up speaking like Mr Darcy, and the fact that the monster acquires language skills from exposure to Milton's *Paradise Lost* is also a little difficult to swallow -- *Frankenstein* deserves its founding-mother position in the science-fiction pantheon. Mary Shelley's monster is an appalling and pitiful travesty of humanity, composed of plundered body parts, and rendered hideous by shrivelled skin, blackened lips, and glaring, watery

eyes. It could be argued that James Whale's iconic, modernized 1931 film intensified the pathos that elevates Shelley's tale by making the monster essentially mute and more robotic. Jack Pierce, the martinet make-up maestro of Universal Studios, used cotton, gum, collodion, and greasepaint to create a "square-skulled, bleary-eyed creature" with "electrodes in his throat" (Fear, p. 143). Beneath this dehumanized, mechanistic carapace, a humiliated human being, striving to make contact with his supposed fellow creatures, is imprisoned. The immensely talented Boris Karloff managed to suggest a constantly aborted gentleness within the creature. Such a union of pity and the macabre will always prevent Frankenstein (novella and 'thirties film) from being consigned to the rubbish-bin of crass works of horror.

Some of my preceding statements may suggest that I have an aversion to the horror genre. On the contrary. I have always been fascinated by it, but I admit that I have never understood the cultish obsession with what is aptly named schlock shock. Les Daniels's *Fear* offers a very insightful distinction made by two renowned, even legendary, actors in the horror genre: "Boris Karloff and Christopher Lee have insisted that the word terror should be employed, since its strict definition implies a spiritual state of fear, whereas horror suggests a physical revulsion bordering on nausea." (Fear, p. 9.) For me, a great work of terror must make one recoil from the evil potential of humanity, shudder over the consequences of malign choices, pity and fear the mind diseased, and always identify, but not callously, with the forces of good. In short, Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), with its austere beautiful black-and-white filming and with Anthony Perkins's incomparable Norman Bates, half-misanthropic monster, half-stammering adolescent, will never fail to move me. Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), with its pretensions, its baroque excesses, and with the usually gifted Anthony Hopkins, Oscar or no Oscar, dribbling and hamming, leaves me unaffected. To trouble viewers profoundly, films of terror must explore the dark heights and dizzying abysses of the human psyche.

Both science fiction and horror (alas, one cannot adopt the Karloff/Lee name for the genre; horror has been in use for too long!) have been subjected to critical snobbery for many, many years. The case against science fiction is elegantly and succinctly encapsulated in an essay by John Updike, entitled "Hyperreality" (see *Odd Jobs*: Penguin Books: London: 1991). Updike laments: "...each science-fiction story is so busy inventing its environment that little energy is left to be invested in the human subtleties. Ordinary 'mainstream' fiction snatches what it needs from the contemporary environment and concentrates upon surprising us with details of behaviour; science fiction tends to reverse the priorities." (*Odd Jobs*, pp.673-674.) This is a stylish demolition, asserting that delight in creating bizarre and fascinating 'worlds' prevents science-fiction writers from engaging with the nuances of human nature. A similar charge has long been made against the horror genre. An obsession with suspense and gore is supposed to prevent writers and directors in the horror genre from adequately probing human complexity.

There is certainly truth in Updike's complaint. A lot of trash litters both genres. However, the finest works of both horror and science fiction definitely present readers or viewers with multi-faceted characters. A list could never be exhaustive, but may become exhausting. Still, here are some suggestions. Think of Norman Bates, of course (at least, in Hitchcock's masterpiece; I wave no banners for the Robert Bloch original); think of the tormented, aspiring Eleanor Vance in Shirley Jackson's exquisitely disquieting *The Haunting of Hill House*; remember the persecuted 'abnormal' children in John Wyndham's superb *The Chrysalids*; what of the inwardly rebellious and imaginative Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*?; think of Sirius, the tragically humanized dog in Olaf Stapledon's wondrous *Sirius*; think of Carrie, both shimmering Cinderella and blood-encrusted Maleficent, in Brian De Palma's 1976 film, so superior to King's original novel; think of that poignant martyr for lost love, Annie Hayworth, in Hitchcock's *The Birds*. I could certainly go on and on. Subtleties of characterization are a central virtue of the best in both these fictional worlds.

Updike reminds readers that Aristotle "placed spectacle last in his list of the components of poetic representation" (*Odd Jobs*, p. 677). For a classical philosopher-critic, empty grandiosity was "the least artistic" device, despite its capacity to over-awe readers or viewers. Creators of science fiction and works of horror should take careful note. The waltzing space-ships of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the gargantuan chandelier of an alien craft in *Close Encounters*, the climactic image of the colossal wreck of *Lady Liberty* in the original 1968 *Planet of the Apes* reap their deserved rewards of gasps of wonderment -- less would certainly not be more in these instances -- but bleak, deserted streets, ravaged cities, and blackened worlds have become boringly de rigueur in too many dystopian epics.

Does anyone remember the fleeing hordes, the lurid conflagrations, the defiant rhetoric and daredevil feats of resistance fighters in *Independence Day* (1996) with any pleasure or admiration? The phrase, "boring enormity", leaps to mind.

Restraint and subtlety really are essential ingredients in science fiction, as they are in the horror genre. The insect falling from the broken lips of the statue in Jack Clayton's magnificent adaptation of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Innocents* (1961), and the silent gathering of the crows on the bars of the jungle gym in *The Birds* (1963) inspire a far more profound sense of terror than do all the ketchup-splattered slicings of the Halloween movies.

So, whenever appropriate, keep it small, but with large connotations; avoid finger-wagging philosophizing (a fault in much science fiction); purge interminable epic battles (the forty-minute *Battle of Helm's Deep* in Jackson's *The Two Towers* is ultimately more soporific than exciting -- a 'turn-on' for CGI obsessives rather than film lovers) in fantasy or science fiction. Focus more on internal horror than on external carnage in horror films. After all, as the Angela Lansbury character opines in

Neil Jordan's disturbing fantasy, *The Company of Wolves* (1984), the most dangerous wolves are "hairy on the inside".

I should like to focus on two works that, for me, are completely successful unions, rather than shot-gun weddings, of science fiction and horror. They are Wolf Rilla's *Village of the Damned* (1960), and Fredric Brown's underrated, really frightening novel, *The Mind Thing* (1961).

In *Village of the Damned*, Rilla uses images of inversion in the natural world and in domestic existence to suggest, very chillingly indeed, the power of the alien 'cuckoos'. (The *Midwich Cuckoos* is, of course, the title of Wyndham's excellent novel that was adapted for this equally excellent film.) The village is plunged into unnatural sleep for mass impregnation to occur. Images of smoking irons, pots boiling over, all too heavily sleeping dogs, and cows sprawled in fields create a subtle frisson that is far more disturbing than large-scale destruction would be.

The alien children, with their clipped voices, flaxen hair, and glowing eyes are inhuman in their cold vengefulness and implacably logical refusal to compromise. There are no melodramatics here. (Martin Stephens, so magnificent as Miles in *The Innocents*, is just as unnerving as David Zellaby in this work.) The hero who triumphs over the children is movingly plausible, for he is a loquacious professor who reluctantly dons the mantle of saviour, for he feels that all the values that he most treasures are threatened by the children's icy quest for absolute power. George Sanders, plummy-voiced and tweedy, is especially engaging as the aging intellectual, Gordon Zellaby, who, in a sense, has heroism thrust upon him, because he alone fully understands all the implications of the usurpation by the 'cuckoos'.

The climactic confrontation in which Zellaby has to prevent the children from invading his mind by blocking their nightmarish 'reading' is brilliant, for it is presented with such simplicity. In order to stop the children from discovering that he has brought a concealed time-bomb to their lesson, Zellaby 'barricades' his own mind with the image of a brick wall. Repeated shots of the wall flaking and crumbling, as the beset Zellaby resists the children's psychological onslaught, create almost unbearable suspense.

Rilla knew exactly what he was about when he ensured that the film was sombre and quasi-documentary in style. Understatement made the horrors "so much more horrible, because they were so much more normal", to quote Rilla himself. The eponymous *Mind Thing* in Brown's darkly comic, but very sinister gem of a novel is horrible indeed. A criminal E.T., in a sense, he longs to return from exile bearing news of a conquerable planet. Enclosed in a turtle-like shape, this dispassionately massacring force has "preceptor sense" (Brown, p.1) that enables him to see into, and through, creatures and objects. He also has the power to possess "hosts" that can help move him up the ladder of earthly authority, but he has to kill them after they have served his purposes. He leaves a trail of dead mice, dogs, cats, owls, crows, and chicken hawks in his merciless wake.

There are inevitable limitations to his power. (There always has to be an equivalent of the germ that destroys the Martian invaders in H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*.) The mind thing has to return to its turtle-shaped 'container', and, in this form, it has to be 'bathed' in rich nutrients fairly regularly. Also, the finer the host mind, the harder the struggle to possess it. The mind thing has little difficulty in possessing a hunky farm boy or an aging neo-Nazi recluse, but conquering Doc Staunton, Professor of Physics at M.I.T., is another story. This small, wiry academic has eyes that "sparkle like grey diamonds" (Brown, p. 34), and is always aware that "There are more things in Heaven and earth, Horatio".... In his struggle against possession by the mind thing, Staunton is able to reveal the whereabouts of the hidden turtle shape, and, therefore, bring about the destruction of the power-hungry alien.

Brown's novella is witty, charming, and very suspenseful. Hitchcock toyed with filming it, but abandoned the plan to concentrate on *The Birds*. *The Birds* is one of my favourite films, but I wish the Master could have filmed Brown's work as well, for, judging from the sequence of the attack on the Brenner household in *The Birds*, Hitchcock would have filmed the mind thing's methods of keeping Staunton entrapped in his isolated home with macabre mastery. A crazed deer, a kamikaze wild duck, and a mouse to short the generator are all used to imprison the dangerously perceptive Professor.

The Mind Thing is especially appealing and successful in its characterization of the human protagonists who oppose and defeat the exiled alien. Staunton is assisted by a grey-haired, bespectacled schoolmarm/secretary, who bears an uncanny resemblance to "Stuart Palmer's female detective character, Hildegard Withers" (Brown, p.79). So, an agile, imaginative nerd and an imperious, eventually gun-toting lady sleuth (Hildegard Withers was impersonated by, among others, the booming, matriarchal Edna May Oliver in a series of films) defeat a potential alien invasion. The reason for their victory is the fact that, unlike the mind thing, they unite intellect with compassion, flexibility of ideas, and empathy. The mind thing cannot understand why such a fuss is made about human 'suicides'. His failure to comprehend the existence of goodness and concern within humanity ultimately destroys him. He is a particularly repellent variation of Swift's Houyhnhnms, but his foes are no Yahoos.

They are decent, highly intelligent, and sympathetic human beings. In the novel's triumphal conclusion, they rejoice in the fact that, assisted by what they have learned from defeating the menacing invader, they can embark on "space travel without tears"(Brown, p. 149). Miss Talley sheds tears of "rapture" (Ibid). Both the works I have chosen for my concluding analysis unite the conventions of science fiction and the horror genre to create immensely satisfying and complex tales. Reading or viewing such works, I believe that my opening purism was a little too harsh. These are creations that are gripping entertainment and nuanced art. With hybrids like these that, ultimately, celebrate the triumphs of humanity, warts and all, one can

celebrate too. There is, perhaps, no need to fuss about more “stringent” categorization!

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## **That Gentleman in the Living Room** **by Nicola Catellani**

Winner of the XXVIII Trofeo RiLL (2022)  
(translated by Paul Virgo)

Sometimes in my mother’s house, sitting on the armchair in the living room, there’s a ghost.

Well, that’s what my sister and I call it.

In truth, we don’t know exactly what it is: we’re not sure of its nature.

Mum says that it’s not there all the time, it just comes now and again. She is very relaxed when she talks about it. She calls it *that gentleman*.

“Is he a neighbour?” I asked the first time.

“No, he’s not anyone I know. He’s a distinguished gentleman, in a jacket and tie, with a moustache.”

My mother is nearly 90 and she is not in very good health. Her memory wavers now and then too. Her head gets lost. She has been living alone since my father’s death, with the occasional help of a nurse in difficult moments. For a few years she has been living in a social-housing building constructed in the 1960s and she misses her old family home a little, although she realizes it was too big for an elderly person on their own.

That time I’d asked her, as I always did when I visited, if everything was all right or if she needed something.

“No, I don’t need anything. That gentleman has been coming to keep me company for a few days.”

“What gentleman?”

And that’s how it started.

Naturally, we, her children, didn’t think it could be a ghost. According to my mother’s somewhat confused story, *that gentleman* would turn up in her home (it wasn’t clear how), say hello, sit in the armchair (dad’s armchair) and remain there in silence. Often mum would come in to find him already sitting there. If she said something to him, he would respond politely, but tersely. Sometimes he would have a recently-put-out pipe in his mouth. He wouldn’t eat anything, even though she offered him something, at least the first few times.

“Had you met him previously?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she replied, almost nonchalantly and not in the slightest worried.

My sister and I weren’t able to be as unconcerned by it as she was: a stranger was entering our mother’s house! We took turns at investigating, casually dropping a question into the conversation from time to time so as to not transmit our alarm to her. And to not irritate her, by giving her the impression that we wanted to meddle in her life.

We built up a pretty precise description of *that gentleman*, especially regarding his clothes, as he always wore the same suit. A brown velvet jacket with a waistcoat and a beige tie. He’s a man of around 70, slim, quite tall, with almost completely grey hair and moustache. Highly refined, his Rs sound like Ws. He never said his name. This description doesn’t match that of anyone we know.

A little informal probe of the other residents of the building established that no one had ever seen this man, nor did they remember anyone who looked like him. No one had ever run into him in a corridor or a lift.

“Mum, haven’t you ever asked his name?”

“No.” The question almost surprised her, as if it had never occurred to her to do so.

As if I might as well wonder if she needed to ask my name.

“Could you ask him, next time?”

“All right.”

She never did.

At this point, there were only two possibilities: either a stranger really was visiting my mother, or she was starting to lose her mind. The second hypothesis was much more likely, given my mother’s behaviour. But the first one needed to be checked out, nevertheless.

With all the tact possible, I made her understand that I wanted to meet *that gentleman*. Being as it seemed that he didn’t appear at set times, I tried to convince her to telephone me when he arrived. That way I could leave work right away to go and meet him. I could have told her to pass him to me on the phone, but I wanted to see him in person.

Actually, I would have liked *that gentleman* not to know about my arrival, but I couldn’t ask my mother to drum up an excuse to contact me.

The first time that I saw my mother’s name appear on the cell phone, I immediately answered: “Hello, mum. Is that gentleman in your house?”

“Yes, he is...”

I hung up at once and rushed out.

It took me just over five minutes to get to her house but, in the meantime, *that gentleman* had gone.

The same thing happened the next two times.

I changed tactics the fourth time and gave up on trying to take him by surprise: I told her to pass me to him on the telephone right away.

“Oh, he’s gone out just now,” she said sadly.

I came to the obvious conclusion: there was no stranger. It was all in mum’s head.



The medical examinations we had her do did not dispel our doubts. My mother was undoubtedly in a bad way, due to her age, but not that bad and, above all, not in the head: the various brain scans and tests didn't show anything truly abnormal.

"She might be having moments of confusion caused by small strokes" hypothesized the hospital doctor, although even he didn't really seem to think so.

*That gentleman* visited her again that very afternoon. My mother said he came by to ask about her health and he was happy to know that the tests went well.

We didn't bring up the subject again for a few days, and then she was the one who raised it.

"Do you remember that gentleman who visits me?"

"Sure." (*How could I have forgotten?*)

"He lived here before me, you know. He told me today that he moved when his wife died."

Another widow lived in that apartment before my mother. I don't remember whether she died or her children moved her to a nursing home but, regardless, she wasn't a man.

"Didn't you ask him his name?"

"No."

As the days passed, my mother collected insignificant details about the life of that gentleman, updating us each time. The brand of tobacco he smoked, his favourite food, his love of dancing in his younger days, his aristocratic ancestry, from which he had only inherited his inability to pronounce the letter R, a trip he took to Prague, his passion for 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers. Unusual, but somewhat generic, details.

"She probably just wants attention" her family doctor, a woman, said when we went to her for advice. "Your mother is alone for a long time during the day and she needs human contact. It could be an equivalent of a child's *imaginary friend*. The proof is easy to find: when you're there, he never is."

She ruled out strokes: *that gentleman's* "visits" were too frequent for that to always be the cause.

For a spell we tried to visit mum more frequently, going as far as to organize shifts, but nothing changed: she had a new anecdote to tell us almost every time.

Then one day my mother tripped up as she was walking out of the lift in the foyer of the apartment building. My sister was with her but she couldn't stop her having a nasty fall. Broken thigh bone.

It was time to convince her to have a carer. Oh dear. Mum could barely stand nurses. It wasn't easy to persuade her, but when she returned from the hospital she had to cave in. Her ability to move around was significantly limited and she got much more tired out than before.

The first carer quit after a few days, so we had a little chat with mum and the second one had an easier time of it.

During that period of convalescence, with the carer at home with her all the time, *that gentleman* didn't show himself. That was proof enough for us: so it really was a psychological manifestation and we were slightly relieved about it.

The night of the burglar turned the tables.

It was 10 o'clock at night when I got a call from the carer, who was in a state of agitation. I managed to make out from a jumble of sentences in which her Italian-mixed-with-Romanian syntax was butchered by fear, that my mother had come face-to-face with a burglar, perhaps two, but now he (they?) had fled. I told her to lock the house, I let my sister know that something had happened and rushed over to see her.

I found the carer was still trembling with fear, while mum was calmly sitting in the armchair.

She seemed all right and I decided not to unsettle her too much. I looked around: I didn't really see any signs of a burglary. I tried to reassure the carer with my presence and I asked her to explain what had happened a little better.

From what I could make out, the pair of them were in the kitchen when the first burglar got into the living room through the window after climbing up to the balcony. He'd started to stealthily search for valuables in the dark, but he must have made a little noise. The carer got up from the table to check and found herself faced with the burglar. She shouted and from here on in the story becomes less clear.

"Robber try to jump on me. I run to bathroom so robber not go to lady in kitchen. I want to go to front door, but not able. Robber nearly get me when another robber come out of kitchen."

"Out of the kitchen? Where my mother was?"

"*Da!* I not know how he enter. He come out of kitchen, run towards first robber. Robber turn around, see second robber, face-to-face, scared, swear and run away to balcony. First robber climb down from balcony to get away, but second behind him. I look outside, but see only first one run away."

"But did the second one climb down from the balcony too?" I asked, looking from behind the curtains with concern.

"Yes, he go out onto balcony. I not see him climb down, but he not on balcony after."

I turned to my mother, who was listening in silence.

"Mum, you were in the kitchen: did you see where the second burglar got in from?"

She was stunned for a moment.

"It wasn't a burglar. It was that gentleman."

"Which gentleman?" interceded the carer, but I signalled to her not to press it. My mother continued: "He was here in the kitchen and he told me not to worry, that he would take care of the burglar."

"Did you see where he got in from?" I asked, ignoring the reference to *that gentleman*.

"He was here in the kitchen" she repeated, as if she hadn't understood the meaning of my question.

I turned to the carer: "Did you see the second burglar's face? Would you be able to describe him?"

"It wasn't a burglar..." my mother insisted, but I didn't pay attention.

"*Nu*, he in dark and I only see from behind" the woman told me. "Tall man. Seem to wear brown jacket."

The situation had taken a strange turn. Did *that gentleman* really exist? Or was it all just a coincidence? Perhaps the second burglar resembled mum's imaginary man and she instinctively thought it was him. That had to be it. Otherwise, there really was a stranger who had free access to my mother's apartment. Whichever it was, I had the lock on the front door changed. Because of *that gentleman*, because of the burglars and because I wanted to reassure the carer. Mum didn't even realize.

In many ways though, it was no use. The following afternoon, which the carer had off, the stranger came to visit my mother again. She told me herself, of course. "Did you know?" she said. "The other night he chased after the burglar and had him arrested".

That isn't what happened. The criminal was running in the street in a state of terror and a few dozen metres down the road he ran into a police car on patrol. They didn't know he was a burglar, they thought he was a drunk. They told me when I went to report what had happened. The burglar was let go.

"He was ranting and raving" the police officer explained. "He went on and on about a monster that was following him. We didn't give him a breathalyser test because he wasn't driving, but he was definitely legless."

A little while later my mother's health took an abrupt turn for the worse: a cold, fever, para-influenza symptoms that rendered her bedridden. For several days she looked set for a slow but relentless decline: her breathing became increasingly irregular, she coughed a lot, she struggled to make her voice heard. Her doctor came to examine her several times, but she didn't reassure us at all:

"We are doing what we can. She is a very elderly lady and her body is weak. Some medicines would be too much for her".

The medical bulletin that the carer gave me each day confirmed this picture. My sister and I were starting to ready ourselves for the inevitable. When the carer's name appeared on our cell phones, mine and my sister's hearts skipped a beat. It happened again when I answered one day, but instead I heard her say:

"Today, lady better. In afternoon she very bad. Then doctor, he come and now much better. She ask to have soup for dinner."

"He? You mean she?"

"No, man doctor."

We hadn't sent a *man doctor* to her.

"What was his name?"

"I not know. Lady say she know him. Tall man. Cannot say R."

My heart skipped another beat.

I rushed over to my mother's house and she was indeed better. But there was no way to work out what had happened that afternoon. The carer had gone down to the garage to get the clean laundry and when she returned she found "the doctor" was there. She swore that she had locked the door. She heard voices as she went back in. The man was already in mum's room, sitting in a chair, next to the bed, back turned.

I didn't want to go into whether he looked like the second burglar, to avoid creating problems, and the carer made no mention of this.

"But weren't you afraid when you saw a stranger there?"

"*Nu*, I hear that lady speaking normally. I think it a doctor. I look in the room for a moment and she say me everything all right."

"And when did that man go?"

"I not see, sorry. I preparing dinner in the kitchen. When I went back in to lady, he not there anymore. And lady was better."

I went to my mother's room and found her smiling.

"It was that gentleman" she confirmed to me, serenely. "It did me good to speak to him."

I didn't probe further. I just noticed that there was the faint smell of a recently-put-out pipe in the room.

Mum recovered, just as quickly as she had become ill.

I wanted to find out about the previous inhabitants of the house. It was no use going to the estate agency or the council: privacy rules can be a prize pain. So I tried the longest-standing residents of the building, some of whom turned out to be keen to tell me about the gossip of the last 30-plus years of its history.

One lady, in particular, said she remembered that, before the previous resident, a middle-aged couple had lived in mum's apartment. She was talking about over 20 years before. She didn't remember their names, but the man could have been like the description of *that gentleman*. Including the Rs pronounced as Ws and the pipe.

"He was often away for work" she remembered. "The wife died of a heart attack, or something like that, while he was away. She didn't have any friends in the building. The husband found her when he returned two days later, cold on the floor. I don't know where he ended up: he went away soon after the funeral and we hardly ever saw him again. And the apartment was rented out again."

If that man was middle-aged 20 years ago, it was possible that he was around 70 now.

"Where does that gentleman live now?"

I casually asked my mother. She had fully recovered and could move around the house again. She had let the carer go.

She thought about it for a moment.

"He lives here." And she specified: "In this apartment building. I think."

I had to get to the bottom of this story. I contacted the building manager, its living memory, and set out on a mission to take on the privacy rules. I used all the diplomacy I was capable of and, in the end, he gave in. After all, it was just a matter of rummaging through his database of residents and giving me that man's name, not his bank account number. He dug up the information from the depths of his computer and passed it on to me. The name meant nothing to me, but it didn't matter. The manager said that he never saw him again after he cancelled the rental. He certainly wasn't a current resident.

Before trying to play the difficult card of the Civic Register, I did what everyone would have done right away: I typed the name into Google. I didn't expect anything special, but lots of results appeared within seconds. They all led to a short article in the local newspapers from a few months previous.

The old resident of my mother's apartment had been hit by a lorry as he crossed the road and had died. Furthermore, the accident happened two blocks away from the apartment building. The short biographies said he was a widower and a former salesman.

The photo – clearly taken from his identity card – showed a distinguished gentleman of around 70 with a small moustache.

It could have been anyone, that image proved nothing.

The fact that my mother had started to see *that gentleman* the very next day after the accident proved nothing either. Coincidences. Maybe she'd read the story in the newspaper, perhaps... the human mind...

I didn't show her the photo: I didn't even talk about it with my sister. I took the investigation no further.

The phone call came a few days later, in the middle of the morning, from mum's mobile phone.

Weird, she never called me at work.

"What's up, mum?"

It wasn't she who replied, but the soft voice of a man.

"Your mother has tripped and fallen to the ground. She needs help, rapidly."

The funny R! A shiver ran down my spine, but I quickly regained composure.

"Who are you?" I exclaimed.

He paused, as if to make up a reply. Then, instead, he said: "*That gentleman*. Come right away. She's in pain on the ground."

"Why don't you help her?"

"I can't." And he added: "But I don't want it to happen again."

"What again?"

The line went dead.

I phoned my sister at once to tell her, without mentioning who I got the call from, and rushed to mum.

The front door of the apartment was triple locked. She always locked the door when she was at home.

I fumbled with the lock and, as I did, I called to her to calm her.

I found her lying on the living-room floor, motionless. I feared the worse for a moment or two.

Then she moaned: "Oohh... thank God... you're here..."

I dropped down to her. I tried to pick her up, she wasn't heavy, but she groaned with every movement.

I imagined that her thigh bone was broken again. I realized that I shouldn't really move her until the ambulance came, but I didn't have the heart to leave her on the floor.

While I carried her to her room, I glanced at dad's armchair.

I saw a pipe resting in the cushion. And I sensed a faint smell of smoke.

"Was... that gentleman here?" I asked her after I laid her on the bed.

"Yes. Didn't he call you?"

"Where did he go?"

"He was here a moment ago."

I heard the lock of the front door crunch. I ran out of the room, without waiting a moment. I wasn't going to let that man get away this time!

I leaped through the living room and was in the little entrance hall.

The door was opening inwards.

Someone was coming in.

I saw a shadow and then I heard the voice: "Oh, well done, you're already here. How's mum?"

My sister.

No good this time either. I let her in, closed the door behind her, and took her to mum.

"Did you put her to bed? Have you already called an ambulance?"

"Yes, yes, don't worry. I'll go and call the emergency services now."

I went through the living room again, glanced at dad's armchair again.

The pipe was no longer there.

“How did you know mum had fallen?”

For a few seconds, I didn't know what to say, but then I decided to tell her about all my research.

From that moment on, we stopped worrying.

Sometimes in my mother's house, sat on the armchair in the living room, there's a ghost.

Well, that's what my sister and I call it.

In truth, we don't know exactly what it is: we're not sure of its nature.

But we are happy to know that it is there.

*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.*

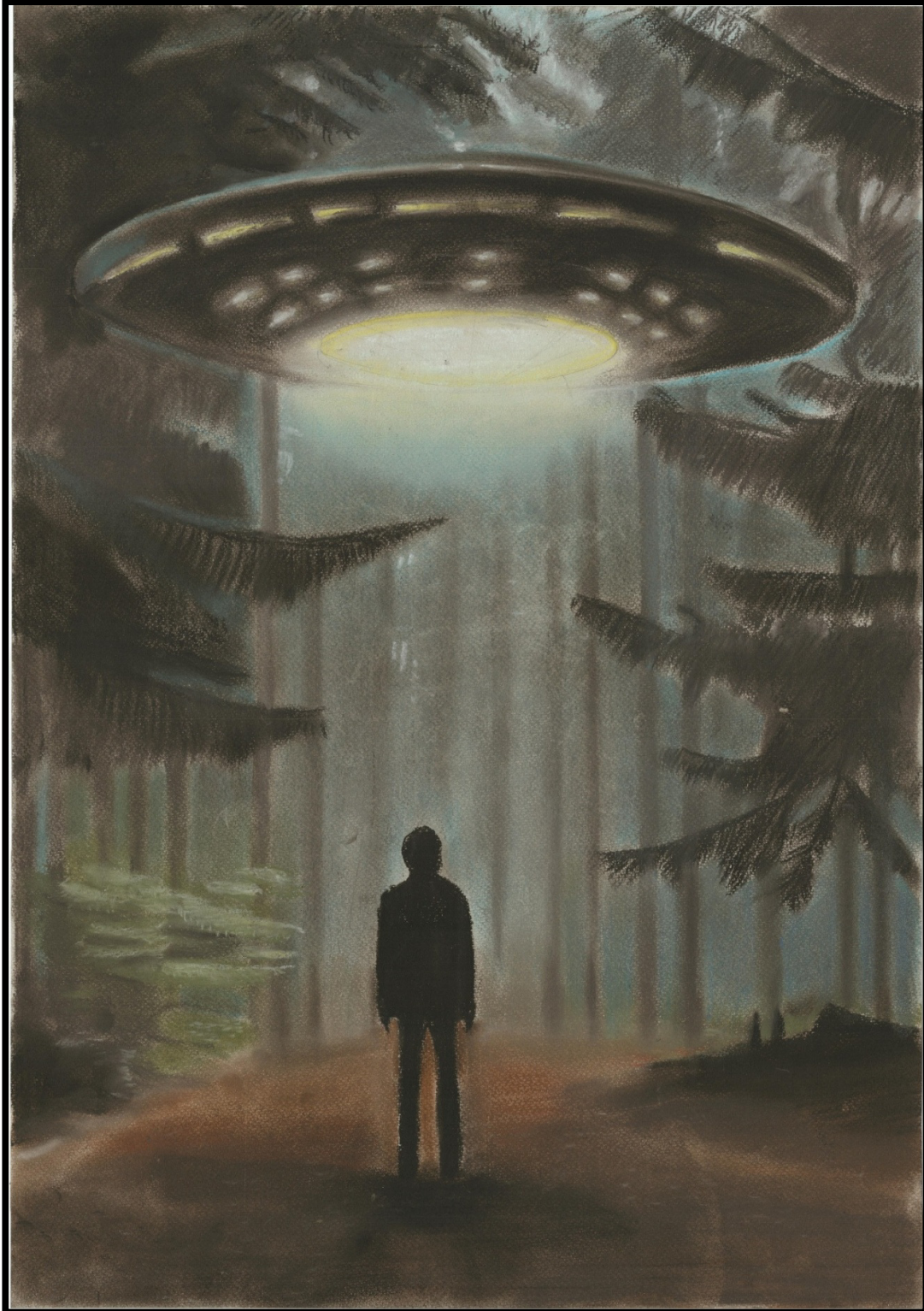
*In 2021, he won the XXVII Trofeo RiLL with “The Bar Right After” (which came first out of the 522 stories submitted). Moreover, he came second the same year with “Urne Elettorali” (Ballot Boxes), which is a noteworthy achievement, because no Trofeo RiLL participant had ever taken the first two places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

*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, 2022), 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.*

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