

re:view

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DREAMING DOWN UNDER

Jack Dann & Janeen Webb (editors). HarperCollins, A\$24.95. ISBN 0 732 25917 7.

Reviewed by Andrés Vaccari

Although writers of so-called 'genre' fiction nowadays may not have to put up as often with the proverbial "When are you going to write something serious?", it is clear that they still constitute a ghetto of sorts. Despite the popularity of genres like crime, Western, romance, horror and science fiction, the notion of genre itself has not managed to shake off an association with rigid formulas and a limited range of archetypal characters and situations. Notwithstanding the efforts of postmodernism, a sharp division between 'serious' literature and low art still

remains, at least at the market level; and only a handful of writers, like James Ellroy or Ursula K. LeGuin have made a smooth transition into the mainstream without eschewing the conventions of their respective genres. Alternatively, writers like Martin Amis, Jeanette Winterson, Doris Lessing or Anthony Burgess have gone the other way around, firstly establishing mainstream careers and then experimenting with the conventions of, for example, the science fiction or crime novel. For all their allegiance to genre, their works are not critically received or marketed as such— even though they are not necessarily better than the real thing.

Genre publishing in Australia is experiencing an unprecedented boom, due in part to the worldwide

growth of niche publishing, which encompasses genre writing as much as cooking or lifestyle titles. In the case of science fiction, major publishing houses like HarperCollins and Bantam have established their own imprints and opened up new markets for local writing.

At the crest of this wave rides this generous, vibrant and eclectic tome, *Dreaming Down Under*, a collection of never-before-published fantastic stories by Australian and New Zealand writers both established and unknown. The tone and thematic range of these stories is rich and diverse, comprising traditional supernatural tales, disturbing vistas of the urban future, and a handful of odd and quirky pieces that can only be classified as unclassifiable.

Designer drugs, virtual reality, time-travel, dream-reading machines and machines that record perception, doomsday cults, the technological remodelling of bodies, urban alienation... it's no wonder that J. G. Ballard called science fiction the only form of literature fittingly equipped to deal with our times. These pages also contain explorations of national and classical myths, a descent into hell, a glimpse of Avalon, a cremation from the point of view of a still-living corpse. All the pieces share a high literary standard and an epidemic enthusiasm for philosophical and narrative play and the possibilities of their chosen themes.

In his contribution to the series *A Centenary of Cinema*, director Martin Scorsese points out that,

contrary to the prevalent view, many directors like John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock have found working within the conventions of genre to be quite liberating. This is true inasmuch as genres can offer the writer or director a rich palette of materials to work with; and in the right hands, they are not only extremely pliable, but also more open to individual style, to subversions and idiosyncrasies. Accordingly, the best stories in this volume are those who take an ironic distance from conventions and go against the grain. Particularly enjoyable is Lucy Sussex's spin on *Waltzing Matilda*—from the point of view of the ghost, as is Terry Dowling's 'He Tried to Catch the Light', a high-tech meditation on the notion that "God is just a by-product of our perception of light". Also worthy of mention is Damien Broderick's 'The Womb', an exploration of doomsday psychology, and Tess Williams' unsettling 'The Body Politic.'—one of the best pieces here.

I didn't think there was anything new to say on the clichéd theme of alien contact until I read the rarefied and strangely touching piece by Cherry Wilder, 'The Dancing Floor'. It's also refreshing to note that the strongest stories in these anthologies are those written by women.

There are so many good stories here deserving a mention: Norman Talbot's 'The Latest Dream I Ever Dreamed', Isobele Carmody's 'The Man Who Lost his Shadow' and George Turner's unfinished

'And Now Doth Time Waste Me.'

Like a flash of light in the dark, *Dreaming Down Under* blinds us but also highlights the dullness of all that came before. And let's face it, genre publishing in Australia has been dull, dull, extremely dull. This is, of course, not been restricted to Australia, since the majority of writing of this kind is, sadly, quite dull. Let's hope that this is not an isolated event. It seems that writers often need a good incentive (say, the initiative of people like Dann and Webb) to produce work of this quality.

Naturally, due to the high quality of most of the stories, the weakest pieces are immediately noticeable and fall flat on their face all the more deafeningly. These are the stories that confirm the reader's expectations and aim to satisfy them, appealing to a sense of nostalgia and closure. (Remember when ghosts were ghosts and not mere metaphoric devices?) Although touching and effective, Wynne Whiteford's piece didn't tell me anything I didn't know. Neither did 'Ma Rung', by Steven Paulsen, the premise of which is over-used. And though steady and elegantly written, Russell Blackford's 'The Soldier in the Machine' ticks every conceivable cliché box in the cyberpunk manual.

This anthology also raises (and, paradoxically, also lays to rest) a question that is as famously problematic as that of defining science fiction itself: Is there a distinctly 'Australian' tradition of fantastic literature?

After reading these stories, the answer is a stentorian "No". Although strong, the local flavour of these stories, when it is present at all, is incidental. A child of Enlightenment ideals and a spin-off from the rise of the scientific *Weltanschauung*, science fiction shares with them the humanist dream of a universal subject.

Accordingly, it has always concerned itself with the grand canvas of human life, as well as the transcultural questions that affect all modernised societies alike. So far, the only area in the world that has produced a modern and instantly recognisable tradition of fantastic literature is South America— and that is not even a country!

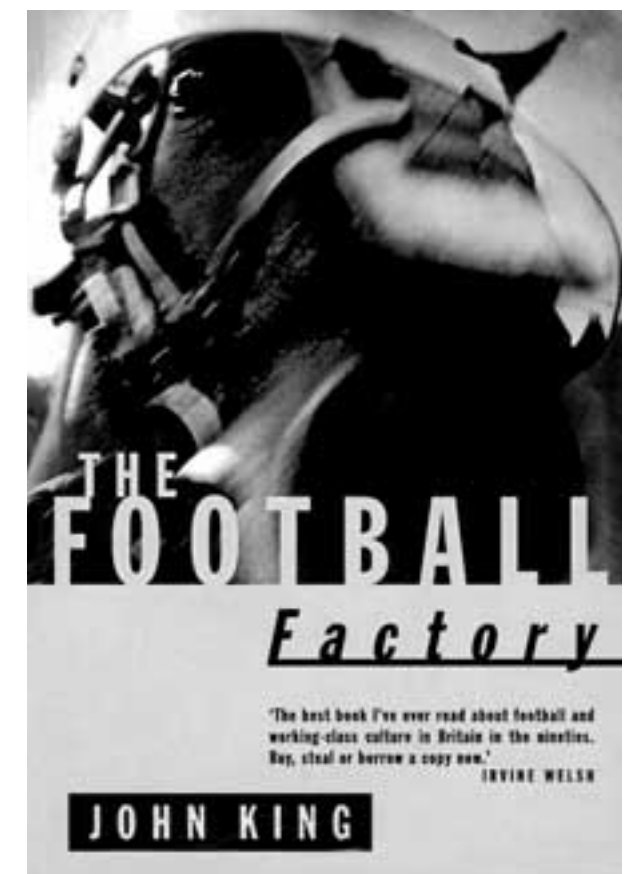
One of the most salient idiosyncrasies of our contemporary world is that it can better be understood

through the prism of fantasy, nightmare and dream; through unusual places and skewed perspectives. And *Dreaming Down Under* does just that. For once, the hype is right, and this is the most satisfying and accomplished anthology of its kind so far published in Australia. It will satisfy addicts of the genre and newcomers alike.

THE FOOTBALL FACTORY

John King
Jonathan Cape, A\$19.95.
ISBN 0 224 04302 1
reviewed by Simon Sellars

The Football Factory, John King's debut novel, charts the lives of a group of football hooligans in present-day London, England. It has been reissued to coincide with the release of *England Away*, King's most recent book and



the third part of his loose trilogy (*Headhunters* was the second). Although *The Football Factory* is an important work, it has not had much critical attention in Australia, with 'soccer' not considered to be a particularly marketable subject here. This review will attempt to redress the imbalance and whet your appetite for John King's skillful *œuvre*.

In case you're wondering, *The Football Factory* is not 'science fiction' or 'fantasy.' In fact, most would class it as straight realism, punk-as-fuck and no-holds barred. But don't be fooled by the Irvine Welsh endorsement on the cover. King writes about working class mores, football and

of *The Football Factory*, with King fictionalising the bewildering experience of living within a literalised media landscape and the resultant pre-millennium tension. The book does not speak science fiction— it lives it, in everyday life.

Tom Johnson is young, good looking, well dressed, quick-witted: the antithesis of the stereotypical football yob. A Chelsea supporter, Tom brawls his way around England's Premier League grounds, scoring cheap and nasty sex along the way.

The Football Factory consists of self-contained chapters, mostly told from Tom's point of view, his internal monologues ruminating at length upon

from ground to ground, always reforming and uprooting itself when authority nears. Rival gangs stalk the streets, sniffing each other out, all with ultra-violence on their minds, their strategic intelligence ensuring they are one step ahead of the inefficient police. It could have been a clumsy dichotomy, but the point is subtle and well-made: for Tom, the fighting is a release from the drudgery of his factory job and from the mind-numbing monotony of consumer society. But King never preaches, his writing is never heavy-handed, and therein lies the book's strength— the slow-creeping atmosphere is oppressive

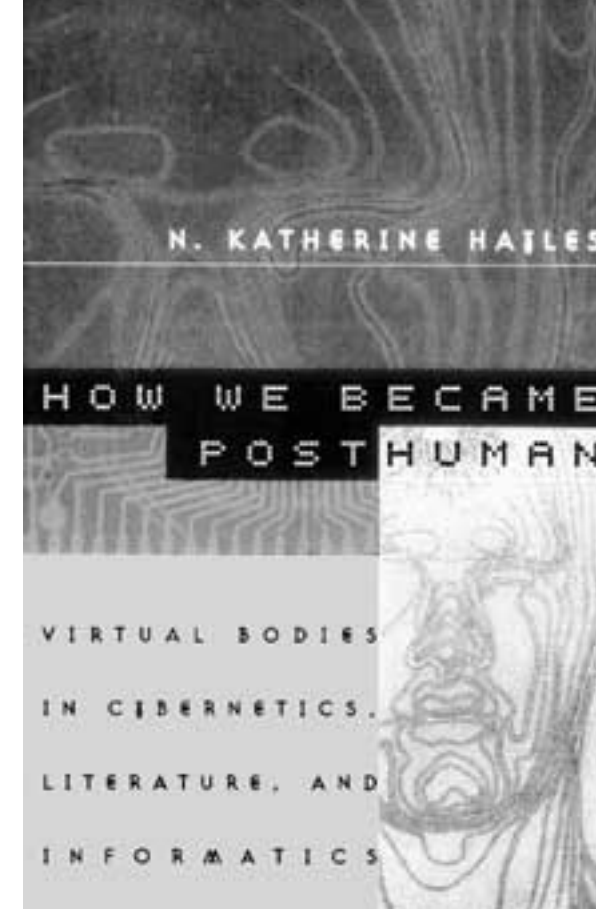
chess with the proprietor.

Vince's drug-addled thoughts turn from the game to a reflection on the multicultural nature of British society. In his skinhead days, Vince used to witness London race riots fuelled by political portrayals of minority ethnic groups as meek and unrepresented. But, he reflects, the reality is very different, the Indian flavour of his surrounds constituting a state-without-borders: "I know that from growing up in the area... you're living in the real world, not some whitewashed Tory idea of a constipated paradise or socialist ideal of good-natured underdog, just people, that's what it is, just

play of surfaces in which myths and artificial realities abound. One chapter moves away from Tom's point of view, exploring a day in the life of a tabloid football journalist as he explains the tricks of his trade. When writing about hooliganism, the 'English Disease', the reporter notes: "First comes the titillation and gory details, then the condemnation which masks the pleasure the reader's had from the story. Call for the return of the cat o' nine tails and demand some good old fashioned square-bashing and everyone's happy. It makes the public feel secure."

Another chapter examines a social worker and her vested interest in rehabilitating hooligans such as Tom: "Michelle could find no logic in drugging yourself up to the eyeballs and ignoring the realities of life... These football hooligans she'd read about were avoiding the issues, kicking lumps out of each other over a sport. It was unbelievable. Sport was the ultimate indignity of a capitalist society, resting as it did on the importance of competition, the wastage of resources, concentrating people's energies away from the class struggle towards silly games. She had never been to a football match herself, though she had listened to gutter conversations in her local, but felt qualified to comment."

But Tom, dismissive of these "rich cunts and slumming socialists", is the key. Shaped and moulded by competing forces to suit



varying agendas, he's rewritten as hero, thug, sex symbol, as noble savage. He is—to all intents and purposes—a digital ghost wandering the nooks and crannies of the media landscape, police surveillance cameras perpetually on his case. Kicking and fucking his way relentlessly, Tom wills pain into his body, wallowing in his physicality—a crucial strategy in the fight to breathe life once again into his disembodied self.

At one point, Tom expresses an admiration for the films *Clockwork Orange* and *Blade Runner*, and there are obvious parallels between the former and King's book. When Stanley Kubrick filmed *Clockwork Orange*, he withdrew it from release a few years later on the grounds that actual British society was far more shocking than his depiction.

King appears to confirm Kubrick's paranoia. In many ways, *The Football Factory* is *Clockwork Orange* updated, Tom and his mates serving the same function as Alex and his droogs— all commit vicious acts as a reaction against their sterilised environment. King is obsessed with the same philosophical conundrum as Anthony Burgess (the author of Kubrick's source novel) was: simply, is the freedom to commit violence an acceptable by-product of freedom of choice? What is the alternative? Does the state have the moral right to regulate acts of violence when those acts constitute *authentic free will*?

And King writes with enough skill to help us to share Tom's adrenaline high. The fight scenes are as addictive as anything I've known; combined with the

author's laser-sharp intelligence and considered political perspective, and the effect is overwhelming.

Along with Burgess, *The Football Factory* echoes George Orwell's *1984* as well as polemical films from Lindsay Anderson (*If...*) and Peter Watkins (*Privilege*)— all express bitter loathing for the rotting corpse of British democracy. King's firm root in the present day, through use of language and setting, does not distance *The Football Factory* from these earlier, nominally science-fictional texts; it fulfils their prophecies.

Science fiction is dead: the future is now.

HOW WE BECAME POST-HUMAN

N. Katherine Hayles.
The University of Chicago Press, A\$18.
ISBN 0 226 32146 0.
reviewed by Andrés Vaccari

"I don't particularly like people. Never have. Man to my mind is about the nastiest, most destructive of all the animals. I don't see any reason, if he can evolve machines that can have more fun than he himself can, why they shouldn't take over, enslave us, quite happily. They might have a lot more fun. Invent better games than we ever did."

This is Warren McCulloch, a neurophysiologist who elaborated one of the most influential models of the workings of the neuron. McCulloch was also one of the leading figures in the seminal Macy Conferences on Cybernetics, a post-war interdisciplinary meeting that, for decades to come, would shape the way we

For King, London is a template for the postmodern world: a contradictory, dazzling mix of old and new, rich and poor, black and white

drugs, less the sloppiness and incomprehensible self-indulgence peddled by the Scottish writer.

Still, the question remains: why is King getting props in a magazine ostensibly concerned with the 'fantastic'?

In the last issue of *Abaddon*, Editor Andrés Vaccari briefly attempted to sketch out a future direction for science fiction. Stating that the major challenge facing the genre is a meaningful examination of the present, Vaccari argues that SF "has not successfully engaged with some dominant (and curiously 'science fictional') languages of our era: the languages of advertising [and] propaganda..."

This is precisely the focus

the nature of the modern British police state. In King's London, surveillance cameras record, edit and wipe over lives with clinical efficiency; the economical, tight prose (aided by the book's disjointed narrative structure) zooms in on each character, filing their personal details for later reference and further developments.

While Tom lives for the moment, for the adrenaline rush of the ruck, his crew don't do their brawling inside the heavily policed grounds, but outside, away from the crowds. King sets this milieu up as a Temporary Autonomous Zone, with the fighting (a consensual act, directed through the primacy of the thrill of the chase) moving

for the manner by which it is so thoroughly masked from view.

Note the references to the Dali-esque quality of our late-capitalist dystopia: a character's realisation that only 12-and-a-half per cent of money physically exists, the rest "just numbers in computers"; a flashback in which Tom, as a child, puzzles over the fact that "they just have to make a law and [Dad] has to pay what they say otherwise he goes to prison"; a self-contained chapter in which Vince Matthews, an ex-hooligan who has renounced his violent past and now spends his time withdrawn into his skull, sitting in an Indian cafe, nursing a bhang lassi and agonising over a game of

people... it's all about clear thinking and seeing beyond the initial action, making the right decision when there are so many different versions of the truth... there must be something in this lassi because I'm having trouble keeping my thoughts together, pulling the different strands tight adjusting the contradictions, like the information has got tangled together and my brain is being squeezed by the rush of images..."

For King, London is a template for the postmodern world: a contradictory, dazzling mix of old and new, rich and poor, black and white, high-tech versus Edwardian grit; an urban sprawl with no definable centre; an infinite

think about biological and automated systems. To me, this statement clearly encapsulates the driving force behind many of the contemporary myths about technology: the deep distaste of the flesh and the yearning for a infinite realm in which some kind of immortality can be achieved. More recently, Hans Moravec, roboticist and author of *Mind Children: the Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (1988) has articulated this wish most brazenly, with his assertion that downloading our consciousness into machines will be the next step in human evolution—a project that he considers not only possible, but,

founding myths of the Digital Age, one made possible by an epistemic shift that favoured pattern/randomness over presence/absence. Hayles offers a well balanced historical overview of the ways in which machines and humans have entered the discourses of science, cybernetics and science fiction. She uses these texts as symptoms, or sites of conflict, picking their anxieties and contradictions. Reading the proceeds of the Macy Conferences, Hayles traces the origins of the first cybernetic model that established comparisons between humans and machines. Firstly, when discussing the structure of a

the role of the observer. Norbert Wiener's model (the foundation of the cybernetic view) offered some solutions, since it reduced organism and environment to a set of informational processes and fluid interactions, thus 'disembodying' the human.

Hayles' reading of the Macy Conferences is exhaustive and her perspective original. She sees this moment as a struggle between many contesting theories, and we get a good sense of the players involved and the role their personalities played in the outcome. In an effective move, Hayles turns her attention to the physical process of transcription of the Conferences, where the

force behind science, language and perception. Perception, for example, is a process that is about pattern rather than content. Yet, for all its complicity, cybernetics was also prophetic of the dissolution of bodily frontiers that becomes so acute with the advent of modern technological and virtual environments— a symbiosis epitomised in the figure of the cyborg. Cybernetics, according to Hayles, also displayed remarkable similarities with Saussurean linguistics, where communication and meaning are constructed not out of discrete and present terms but "through selection from a field of possible alternatives."

Dick recapitulates some common places (i.e. the "destabilising" figure of the android and Dick's alleged misogyny) and contributes some novel perspectives.

It is clear that information and VR technologies are demanding a reinterpretation of the body and a rethinking of its boundaries. Our organs of cognition have dispersed, threatening the model of individual agency. Coupled with the products of technology in an increasingly direct and aggressive manner, it is also clear that our bodies (whether we want it or not) can no longer be thought of as delimited by an epidermic frontier. Is the 'human' a historical construction soon to go the way of the *pneuma* and the bodily humours? To be succeeded by, well, the *post-human*?

Acting both as a historical overview and as an argument supporting the inseparability of information, material substrate, body and consciousness, Hayles' position is refreshingly skeptical and compellingly expressed. And this is all the more unusual for a writer coming from a high postmodernist perspective, and who avails herself of many recognisable post-structuralist tactics.

She denounces as absurd the postmodern "ideology that the body's materiality is secondary to the logical or semiotic structures it encodes", and she has few kind things to say about certain developments in theory that regard the subject essentially as a virtual entity, or a dream of discourse. This has been the

focus of much postmodern effort to reconceptualise and 'disperse' the contemporary subject.

Another thing that deserves mention is Hayles' authoritative grasp of scientific theory, which often steers into murky technical waters but without losing the reader. A great deal of debate has flared recently over the Sokal/*Social Text* prank that gave birth to the book *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science* (1998). (Alan Sokal, a renowned physicist, set out to ridicule the humanities establishment by sending a parodical essay to a respected journal. The essay, which denounces scientific discourse as chauvinist, was taken seriously and published.) In this context, it is imperative that academics in the area of humanities offering critiques or overviews of science pay attention to the way it operates and are conversant with the theory behind scientific procedure. It is true that, although it purports to offer wide ranging critiques of Western knowledge and the structure of the scientific eye, the languages of criticism, semiotics and the humanities have completely lost touch with the realities of scientific practice, and seldom bother examining too closely their object of enquiry— more often than not to an embarrassing, risible extent. Nonetheless, Hayles achieves this balance very well, effortlessly bridging the gap between science, literature and the humanities and establishing not only a

dialogue but also a form of synthesis.

In short, this book is complex, challenging, rewarding, and lucidly and engagingly written. Those interested in the philosophy of technology are recommended to read it immediately. And for those who would like to know more, this book acts as an excellent introduction.

THE FOREST OF HOURS

By Kerstin Ekman
Random House, A\$22.95.
ISBN 0 7011 6884 6.
reviewed by Andrés Vaccari

Sweden is renowned mainly for high suicide rates and bad pop bands. Occasionally, however, some good Swedish writers do appear to redress this imbalance, as evidenced by

this enchanting work from one of the country's top novelists. Spanning more than 500 years, the plot centres on Skord, a mischievous troll who has lived in the forest for ages, until one day he stumbles by accident into the world of humans. Like the forest, Skord is ageless, and his consciousness is one with that of nature. As Skord learns language and the trappings of culture, he becomes an alchemist's apprentice, an outlaw, a doctor and a lackey. He is given words to meditate on his condition and on that of all humanity. It is an old literary trick: to use an outsider figure to explore the human condition, yet Ekman brings an exuberant imagination, erudition and the power of her dense and beautiful prose.

Is there an 'essence' to information or knowledge, even to reality itself, that can be divorced from its material substrate?

strangely enough, *desirable*. It's a new version of an old dream, an enduring and intimate dream that is often tainted with the nihilistic, flagellant attitude that Nietzsche (writing more than a hundred years ago) denounced as the "haters of the body", the belief in an afterworld more pure than the flesh.

N. K. Hayles, at the beginning of this excellent book, describes Moravec's grand delusion as a "dream that struck me as a nightmare." One of the questions she tries to explore is 'how did information become disembodied?' Is there an 'essence' to information or knowledge, even to reality itself, that can be divorced from its material substrate? To Hayles, this is one of the

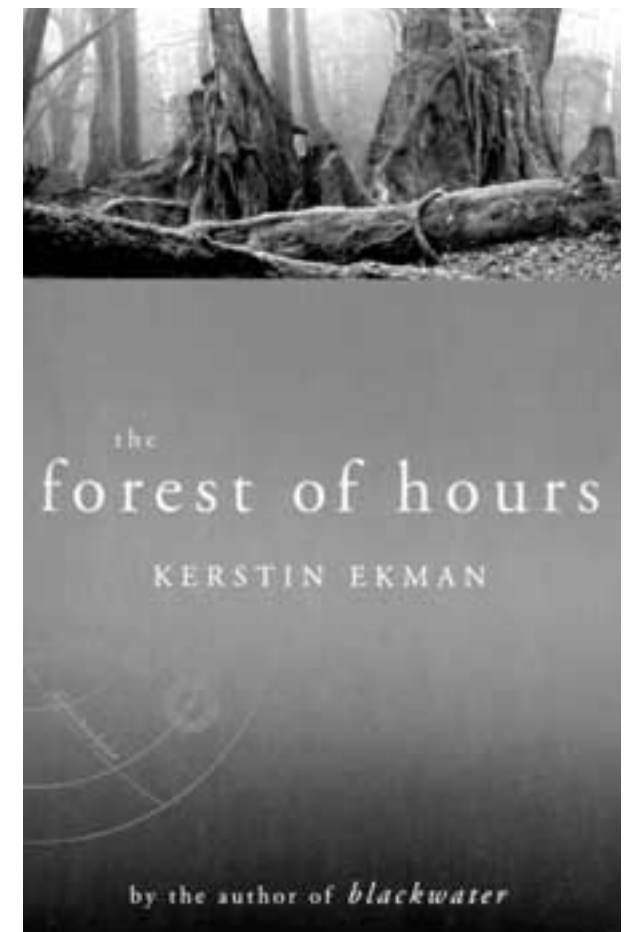
system, cybernetics shifted the emphasis from *energy* (as in the thermodynamic model) to *information*. Secondly, it followed behaviourism in that it bracketed content and focused exclusively on output. The Turing test echoes this premise, since the observer must decide who is human and who is a computer by vocal responses alone. Thus, for cybernetics, humans, machines and, indeed, all biological entities are informational systems. We must remember that the scientific discourse of the day (1940s and 1950s) was grappling with questions of boundaries between organism and environment, the Uncertainty Principle and how to delimit the scientific experiment and

same philosophical problems are embodied and reflected. Here, the practical problems of information and cognition are revealed in all their messy everydayness, as we follow the movement from a chaotic gathering of rambling, talking bodies to the final transcript and the abstracted cleanliness of theory.

The fourth chapter deals exclusively with the theories of Wiener, the founding father of cybernetics. Hayles regards Wiener's role as pivotal in continuing the separation of form and content, body and knowledge. One of the founding tenets of cybernetics is that information can circulate unchanged among different material strata. For Wiener, analogy was the driving

From here on, Hayles takes the reader through the successive developments of these questions, covering areas of informatics, philosophy, semiotics, artificial intelligence, science fiction, artificial life, virtual reality and cyborg theory.

Despite the book's ambitious breadth and the dizzying array of subjects covered, Hayles never loses grip on her subject. She offers insightful analyses of Donna Haraway's cyborg manifestos, Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Foucault's reading of the Panopticon, Burroughs' *The Ticket That Exploded*, and Greg Bear's *Blood Music*, among others. Bernard Wolfe's *Limbo* and the novels of Philip K. Dick receive a chapter each. Her extensive reading of



The character of Skord draws from many archetypes, among them the idiot savant, the outsider, the comical and pathetic sidekick of the picaresque, episodic novel, the structure of which *The Forest of Hours* imitates to an extent. Through his figure, one of the oppositions Ekman plays with is nature/culture. The forest of Skule becomes an enchanted realm working with a different logic that keeps tempting Skord back. The forest is brought to life by evocative descriptions, Ekman's rich vocabulary revealing a conscientious exploration of the minutiae of nature. Yet she also explores the civilised world with the same thoroughness and eye for beauty, making it clear that the struggle has no resolution. Culture has created its own sphere of values, and in many characters (most notably, the alchemist) we find incarnated the perennial quest to tame the natural world and unlock its secrets. Through Skord we encounter a variety of human experiences, ranging from abject misery and cruelty to spellbinding, divine love. Throughout his adventures, Skord feels the persistent call of the forest, and knows he is living in a limbo between two worlds. In this lies the ecological message of the novel, inasmuch as the reader witnesses the gradual separation between them, until they become irreconcilable. At some point, Ekman suggests, we have strayed from the possibility of return.

This is a great

philosophical and environmentalist fantasy, an ode to the ancient power of nature and the serpentine ways of the human soul. Although weighty, it is a mesmerising book, and a joy to read.

Those seeking a fast-paced read are advised to steer well clear.

PIG TALES

Marie Darrieussecq
(Trans. Linda Coverdale)
Faber & Faber, A\$14.95
ISBN 057119186X
reviewed by Darrin Baker

Darrieussecq's first novel takes place in modern-day France, and is a first person fabulist account of one woman's naïve struggle to transform from human to animal. The narrative consists of an unnamed woman's description of her life as it undergoes a process of bizarre transmutation. Her job in the beauty parlour turns out to involve much more than applying facials and

One feels part of a freak show, spectator to a grotesquerie validated only by the audience's presence

cutting cuticles, and she soon finds herself working as a prostitute, servicing all modes of disgusting men eager for their fantasies to be met.

Her transition to a new profession is paralleled by the changes in her body. Her youthful figure begins to grow and distort; at first nothing more than weight gain. But as days and weeks pass it becomes obvious, if not to her boyfriend Honore, then to the reader, that she is becoming something else altogether:

"I was so tired. My hair was sticking up like bristles, falling out in handfuls, and I couldn't do a thing with it. I used lotions to set my hair, trying to hide the damage, but my lack of flair for this sort of thing became painfully obvious."

The novel spirals into a Gogol-like landscape of absurdity, as she continues to move closer toward what is assumed her inevitable destination: woman becoming pig. Gradually the clothing of civilised society falls away from her as she takes to foraging for scraps and rolling in mud in local parks. She loses her job, her boyfriend and her home, and throughout this seems unable to grasp the significance of what is happening to her.

Her naïvete becomes the tonal strength of the novel. Throughout her transformation, a sense of disbelief is suspended by her childlike observations. The disturbing changes to her body are revealed

through innocent eyes, pushing the reader into a voyeuristic corner. One feels part of a freak show, spectator to a grotesquerie validated only by the audience's presence. In fact, Darrieussecq seems intent on grinding her audience into submission with repetitious descriptions of the character's slide into animality. This repetition will seem to some a mark of great writing, while to others it will be a frustrating weakness in the text.

The thematics of the

novel pivot on this repetition, however, and how affect is brought to bear through its use. On one level the novel reads as a feminist tract laced with black-humorous digs at the male gaze upon the feminine body. As the lead character becomes more obese and starts walking on all fours, men are not only disturbed but disgusted, and seek to harm and even kill her rather than cast a sexual eye in her direction. Not subtle, the point is well demonstrated for those wishing to pursue it. The male gaze, in all its fury and desire for the perfect female form, can only seek to destroy what it finds unattractive.

Other more diffuse aspects find a voice, in particular a hint of racial tension, given that the lead character is of Arabic origin. This theme, perhaps lost on those unfamiliar with the climate of racism and mistrust in France today, looks at how the



THEY LIVE (1988)

John Carpenter makes two kinds of film: brilliant ones and absolutely awful ones.

They Live, fortunately, is one of the former.

In this criminally underrated sci-fi classic, the evil aliens have surreptitiously invaded Earth and camouflaged themselves behind a world-wide holographic veil which is nothing other than our everyday reality. Thus the subjugated masses carry on their daily business, ignorant that their bosses, presidents and most of the police force are aliens in disguise having a jolly good time at their expense. The only way to detect them is to wear special sunglasses developed by a group of rebel humans.

And so our unsuspecting working-class hero stumbles upon the sunnys and into the nightmare that hides behind the alien projection. As he

walks down the street, the whole of reality turns black and white. Magazines, newspapers and billboards everywhere reveal their real subliminal messages: SLEEP, NO INDIVIDUAL THOUGHT, OBEY, BUY, MARRY AND REPRODUCE. All bank notes show as pieces of white paper with THIS IS YOUR GOD printed in large black letters. The aliens walk among humans, driving police cars, wearing suits and getting all the promotions. Reading like a cross between Karl Marx and Philip K. Dick, *They Live* works at many levels. On one hand, it is an homage to fifties B-grade—and, in this department, the aliens' hilarious rubber masks are worth the price of the admission alone. On the other, it is the closest this remarkable, if erratic, director has come to give us a piece of his own mind. In the final analysis, however, Carpenter cannot



decide between humour or social critique. To him, reality is also black and white: "They Live, We Sleep". The tongue-firmly-planted-in-cheek sometimes can barely dissimulate the anger seething beneath. However, this indecision is part of its appeal, and Carpenter ends up winning on the sheer power of attitude alone.

Needless to say, *They Live* vanished in the box office without the slightest ripple, although a few people at the time got the joke. ■