

VAN IKIN ((ED.)
GLASS REPTILE BREAKOUT (AND OTHER AUSTRALIAN STORIES)
THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, 1990
158 PP + 3 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Glass Reptile Breakout is a collection of short stories by Russell Blackford, Damien Broderick, Simon Brown, Paul Collins, Stephen Dedman, Terry Dowling, Greg Egan, Leanne Frahm, Van Ikin (ed.), Sue Isle, David J. Lake, Rosaleen Love, Philippa Maddern, Sean McMullen, Petrina Smith, Lucy Sussex, George Turner and Thomas Wodhams.

If we are to believe the introduction provided by the editor, "Most of the stories are science fiction, some science fantasy, and one or two are (strictly speaking) fantasy. The designation "sf", or the term "speculative fiction", is used deliberately to mask or elide these subdivisions, thereby reflecting the writers' willingness to draw upon different modes."

Van Ikin's presumably good intentions in providing this note right at the beginning of his introduction to the book turn out to be, unfortunately, a symptom of the same disease from which most non-realistic fiction suffers all over the world, namely, an inferiority complex.

One honestly thought the time for justifications in literature had gone notwithstanding the little help provided by some trends in criticism. And yet, some writers and critics still feel the need to label, clarify, specify, classify and justify what they produce. On the one hand, it seems pretty easy to find two people who agree on what sf is (or what it is not). On the other hand, though, it is most unlikely that many people agree on the term "science fantasy" because *science* and *fantasy* are, per definition, opposites. To make things worse, the term "speculative fiction" is provided on the front cover, although it is hard to know whether it was the editor's wish or the publisher's requirement. As most fans of science fiction know, the idea that the speculative potentialities of the genre are one of its main *raison d'être* was abandoned some decades ago, when it became obvious that not even the wildest fantasies could rival our twentieth century reality.

Glass Reptile Breakout presents an added difficulty. Given the present-day relevance of the study of "New Literatures in English", one hesitates as to the approach to be taken. Should these stories be contemplated as yet one more production in the area of non-realistic fiction, or should their Australian origin be kept in mind as a distinctive feature?

If we choose the first approach, it may be said that these stories could have been written elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere. Such is the case, for instance, of "Glass Reptile Breakout", which evokes a peculiar atmosphere which resembles disco music and is not far from cyberpunk sf. On the contrary, if we choose the second approach,

it seems clear that stories such as "Vanities" are distinctively Australian, if only because they play with Australian peoples, landscapes, traditions and even vocabulary.

But the collection offers a great variety of themes.

"The Last Guardian" rediscovers (?) Arthurian myth from yet another point of view.

"The Getaway Star" makes violence the centre of an oppressive microcosm.

"The Supramarket", perhaps one of the most intense stories in the collection, upsets the reader as the main character chokes on the agoraphobia produced by a megastore.

"The Sea-Serpent of Sandy Cape" is a re-elaboration of the Loch Ness monster theme.

"In the Garden" is a two-page nightmarish observation of an inanimate -and yet alive- garden.

"Mostly Meantime" displays a sarcasm at times not different from Stanislaw Lem's wildest star tales.

"Skyriders" hints at the mental strain of war and how it turns into physical folly.

"Errand of Mercy" distantly recalls Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* by presenting a society where books —particularly those concerned with religion— are banned. Unfortunately, the similarities end there.

"All my Yesterdays" has a Beckettian flavour. The *joie de vivre* of the king of creation, who has achieved Methuselah-like longevity, has become sheer boredom for which psychiatrists recommend "doses of fornication". As if to corroborate Beckett's influence, the protagonist tries to commit suicide by hanging himself, but fails. Cosmic irony is granted: his name is Lazarus.

"Artifact" echoes A.C. Clarke's novels *Rendez-vous with Rama* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, although it immediately shifts towards another theme: the homesickness of the spaceman.

And this thematic variety pervades the eighteen stories which make up the collection. *Glass Reptile Breakout* is an *interesting* book, with all the negative connotations of the word. As an Australian work, it is worth reading in order to reach some conclusions on the state of Australian non-realistic fiction. As a work of sf, its validity is questionable, for many of the stories can hardly be labelled so. In any case, though, as the title promises, the "speculative" (<Lat *specular* = look at) stories which make up the book are worth looking at, at least, in order to benefit from the perspective provided by distance both in space and themes.