

Australian Science Fiction: in Search of the 'Feel'

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This is our Golden Age – argued Stephen Higgins in his editorial of the 11/1997 issue of *Aurealis*, Australia's longest-running magazine devoted to science fiction and fantasy. The magazine's founder and editor, Higgins optimistically pointed to unprecedented interest in science fiction among Australian publishers. The claim about a "Golden Age" echoed a statement made by Harlan Ellison during a panel discussion "The Australian Renaissance" in Sydney the year before (Ellison 1998, Dann 2000)⁶⁴. International mechanisms for selection and promotion in this genre seemed to compare favorably with the situation of Australian fiction in general. The *Vend-A-Nation* project (1998) was to encourage authors to write science fiction stories set in the Republic of Australia, and 1999 was to see the publication of several scholarly studies of Australian science fiction, including Russell Blackford's and Sean McMullen's *Strange Constellations*. Many of these publications were timed to coincide with the 1999 'Worldcon', the most prestigious of all fan conventions, which had been awarded to Melbourne. The 'Worldcon' was thus about to become the third 'Aussiecon' in history, accessible for the vibrant fan community of Australia, and thus sure to provide even more impetus for the genres' health.

And yet, in the 19/2007 issue of *Aurealis*, ten years after his announcement of the Golden Age, Stephen Higgins seems to be using a different tone:

Rather than talk of a new Golden Age of Australian SF (and there have been plenty of those) I prefer to think of the Australian SF scene as simply continuing to evolve. There seems to be a settling going on. It isn't as if the Australian SF community is maturing... That implies stagnation or at best, an acceptance of what we are and what we can be. I still get a sense of vibrancy: Not so much that there are new worlds waiting to be discovered as new writers waiting to write them.

The invitation to the readers to enjoy the issue's "heaps of good stuff", with which Higgins ends the editorial, appears to be sober and anticlimactic after previous declarations that the periodical's aim was to promote fresh local science fiction and herald the upcoming Golden Era. In a debate on what makes some science fiction texts more 'Australian' than others, Higgins promotes writing that has an Australian 'feel', as opposed to countless texts stereotypically set in New York by Australian authors who crave international popularity at the price of losing their actual 'sense of place'.

While Australian science fiction is indeed evolving or settling, its local ‘feel’ and ‘sense of place’ is now rather different from the concrete Australian settings which such initiatives as *Vend-A-Nation* aimed to promote, as well as from the origins of the genre in Australia. What could be retrospectively termed science fiction came to Australia at the turn of the 19th century in the form of romances about lost races and – embodying some Australian sense of place – novels of immigration depicted as invasion, to which Blackford’s, Ikin’s and McMullen’s *Strange Constellations* devotes much space (Blackford et al. 1999, “Novels of Racial Invasion”, 36-48). The phenomenon is not unique to Australia: the façade of futurology or scientific romance has often made it possible to address issues and express opinions which would be difficult, shameful or unacceptable if presented in a different guise. The fear of robot rebellions of much science fiction, for instance, could be read as an outlet for the idea of oppressed social classes as non-human. In the USA, Ignatius Donnelly’s futurist dystopia *Caesar’s Column* (1889) described a terrible fate for America, and especially New York, in 1988, exploited and destroyed as it is by a devious cabal of ruthless Jewish oligarchs, monopolists, aristocrats and corporate barons. A vision which, thanks to science fiction, could be presented in a seemingly objective guise, meriting a note by the author that “[th]e prophet is not responsible for the events he foretells. He may contemplate it with profoundest sorrow. Christ wept over the doom of Jerusalem” (Donnelly 1890, n.p.).

In Australia, an anxiety that was freely voiced by science fiction was the fear of an Asian invasion, which is first thematized in 1888 in the serialized novel *White or Yellow? A Story of Race War of A.D. 1908* by William Lane, followed by *The Yellow Wave* (Mackay, 1895). *The Coloured Conquest* by Thomas Roydehouse (first published as “Commonwealth Conquest” by “Rata” in 1903) and *The Australian Crisis* by Charles Kirmess (1909) both present visions of an Asian infiltration of Australia. In the first case, the Japanese and the Chinese join forces to attack the continent and invade Sydney; in the second, the invasion at first takes a more surreptitious form of secret immigration by the Japanese, who then claim that their children born on Australian soil should be granted the right of stay. British authorities are presented as over-lenient in the face of a threat to Australia’s integrity, but luckily there are still true Australians ready to fight, kill and die for the lost cause in an uprising which to the present reader somewhat resembles the vision of the glorious rise of the Ku Klux Klan as depicted in the fervently racist *The Birth of a Nation*. The complacent idleness of the urban elite seems a recurrent motif, countered by the patriotic zeal of outback guerilleroes.

As Blackford and McMullen illustrate in their *Strange Constellations*, the trope continued well into the 1930s. In fact, it may be even traced a century later, the most recent specimen being John Harper-Nelson’s *The Day They Came* (1998)

and Colin Mason's *Northern Approaches: Australia at Risk?* (2001), where the invasion of refugees comes from Indonesia. If ever any strain of science fiction has showed a true Australian "feel" and a "sense of place", the racial invasion trope surely should be counted as a case in point. This breed of futuristic tale made its Australian readers re-live exactly the invasion of the continent as conducted by their ancestors, and, at the same time, reinforces their identification with Australia by juxtaposing them with the Asian invaders. The identification with Australia was further facilitated by another and still extant motif which featured the continent as a special place, holding much more than meets the eye, including secrets crucial for all humanity (some of them obviously inspired by Rider Haggard). Lost races and artifacts of ancient civilizations were to be found in the mysterious interior, ranging from the last surviving Lemurians (George Firth Scott, *The Last Lemurian*, 1898) to an unknown race inhabiting a pleasant if secret region in the west of the country, whose riches – including the "Gold Reef" – naturally fall to the explorers (Ernest Favenc, *The Secret of the Australian Desert*, 1896). However, these fantastic discoveries, such as the finding of Atlantean relics (Rosa Praed, *Fugitive Anne*, 1902) not only bring the characters gold, but also add to the value, prestige and heritage of Australia, and, by extension, to the prestige of its current inhabitants.

The post-WWII publishing boom in popular literature, brought about by the demand on local popular fiction including science fiction, proved to be largely ephemeral. Initially, regulations controlling foreign exchange meant an ebb in the import from Britain and the USA, so that for some time writers of detective or adventure fiction were recruited to produce texts for such magazines as *Thrills Incorporated* (1950-52), *Future Science Fiction and Popular Science Fiction* (1953-55) and *Science-Fiction Monthly* (1955-56). However, the magazines proved to be short-lived and were destined to perish with the come-back of British and American fiction. The post-war science fiction strain describing technological apocalypse, best represented by Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957), placed Australia at the world's margin, a victim of global forces. In the science fiction market, too, global forces seemed to dominate, as A. Bertram Chandler, who was to become the most popular Australian science fiction author of the era, was recruited by John W. Campbell to write for his American *Astounding Stories*. The import restrictions were lifted in October 1958 – a date which marked the decline of most home-grown science fiction intended for the local market; once the emergency had passed, most local writers ceased to attract readers. It was authors like Chandler, Norma Hemming and their successors, writing primarily for an international audience, whose names became synonymous with the 1950s-1970s in Australian science fiction.

Arthur Bertram Chandler, a British merchant marine officer and, after he settled in Australia in 1956, one of the internationally best known Australian science fiction writers, is primarily remembered for his *Rim Worlds* series, and particularly John Grimes' stories set in the Rim Worlds universe. In the stories Chandler combined space opera with his own seagoing experiences on British, Australian and New Zealand vessels and several motifs possessing what Higgins would probably call an Australian 'feel'. On the one hand, his vision encompasses the frontier atmosphere of Rim Worlds, which could be called the outback of space, a remote part of the galaxy, where spaceships maintain contact between isolated human outposts, rediscover lost colonies and survey unexplored space sectors. On the other hand, the stories feature Australia as a world power due to its role in space exploration. Several authors envisioned Australian deserts as ideal locations for spaceports, a hope embodied in the memorable travesty of "Waltzing Matilda" sung by space explorers departing from the Woomera space port in "The Mountain Movers", one of Chandler's most memorable stories.

In "The Mountain Movers" the song's optimistic point seems to be the transformation of Australia into a gateway to Rim Worlds of the universe. The short story also contains a 'lost race' motif that is explicitly Australian. On a planet now colonized by humans but once inhabited by a native race, the characters – including John Grimes, whom Chandler viewed as his own crusty, conservative and reactionary mouthpiece in the stories – discover a giant monolith strangely resembling Uluru. The monolith then turns out to be a spaceship of an ancient civilization ready to take natives "back where they belong" – as, presumably, Uluru will do for Aborigines on Earth. The main character, the Australian Grimes, does not seem to devote much attention to the prospective departure of his fellow-citizens, but worries about Australia's loss of tourist dollars once Ayers Rock disappears. Nevertheless, the image of the Rock majestically taking off in "The Mountain Movers" remains one of the most memorable images in Australian science fiction: "[the Rock] was lifting, and the skin of the planet protested as the vast ship, (sic!) that for so long had been embedded in it, tore itself free" (156). Some Grimes stories also connect to other typical themes, such as the Australian Republic, depicted in the alternative-history path visited by Grimes in *Kelly Country*, and even an alternative-history Asian invasion, which Grimes thwarts in the unpublished story "Grimes and the Gaijin Daimyo."⁶⁵ Generally, Australian themes were for now more readily acceptable to overseas publishers and audiences if they appeared in short stories rather than in novels. As the local market remained insignificant next to America or Britain, such authors as Damien Broderick, John Baxter, Lee Harding, or Jack Wodhams saw it as essential to target international rather than local audiences, however 'vibrant' Australia's fan community might seem.

In 1975 the first ‘Aussiecon’ – that is, a World Science Fiction Convention awarded to Australia – took place in Melbourne, and promised a chance to change the situation. One of the key points of the convention was a writing workshop held by its guest of honor, Ursula K. LeGuin. In the unanimous opinion of several writers, including Broderick, the meetings and discussions, along with some writing tips and the optimistic atmosphere of the workshop activated the community and opened new perspectives to Australian science fiction. By the time such workshops were held again by LeGuin and Gene Wolfe in 1985 at the second ‘Aussiecon’ in Melbourne, there was already a professional magazine devoted to science fiction, and by 1990 there were two, *Aurealis* and *Eidolon*, both active in promoting local authors. The conventions also resulted in the publication of several anthologies, such as Van Ikin’s *Australian Science Fiction* (1981), Damien Broderick’s *Strange Attractors: Original Australian Speculative Fiction* (1985) and *Matilda at the Speed of Light: A New Anthology of Australian Science Fiction* (1988), showcasing the writing of Australian authors. The most important ones among these were Damien Broderick, Sean Williams and the rising stars of the 1980s: Greg Egan and Terry Dowling.

Before the third Melbourne ‘Aussiecon’ the harvest of new authors and anthologies was more opulent than ever, including Ikin’s and Dowling’s *Mortal Fire* (1993), Paul Collins’s *Metaworlds* (1994), Peter McNamara’s and Margaret Winch’s *Alien Shores: The Anthology of Australian SF* (1994), Jonathan Strahan’s and Jeremy G. Byrne’s *The Year’s Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1997 and 1998), and Jack Dann’s and Janeen Webb’s influential *Dreaming Down-Under* (1998). Small wonder that Stephen Higgins would expect a Golden Age of Australian science fiction to come. Indeed, the third ‘Aussiecon’ brought even more anthologies (including *Centaurus*, edited by Broderick and David Hartwell, and some specialized ones, such as *Women of Other Worlds*, promoted at the ‘Worldcon’ itself). New authors, such as Stephen Dedman and Sean McMullen, rose to prominence. The market potential of Australian science fiction is now recognized not only by small presses, such as Aphelion or *Eidolon*, but also by international publishing houses: Australian Voyager imprint (HarperCollins) now dominates the market, challenged in 2007 by the launching of the Orbit Australia imprint. Of Australia’s two most influential magazines in the field, *Aurealis* is now a well-established annual, although it typically contains only some ten stories a year, not counting the occasional double issues. The last issue of *Eidolon* appeared in April 2000, but the small press *Eidolon Publications* continues. There are now as many as five awards conferred in the field. The traditional Ditmar (first awarded in 1969) has been joined by the Chandler Award (1992), the *Aurealis* award (1995), the George Turner Award (1998) and, most recently, by the Peter MacNamara Award (2002).

However, for all this proliferation, Greg Egan, the most recognized modern Australian science fiction author, seems to be “international” in his subjects and interests as much as in his acclaim, and symptomatically insists on being defined as a science fiction writer without the epithet “Australian”. During an Internet panel discussion on Australian science fiction transcribed by SciFi.com, Chris Lawson remarked that even such a star writer as Egan might still sell better if his novels were set in America instead of Sydney. According to Sean McMullen and Stephen Dedman, editors are reluctant to publish longer pieces with a local “feel”, and those Australian authors who start international careers do so because they are “least ‘Australian’ in style and content” (Dedman et al, 1999). Paradoxically, the success of Australian science fiction seems to be coming at the expense of its Australian “sense of place”.

A specifically Australian ‘feel’ remains to be found in Terry Dowling’s very singular writing, which could be described as situated on the borderline between surreal fiction and science fiction. Dowling’s first *Rynosseros* cycle (1990), with its daring blend of highly original language, fantasy and exotic far future imagery, returns to the concept of Australia as a world power, with cosmopolitan and metropolitan coasts, while the continent’s interior is ruled by “Ab’Os”, genetically improved descendants of Aborigines. Their mixture of technology, psychic powers and mysticism reminds of Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, as does the complexity and exoticism of the whole imaginary world. Even though the continent in the cycle is changed almost beyond recognition, it is still permeated with an unmistakably Australian atmosphere – certainly more so than Egan’s realistic writings set in actual Australian cities only a few years into the future. The two writers seem to point to two different paths in the development of world quality Australian speculative fiction, both perhaps equally unexpected a few decades ago, though neither direction precisely corresponds to the hopes of a Golden Age. As Higgins commented on modern Australian science fiction in another *Aurealis* editorial (October 1997), well after he had assessed the results of his *Vend-A-Nation* project, it is only “poor stories [that] have kangaroos in them”.

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64 The famous “prophecy” was uttered during a conference sponsored by Qantas Airlines and the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney in 1996. Not long after the conference, Ellison wrote prefaces to both volumes of Jack Dann’s and Janeen Webb’s anthology of Australian science fiction, *Dreaming Down Under*, and reiterated his own proclamation of a Golden Age in the first preface. The inspirational impact of Ellison’s remark is visible in Denn’s introduction to the second volume (*Dreaming Down Under - Book Two*), available online at <http://www.voyageronline.com.au/books/extract.cfm?ISBN=073226412x> .

65 The story’s manuscript, now the property of Arthur Bertram Chandler’s Literary Estate Agents, was made available to several fans for note-taking. For a brief summary of the plot, see Steven Davidson’s *Rim Worlds Concordance* available online at: www.rimworlds.com/rimworldsgrimessaga.htm