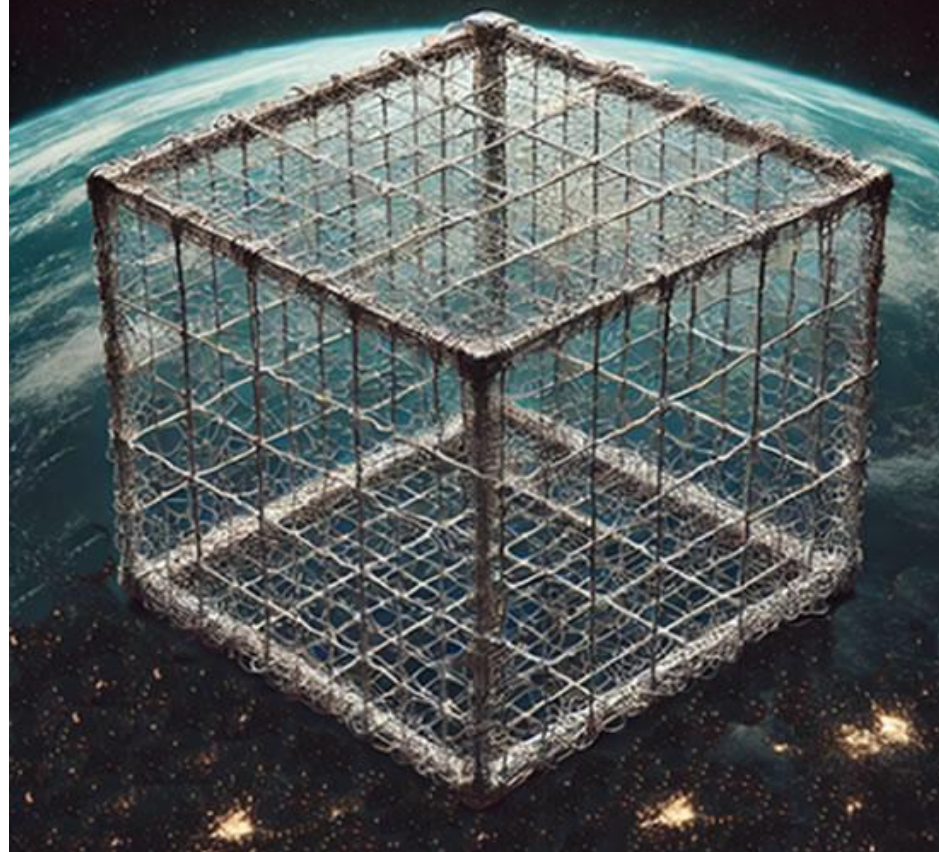


Futuricity

Out of Time

Sam Smith



An epic tale and love letter to the SciFi genre that defies conventional storytelling and will leave you questioning the nature of reality and the consequences of meddling with forces beyond our understanding.

Prepare for a thrilling ride as Benjamin Barraclough, an ex-newsman, and his SciFi forum friends find themselves at the centre of a cosmic adventure when his friend Julian creates a device that can traverse both space and time. As they explore the distant future, they uncover a depopulated world that raises more questions than answers.

But their discovery doesn't go unnoticed. O/V, a former criminal turned time traveller, sees the potential for profit and power in this new technology. His actions draw the attention of the mysterious "Time Police," a group of hybrid clones tasked with maintaining the integrity of the timeline.

As the boundaries between past, present, and future blur, a complex web of crime, love, and interspecies relationships unfolds. The disappearance of O/V triggers an investigation that threatens to unravel the very foundations of the Time Police's existence.

With twists that span centuries and species, *Futuricity, Out of Time* is a mind-bending journey through space, time, and the human condition.

"Sam Smith you will either Love or Hate... I know I will be reading Sam Smith all my life... Here is a British writer who is actually saying something. Sam is a Leninist James Joyce." S.J.Owen: 4th Dimension



Futuricity: Out of Time

by

Sam Smith

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For Stephi, who has been with me all these many
ways.

Other SF books by Sam Smith

John John

We Need Madmen (winner 2004 SKREV prize for Science
Fiction)

The End of Science Fiction (shortlisted for a 2001 Eppie)

Once Were Windows Once Were Doors

Balant }

Happiness }

You Human } The unMaking of Heaven quintet

Not Now }

Eternals }

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Inquisitor: If I may suggest, Senior One, that you skip the first 5 chapters of The Book. They are of little concern to The Enquiry, give but background to the four main characters initially involved. Can be of passing interest only. Mention is made of the original Faraday Cage in Chapter Three, but again solely as background. Chapter Six onwards is what leads directly to our Enquiry.

Senior One: Appreciate your advice, but I'm already on Chapter Three. And there are clues.

Inquisitor: Really? Such as?

Senior One: Attitudes, mindsets maybe, more than clues as such. These four were on the island of Britain?

Inquisitor: Yes.

Senior One: [after a pause] Once our Enquiry into his disappearance begins in earnest, we will work on the assumption that not everything was/is what it seems/seemed. We therefore need to know everything.

Part one - The Book: *Futuricity*

One: *Futuricity*

Futuricity, the name of our website, is where for the past twenty plus years we have been assessing works of science fiction. Any member – almost fifty of us active at one point – can put up a 'discussion paper.'

'Paper' can make us sound like scientists, academics, intellectuals, even more like poseurs. Nevertheless 'papers' is what they still get to be called; and in the online discussions that follow the posting of new papers we continue to refer to them as 'papers.'

Although we are all enamoured of SF/Sci-fi we do try to keep our discussions of the merits/aspects of this or that author/sub-genre down to earth. Which, given *Futuricity's causa causans* – chucking in a Latin or otherwise foreign phrase or two can certainly add to the 'paper' pretentiousness – has by no means been easy.

Before it was called *Futuricity* one of the many titles Steve and I considered was *The Future Remembered*, its credo 'Remembering the Once Future.' When historian Bart became a regular, he suggested changing it to *Future History*. Having by then though settled on *Futuricity* it was my idea, when 'Fake News' as a misleading concept came along, to have under *Futuricity* by way of explanation, the epigraph, 'Is Science Fiction the only route we now have to the truth?' Which drew the comment, 'Aren't all SF authors perpetrators of fraud?' Discuss.

Steve and I originally met on another social media SF and fantasy forum. Where we, at various times, both voiced our despair at contemporary SFers ignorance of century-old SF. We had both shaken our metaphorical heads at their enthusiasms for 'new' concepts, many of which had been articulated better way back when.

One book, for instance, that I still keep virtually ramming into peoples' faces, is John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar*.

We are now living upon the overpopulated world that John Brunner described. Yet *Stand on Zanzibar* nowadays hardly ever gets referenced, let alone read. What John Brunner describes – for anyone who doesn't know – is a world so overcrowded that it drives some individuals berserk, where they attack whoever is at hand. Senseless killings. Bombs in public places, school shootings, knife and machete attacks, cars used as lethal weapons... All so familiar to our news feeds today and written by a Somerset author in the early 1950s. Possibly before.

Consequently, one of my early 'discussion papers' on *Futuricity* extolled *Stand on Zanzibar*. I say 'discussion paper' but *Stand on Zanzibar*'s central hypothesis having become self-evident my 'paper' didn't provoke much in the way of discussion. Had been good though to get it off my chest.

What Steve and I had wanted for *Futuricity* was a discussion, an exploration of SF's multitudinous futures, the airing of a myriad alternatives. Neither of us was particularly keen on SF tales that slipped over into Lovecraftian-type horror, or with battle-heavy SF, where aliens were always the counter-cultural enemy.

Unfortunately, we never did get the debates *per se* that we were after. Or only in the sense that some 'papers' started a thread of people putting up their own take on the same book. Or we got someone gleefully pointing out an anachronism. As there inevitably is in any book of the future, especially those written a while back, including even the more recent internalised high-tech dreamstate takes on the future. But where, peradventure, there are still cigarettes and newsprint when, within our time, most have already become largely defunct.

Wasn't long before we began to see that many *Futuricity* subscribers only joined in order to deliver up their response to

one work, or to publicise a favourite author who hadn't yet got a *Futuricity* mention. They might go on to put up 'papers' on two or three more books/authors; but what we came to realise was that if that was all they did and they didn't interact with any other contributors then they wouldn't be long for *Futuricity*.

Vortex man came, said all that he wanted to say in three highly technical papers, actual science mixed with speculation upon far out speculation, and he disappeared never to be heard from again. While we got only the one 'paper' from a woman confused by Bode's Law. She was obsessed, she said, with the idea that there is a planet missing between Mars and Jupiter, and which hasn't, and certainly not to her satisfaction, been explained.

We also soon found that K-Dickers, and other single author fans, were only interested in, and fiercely defensive of, that one author. When what we were after, almost regardless of the author, were ideas for their own sake. Not quotations – with exclamation marks! – to be shouted at fellow shouters. Not zealots who chose to misunderstand what had been said just so their author/cause could get a mention, and they could start into their spiel, finger-stabbing [virtually] outrage and condemnation of all us non-zealots.

After a spate of such shoutings, I considered adding another epigraph: 'No SF book is a bible.' L Ron Hubbard's aside of course. Scientology anyone?

We wanted *Futuricity* to be educational in the widest sense, an online tool for the gaining of knowledge, new knowledge that might prise open yet more knowledge. Not a cosmetic or colourful quotation coat for a 'paper' to be wrapped in, to be resentfully admired. While as webmaster I was determined not to be proscriptive: I even let post those authors of supposed flow-of-machine-consciousness, if incomprehensible.

Noticeably what no-one did, not us four regulars nor any of the visitors, was attempt to critique or otherwise promote film

versions of SF. Probably because us readers of SF have little in common with fans of SF film and TV franchises, which are generally space/time-shift drama rather than explorations of concepts.

Such SF adventure films often include, if not a cute and cuddly alien animal then a simple robot or alien, both with a charming and insatiable curiosity. The robots/cyborgs behaving with no mention of the quandaries caused by Artificial Intelligence, to wit Isaac Asimov's four laws of robotics. Those four laws only getting a cinematic airing in the film version of his *I Robot*.

Personally, I dislike, despair of, SF movies that don't see beyond present technologies, behavioural tropes, where every assumption of their imagined future is taken from today's cultures.

There are exceptions of course. I confess to a soft spot for an early *Star Trek*'s discovery of a silicon intelligence. A seductive concept, and Spock's delight in ascertaining a slow rock's vitality did have an impact on me. *Futuricity*'s own mission [statement] is to find futures before they are lost to us. Not said unboldly. To find remembered futures and transport ourselves to one. [That comes later.]

Another film exception is Arthur C. Clarke's long ago *2001*. Despite my being in awe of the great majority of Arthur's written work, this film adaptation is I believe an improvement on the book.

Few other film versions though can be called an improvement. In fact, any SF film that has actors holding handguns or their equivalent has usually missed the point of SF. I can't for instance think of any *Dune* film version that has come anywhere near close to capturing Frank Herbert's preoccupation with the formation and exploitation and corruption of religions.

Film fans are usually more conversant with the arcana behind the film, or series, are more interested in who the

actors, who the directors. Generally, it is neither the science nor the fiction that appeals to those fans, could just as easily be a well-crafted Western or a gangster movie.

So, for the twenty odd years that *Futuricity* has been running, SF fans have discovered us, have left their tuppence worth, and have shortly thereafter abandoned our multiverse. Leaving a core, a stalwart four of us. Myself here in Somerset, Julian in North Devon, Bart in South Wales and Steve in Cumbria.

So far as each of our four lives go we are all where we have ended up. And while we may have settled into lives where we are now, we are none of us settled men.

As part of my day job, I have met many men who, having always lived in the one place, are unable to believe that they could exist as themselves in another environment, so much are they a part of where they are. Not us four.

We four know that we are not fixed, that we live within an ever-changing climate upon an unstable planet, with people disappearing, moving on, taking up lives elsewhere. We four know that we ourselves could as easily have had other lives, have been other people.

That said, we four at the beginning of this tale, we also considered ourselves for the moment domestically stuck and could see no further ahead than the sharing of our enthusiasms and ideas.

No way did we then assume – was it only a year or so back? – that we four too would become capable of space travel. Yet here we four Futurists go, looking forward, while recalling older futures.

Two: *Futuricity* continued

(Cumbria & Somerset)

Pre-*Futuricity* Steve Packworth and I – Steve in Workington, myself in rural Somerset – had found ourselves more than the once, supporting one another on various SF sites or social media threads. Especially when, as said before, it came to new SFers believing that only SciFi films or franchises were all that rated an SF mention.

For Steve it was *Dune*. Pre-*Futuricity* Steve became almost possessively incensed with any film's concentration on the giant worms of *Dune*, then on the battles; rather than on author Frank Herbert's invention of myths, his analyses of religion; plus all the many concepts that the film versions failed to explore – tank births, Bene Gesserit use of 'voice', navigation by spice exploitation, and the political machinations beyond the battling fremen and the thuggish Harkonnens.

This huge, many volumed work of imagination and speculation, father and son co-authored, could no way be successfully reduced – Steve resolutely maintained – to a few formulaic tropes.

Nor was it solely the filmic trivialisation of *Dune* that had us voicing our outrage. Science fiction had existed long before TV's *Quatermas* and H G Wells' radio reading of *War of the Worlds*. Nor were Wells' time travels backwards and forwards only about meeting up with strange and frightening creatures. Read his *Kipps*, I told an argumentative but snobbish ignoramus on a social media thread and learn how it had been in Wells' time to be poor, socially awkward, and what a struggle it had been to better oneself.

Widely read as both Steve and I were, what gave us most annoyance was the film buffs' right to call themselves SF fans.

Gratingly so when they believed their latest SF to be the newest of the new; and they had never heard of Jules Verne's *Voyage to the Centre of the Earth*, written in the 1800s. Let alone Cyrano de Bergerac's 16th century *Voyage to the Moon*.

Let me be clear, lest I unnecessarily cause offence: neither Steve nor I were out-and-out opposed to TV and film versions. Both Steve and I could unselfconsciously come out with TV and film catchphrases. 'May the Force be with you.' 'Live long and prosper.' What we wanted was to tell film fans, and not in a condescending way, that there was more, so much more.

On any thread that descended into filmdom 'Read' came to be our recognisable response, our instruction. And as readily, wearily mocked: 'Yup. I know. Go to the book.'

When I came to realise that response was what Steve and I were regularly receiving I privately messaged him and suggested that he and I set up a website to promote SF books and authors both old and new. Steve enthusiastically agreed. Our initial working title was to be, from our joint emphases on the old, *Remembering the Future*. The website was to be where we would encourage those already inclined towards SF to read the hundreds and thousands of novels that explored the many alternative futures and pasts.

For the website software I was wholly dependent on Steve. My own contribution to the new site was a piece aimed at *Blade Runner* enthusiasts, directing them to the many other Philip K Dick short stories. My own K-Dick favourite, beyond *Electric Sheep*, is his offhand reference – and Dick comes up with many such incidental characters – to [again!] Gannymede Slime.

My second SF evangelical effort was intended to take film fans beyond A C Clarke's *2001*. (As with John Brunner's *Zanzibar* I'm always happy to promote fellow Somerset authors.) And of all ACC's books the one that I wanted film fans to pick up was his *Childhood's End*. Steve too loved that book's ending, with everything preceding stood on its head.

ACC is just so good on otherness, as in his *Rendezvous With Rama* trilogy. And of course, I always urge new readers to his non-fiction *Profiles of the Future*. So many of those futures still waiting to come into being.

Steve's first contribution to the pre-*Futuricity* website, after the software and web design, was a strange one. One where I feared he may have set out to deliberately cause offence.

Later on, I realised that it had been more about his ex-wife and her preoccupation with image. I know this as I have since asked Steve how his marriage had fallen apart. This Q&A coming about after his wondering about my own many failed relationships. I had therefore felt it OK to ask. Steve had said that she hadn't liked being called Mrs Packworth. Had to be more than that, I had said.

"No. Image was everything to her. All life was a mirror to her. How she might look at that moment, in that place. If she was being flirty, she'd even pretend not to be a mother. Of three!"

Steve's first pre-*Futuricity* paper therefore – provoked by this image-consciousness – was critical of, indeed sought to laugh at, comi-cons.

Now comi-cons may have started out as a celebration, a chance to promote and sell SF comics; but they have become, since the film franchises, a chance for – sometimes entire families – to dress up as their favourite film characters.

Nubile young ladies parade around the few stalls in second-skin lycra. Those women who don't have comic book cleavages or peach-pert buttocks, but who still like dressing up, they come as ghost-busters. Men without muscles slip into padded vests and don the latest Marvel rig; or, channelling their inner psyche, they sport some grotesque plastic form. Small children are recruited into peculiar alien suits. Then of course there are the store-bought Wookies, Storm Troopers, Spocks; and every other film creation. All parading self-consciously past one another.

On comi-con stalls will be DVDs, toys and posters, a few comics; but with not a solid book in sight. And they have the gall, Steve said, to claim this as a Science Fiction event.

When this was uploaded onto pre-*Futuricity* I readied myself, as webmaster, to deal with outrage. Instead, it proved our biggest recruiter. Obviously attracting those who do not enjoy dressing up.

Futuricity was go.

Three: Ilfracombe

In any life there are many an if: if that someone had not been brown, white, in front, behind... There are as many ifs in this tale. For instance, and foremost, if it hadn't been for Julian Featherstone, and if Julian hadn't lived in Ilfracombe, this tale would not be being told.

Within himself Julian is a man of as many ifs, coincidences and contradictions.

An unashamed techie, Julian refers to himself as a nerd, a geek, self-wired, and happily confesses to being a fan of, of all things, pulp science fiction, the penny dreadfuls of our once brave new world. [Apologies to Aldous Huxley.]

Julian made his entry into *Futuricity* with a consideration of pulp SF, how it has so often – even if as an inadvertent plot device – accurately predicted aspects of this world.

Killer Crabs by Guy N Smith I recall as one of his all-time favourites, though as much for its cover as its content. When I said that nothing within *Killer Crabs* had so far come to pass, his unarguable response had been, 'Not yet.'

Further 'papers' on aspects of pulp SF followed. One I recall, probably because so garishly illustrated, was on how some pulp SF had been saved by their cover art, while others were let down by an unimaginative visual trope, usually – and regardless of the story – a full-breasted semi-naked woman in warrior costume.

Still more promotion of pulp SF on *Futuricity* gave examples of how some pulp authors could write well, although they then had plots and characteristics wholly preposterous. Albeit with some neat notions. EC Trubb for instance.

No pulp SF writer could nowadays however be anywhere near as successful as EC Trubb; and I say this from the heart, could expect anywhere near the following that those old SF

writers got, often verging on cult status. This is primarily because way too much is getting published these days and with so much choice it is hard for any pulp author to get any kind of following let alone a cult following.

Julian made no claims of literary excellence for pulp SF, readily conceded that most had heroes who were unnecessarily macho and ladies who were seductively luscious, and plots – with their plethora of non-sequitors – near chaotic. There would also often be an encounter with a savage tribe and some strange beasts; a bit like those archaeological, treasure hunt films.

Preposterous as maybe, Julian nonetheless lamented pulp SF's passing. Which passing had been brought about initially by repeal of the Net Book Agreement, and completely killed off by the arrival of online Print On Demand and self-publishing.

Old time pulp though Julian still defended, one of his defences being, 'Why not two or more moons? Or whatever natural unnatural phenomena? We accept sky discharges of static electricity. Having ice balls rain down on us. Occluding mists. Rainbows for goodness sake. And that's before we get to Austro or Aurora Borealis.'

What is also untypical for this self-acknowledged techie, besides his having been happily married to glamorous Glynis for years, is his sense of humour. And it is not only defensive self-deprecation, he is quick to find the ridiculous in any and everything.

Before I go any further in describing Julian though I'd best point out that if this was Julian himself in conversation, he would very soon let it be known that he did not want, no matter how close a friend, his name shortened to Jules.

"I am not a unit of electrical energy. My name is Julian."

For some reason this insistence on his full name makes him, in my mind, sound tall. Julian isn't. Julian is a round man. Wife Glynis fractionally taller. In olden times Glynis would have

been described as tightly corseted. These days it is more that she is upright and athletic, well-groomed in even her hiking boots. Although for business she becomes noticeably taller in sharp high heels.

Of much more importance to this reiteration of ifs is where Julian happens to live.

If Julian had not inherited that tall block of Ilfracombe flats, flats which had begun life as a posh seaside hotel, then this tale entire would not be being told.

I should have said cliffside hotel. Julian thus has an invested interest in global warming, its effects of coastal erosion; can quote if provoked whole passages from JE Lovelock's *Gaia* and JG Ballard's *The Drowned World*.

Of this tall block of flats Julian and Glynis have the top floor flat. Of this flat estate agent Glynis, who also makes quilts, has a spare bedroom given over to their production. As an estate agent Glynis would often drape one of her quilts over a bed in a top-end property, and had by this ruse acquired a couple of on-the-side sales.

For his part Julian has the entire large attic. Of this whole floor sections are given over to the residue of his various enterprises. The greater area though is given to what, when busy he calls his workroom, when excited and pleased with an outcome he calls his laboratory.

Not only is Julian's Glynis unexpectedly attractive, she is also sharp-tongued. She said of Julian – during a living room zoom we four had and she was popping in and out – at some point in our chatter one of us had said we all had to admit to having different bees in our bonnets – Glynis said, “Should be so lucky. Got a single bat in my belfry.”

Exit left cackling.

Although still in his early thirties Julian has already had several enterprises. One of which was of course his trading in pulp SF and SF figurines, along with his buying and selling of

general antiques. With the latest recession and his trading having trickled to a halt, with the patent on his two inventions outdated, his main source of income at the beginning of this tale, other than rents from the flats below, came from repairing iPhones and cleaning various other electronic devices back to factory settings for a Barnstaple pawnbroker.

But let us go back to the attic as laboratory.

The longest lasting of Julian's experiments – going way back to a childhood crystal set – was his creation of a unique receiver. He threaded an aerial up inside the old chimney stack. The flats were listed – 'a fine example of Victorian seaside architecture' – and although the stack had not been in use as a chimney for at least a century, the stack was noted as 'a fine example of its type.' Even so a chrome aerial now discreetly protrudes, ever so slightly, above one of its glazed terracotta pots, also fine examples of their type.

That one tall aerial alone would have made for good radio reception – for ordinary radios. For ordinary radios, Julian told us, being shut off by hills inland the strongest signal came from a Welsh-language transmitter the other side of the Bristol Channel. Not that Julian has been keen to learn Welsh. Any Welsh he has picked up has come from his many calls with Bart. Which Julian claims aren't really conversations but steam-punk Bart picking antique-dealing Julian's knowledge of Victorian arcana.

But back to the aerial.

The chrome chimney aerial was augmented by what Julian claimed to be the world's longest carbon rod. It ran the length of the attic, from one apex end to the other. Using just a crystal set – Julian confided that it was both his start-of-the-working-day ritual and what he did prior to leaving the laboratory – he would slide the contact along the carbon rod picking up the world's transmissions.

Has to go almost without saying here that what Julian really wanted was to pick up an out-of-this-world transmission.

What Julian reported back to *Futuricity* was, 'Hugo Gernsbach would have been so impressed with what I have done in this attic. Here I am listening for aliens beside a heap of classic pulp SF.' [For those who might not know, Hugo Gernsbach was both an inventor and publisher/editor of the very first science fiction magazine.]

In that same 'paper', Julian referred to his attic set-up as The New Machiavellian Intervention. Which title may have been what led to him and *Futuricity*, much to our amusement, being investigated by one of the Secret Services. Could have been Special Branch, MI5 or 6; we never did find out.

The reason for Julian being under suspicion was because, historically, the Russians have always been way ahead of Western powers when it comes to radio astronomy. Propaganda of the Western powers claims that this is because Soviet Russia, as it was then, initially opted for radio astronomy because it suited their 'autocratic systems of governance.'

Politics large and small revelling in its usual name-calling mess.

Futuricity was found not be a fifth column.

But back to Julian's daily listening ritual. On those days when he thought he may have picked up something extraterrestrial from a frequency unrecognised he connected the crystal set to the electrics and pumped up the volume.

Julian said that those faint signals always seemed to come whenever there was a storm battering the roof tiles. Although he had inserted solid foam insulation panels between the attic rafters - having removed the silver foil from the panels - still the cliff-top gales, even with the headphones on, would drown out the fainter bleeps and whispers.

With little confidence that Jodrell Bank, or any of Russia's or America's giant dishes, would disclose their having received alien transmissions, Julian set about wiring the attic floor and rafters, making of it an internal dish. Only to discover, cursing

his lack of foresight, that what he had created was a Faraday Cage, wherein even his workaday transistor radio failed to function, couldn't even pick up the Welsh language station.

Concerned that all the new wiring might also inhibit his long carbon listening for aliens, Julian dismantled the all-round wiring and, but of course, knocked out a 'paper' for *Futuricity* on the experiment/misadventure.

Four: Wales

Bart, in South Wales, is our historian. Not yet the historian of *Futuricity* (that lot would seem to have fallen to me). Bart's is more a bent for history in general. Not completely general: he has researched and published a booklet on the pre-mining history of his one Welsh valley. His aim, he said, had been to counter what he called the tendency to myth-creation of other Welsh historians.

'Have they truly been plumbing the past? Or have they too been seeking to create, often out of hints and accidentally found artefacts, myths?'

Although he is along with us enamoured of the future-fantastic, Bart nonetheless has fierce strictures when it comes to actual history; castigating those who go looking into medieval history (legend) only to be able to tell, via SF, of ghosts, strange spirits, hauntings...

'History of a land,' he wrote, 'is the record of migrations over it. There may have well been battles, wars even, but what matters is the record, the pressure of the migrations underlying those conflicts. Romans, Vikings, Normans, Saxons, Huguenots... There began the cultural evolutions...'

Has to be said however – and this from a third person's point of view – that Bart's interest in the past is also what he himself can take from it. A fan of steam punk all of Victorian history – as with Julian's flats and antiquities – is grist to Bart's mill.

I once questioned Bart's insistence on his being described as an 'amateur historian.' 'A professional historian gets paid,' he responded. 'Amateurs not. Pay me and I'll call myself professional.'

'By the time history happens I'm going to be dead.' John Brunner

After me, Bart is the next oldest of us four, although at times one might think of him as the youngest. This I believe is down to his several years younger, and totally tattooed, live-in girlfriend, Rhean. Even Rhean's face, to beyond her scalp hairline, is geometrically tattooed.

Julian had first physically met up with Bart at a Porthcawl comi-con, where Rhean had joined the costume parade barely covered in latex. Bart had told Julian that he knew of no area of her skin that hadn't been tattooed.

While the twenty-year difference in their ages might be remarkable, given the current fashion, Rhean's tattoos were not. Both Bart and Rhean were, as if this might explain much, occasional musicians, and had got together after they had appeared a few times at the same venues. Which explains little. Probably because Bart is so difficult to typecast, so different to me. Apparently, donning his musician's cap, literally, on stage he also wears a jacket with tassels, and switches between saxophone and guitar.

But back to *Futuricity*.

Most of Bart's contributions to *Futuricity* have pursued two themes, steam punk and exploring such as Von Daniken's theories of alien visits to planet Earth. This has had him extensively investigate Stonehenge, its Welsh connection (the Preseli stones); other Welsh barrows and stone circles; and of course pyramids, Mayan temples, Nasca lines... and all the associated religions and cultures. He and Steve particularly get off on these speculations.

“Here I am in Wales,” Bart said once in a zoom, “investigating the origins of hard objects, and there's Steve up there in Cumbria wondering at the shamanistic influence of magic mushrooms.”

Which handily demonstrates *Futuricity's* many pairings. Because although I may have started *Futuricity*, I am by no means its focal point. Steve and Julian regularly confer on various technologies. Bart and photographer Steve are both nature-loving conservationists. As am I. And, in their criss-crossing over and around the Bristol Channel, Bart's and Julian's entire families seem to have become solid friends.

In his contributions to *Futuricity* Bart has, I believe, the best authorial handle, signing off his 'papers' as Bartholomew Montgomery. Nor does he seem to mind our shortening it to Bart.

Talking of Bart and names brings me to his son. When said son was London-living he had been a comedy rapper, with the tag Lou Quickly.

Lou had been Bart's only son. He had died a couple of years prior to our meeting. The inquest came up with a 'narrative verdict,' cause of his sudden death possibly an underlying genetic heart condition, exacerbated possibly by use of Class A drugs, with a rare form of cancer also implicated.

Father Bart and Lou's emotionally unstable mother had already been living apart. Long before her son's death she had returned to her valley parents. Bart had remained in the family home, had more or less single-handedly brought up his son. Lou, even after moving to London, had continued to use the house as his base.

Bart had grieved, had looked for someone, something to blame. Lou's mother had come even more undone.

In the awkwardness surrounding even belated mention of death, I yet felt duty-bound to ask Bart about his son. Not that I was alone: we all of us sympathised with Bart - '*...a strong desire to share the burden of another's pain.*' Cixin Liu: *The Three Body Problem*.

"How did Lou become a rapper?" I had assumed Lou had followed his musician father onto the stage.

“No real idea,” Bart said. “He never did any of it down here. But in London he became really popular. Still can't make out how or why. He talked so fast in a strong valley accent. How Londoners understood a word of it I'll never know.”

But back to *Futuricity*.

The SF authors Bart mostly promoted, aside from steam punk, were Chiana Melville and JG Ballard. Beyond that he goes for time travel concepts, calls it 'Forward History.' As with all four of us though nothing is that clear-cut.

'Past and future', Bart defended his mix of the pair on a thread, 'are said one moment to be irrelevant to the present. The next necessary to an understanding of the human condition. Who of us can live without a past or a future? Science fiction is forward history.'

'I just don't understand where the past goes when it goes.'
Phillip K Dick

Bart has a liking for historical ironies, rubs his hands in glee over any paradox, exults over quantum leaps and has a penchant for alternative histories and bizarre pairings.

“Take apples,” he said once. “A single apple fell – bonk! – on comic Antiphane's head. It killed him. Another apple, much later, fell – bonk! – on Newton's head. From which apple event Newton eventually deduced gravity. Think Antiphanes would've found that funny?”

One 'paper' of Bart's was on Jules Verne's *Voyage* series. Bart maintained that Jules Verne's use of 'voyage' was deliberate, redolent as it then was of both adventure and the exotic. In Verne's recent history there had been celebrated travellers such as Magellan, Columbus, even Marco Polo and Raleigh; all of whom had returned to Europe with tales of the fantastic.

In Verne's original French, which Bart claimed to prefer,

Voyage to... had been used as titles rather than the English language versions of *Journey to...* 'Journey,' Bart had written, 'sounded like Jules Verne had bought a ticket for a regular bus route rather than having taken a step into the great and exciting unknown.'

At the time of Bart's writing those words we four had yet to take our own steps into that great and exciting unknown.

Five: Somerset

As I will be divulging details of the personal lives of *Futuricity's* other three stalwarts, I feel it only fair to disclose some of mine. Although, childless as I am, little there is to tell.

My name is Benjamin Barraclough. Langport, Somerset is where I was born. Somerset is where I continue to live. At that time, to be precise, on one of Somerset's wooded hillsides. To be even more precise, in a caravan.

I did not choose to spend my last years on planet Earth in a caravan. This caravan was where, in my early seventies, my life's pressed-upon-me decisions had dumped me.

This was where, a retirement project, I was supposed to be building my own eco-house, while keeping a jokey journalistic record of the process, its setbacks and successes. All came to a halt soon after the laying of the concrete raft and the installation of the septic tank, the onset of Brexit, the beginning of the pandemic, recessions and distant wars, et al.

The rectangular caravan was already there – water, mains electric and telephone connected – for me to live in while the house was being built. And who knows? With luck, the luck that had to date deserted me, that much-imagined house – oriel window with a view out over the Deane – might indeed get built.

In the meantime, my money having run out, or rather the price of materials having overtaken my budget and local newspapers having gone bust, so not even an irregular income, there I stayed in the caravan. Which was, I used to console myself, ten hundred times better than being shop-doorway homeless.

The caravan was not the only place where I have lived in Somerset.

I began as a homeowner down on the Chedzoy Levels,

stayed thereabouts a good many years. Before moving to Burnham, then around the coast to Arthur C Clarke's birthplace, Minehead; then disastrously – during a surge in the housing market – to an ex-council house beside the River Tone. Which was underneath some electric pylons whose buzzing interfered with my thinking, and which is what desperately led me in my dotage to want to build a house of my original own on a plot up here.

In this dotage I'm still not sure what to give as my life's driving force. Whether it has been my having a need for solitude in which to write; or has it been my desire for solitude and my giving writing as a socially acceptable alibi?

My several partners came to suspect that alibi and, feeling abandoned, unwanted, they left. With few regrets on my part. Each time I re-embraced my solitude.

I am self-evidently not good at relationships. I can analyse them, tell you afterwards what went wrong – misplaced expectations mostly. What I have been unable to do is manage those expectations and live within any of those relationships.

My writing was more than a job. But a day-job it was, paid me a wage. And as I was the wage-earner with a mortgage years before Lilith moved in with me, the house on the Levels remained mine when she eventually moved out.

While partnered with Lilith we had acquired a social group that, without her, I no longer felt a part of. (One of 21st century life rules has it that the more people there are around you the more isolated you will feel.) So I sold up there and moved across to Burnham, which was closer commuting-wise to my then job in Weston-super-Mare.

That set the pattern for all my future moves. Partner left, I sold up; with each move leaving me, peradventure, with a smaller mortgage.

When each of my live-in women left, they made a scene. Felt it behoved them, I supposed, to dramatically mark the breach. Within the scene I would be accused of many things,

but predominantly of neglect, social and emotional.

I knew myself each time not to have been the only one with character faults. Yet mine were the only ones that, each time, got a snarled mention. Lilith even maintained, long after our separation, that my neglect of her had verged on domestic abuse.

Lynne told me that I'd been absent even when I'd been physically beside her. Carole named me 'Distracted.' At a lunch with her friends, near our end, I got up to go to the lavatory. Carole said, "There goes Distracted. Not a word of apology. Not even an Excuse Me." The side twist to her mouth said that she had planned saying something like that in front of her sympathetic friends.

'Some people never observe anything. Life just happens to them. They get by on little more than dumb persistence.' Frank Herbert

Scene behind me, another day or two after the latest had packed up and gone, I would unencumbered come again happily to the page. Even greeted by a blank page I'd be confident that in my brief absence my subconscious would have been simmering away, and on this new day the page would tell me what. And somehow most times it did.

Alone with the page I would be in awe once again of the power of language. (Language is where, should it have passed you by, some creatures exist only as their names – angel, unicorn, phoenix.) And I would delight again in writing for its own sake, relishing those productive periods when writing has been my one and only confidante.

Such days however have to be weighed against those many others when, pen in hand, fingers floating over the keyboard, when writing has been – but to me still retained an attractive aspect – possessed of an aura of mindless ritual. So here I am

again: why do I bother?

'Sometimes you don't know what you think until you try to explain it.' Brian M Stableford

In my newspaper columnist day jobs, I specialised in self-mockery, or rather in self-pity with an undertone of wry self-approval. Or, looked at generously, a simple monitoring of mine own responses to life's stimuli.

So self-negating was I that in one article I quoted the one review of my one poetry collection - '...far less than the sum of its parts.'

Nowadays I console my poet-self that, dismal as that review may have been, at the very least throughout my poetry 'career' I placed no reliance on ornate fonts.

'...lyric poetry was left to untalented screwballs who had to shriek for attention and compete by eccentricity.'
Pohl/Kornbluth – The Space Merchants

I think it was from that ego-pricking review onwards that I stopped taking my own authorship seriously, came to see myself as no longer in competition with the likes of Clarke and Brummer, and most certainly not with that pair of Somerset literary grandees, Coleridge and Wordsworth. From thence onwards I reconciled myself to being but another second-hand chronicler of the absurd; and as a journalist – not that differently – reporting on the sillinesses and hypocrisies of Somerset folk, and of politicians both local and national.

'He had never seduced his clerkly soul with the thought that he was either born great or would under any circumstances achieve greatness.' Isaac Asimov

For clarity I have to state that, although I might relish solitude, here I have not been that solitary. Two cats, a tortoiseshell and a tabby, within a year of each other have found me. Not that I let them and their fleas indoors. Both live under the caravan, and from there have been company enough. Idle moments they might sit on the steps with me, sheltered by the canopy I had built over the caravan's front door, the three of us looking out over the concrete platform, foundations of a house never to be built, two blue pipe ends sticking out of the grey concrete, their opposing arches making different shadows.

Those two cats undid my hermit status. As did/do my three *Futuricity* compadres. I also maintained a rivalrous and distant friendship with many other writers. In whom I readily recognised aspects of my solitary self, even in those at the time with their partners. All of us content with our own company. The cats likewise. No fealty with cats. Much as they might have enjoyed my food and occasional petting, both went their own way, followed their own woodland tracks and trails.

The outstanding consequence of all my failed relationships, each subsequent house move decreasing my mortgage, was that I inadvertently made enough, come my late sixties, to buy this woodland plot and with retirement savings enough to self-build my dream house. As already said the house remained a dream. Instead, there I was in a tin shelter getting woken mornings by twigs and acorns falling on the roof.

No real rancour at fate though. I had grown accustomed to life's struggles and disappointments. My one struggle with the caravan was pushing bike and trailer full of supplies back up from Wellington, seeming even back then to have to pause more and more often to catch my breath.

In many ways that caravan has left me better off. Compared to a house a stationary caravan requires little in the way of upkeep, beyond maybe an annual touch of oil on door and window hinges. Having also been gainfully employed most of my adult life my state pension alone has covered my day-to-

day needs. No longer do I have to prep for interviews, hustle for freelance work.

I have been free to write what entertained me. Least ways I was before I began this book.

Back in those days however I couldn't help but feel that the absurd, the more ridiculous end of SF, had to be a more accurate representation of our lives than anything supposedly grittily authentic. In which case I will have to retrospectively count myself a late-coming associate of the K-Dickers.

All of this is how I see myself. Is probably not how others saw/see me.

As an SF writer in Somerset, I believed that my efforts would inevitably get compared to those two Somerset heavyweights, Brummer and Clarke. I believed, back before *Futuricity*, that one had to either deny their influence or to live with it. Living with it was what foolishly decided me to buy the beside-the-Tone house: it was only a couple of cycling miles from Arthur's last known Somerset address. Although by that time Arthur had long before taken up residence in Sri Lanka. His brother Fred had been the last to live in Dene Court, from where he had put out occasional paper issues of his *Rocket* magazine. (I learned later that Arthur had never lived there at all, but had been brought up in a farm at Ash Priors.)

My buying that Tone house had been a silly idea all round. Took me several frustrating years to get someone to take that unwholesome dwelling off my hands.

Burdened by those reputations, come *Futuricity*, and being another Somerset author, I yet believed it behove me to champion both John Brummer as well as Arthur C Clarke. Blogging a homage to Brummer's *Stand on Zanzibar* I set my short story in an overcrowded, jampacked but still very polite England, and I titled it, *Excuse Me, Sorry*.

Self-evidently I have never relied for income on my SF output. Didn't take much hindsight to see that my own SF

suffered from the same air of facetiousness, as if reluctant to take itself seriously, as so much other amateurish SF. But I did, as Ben Barracough, sell more than a few formulaic crime tales. Likewise, I have also been able to pen a magazine/periodical/newspaper piece to order, lately knocking out an occasional piece for the online Gazette.

Doesn't mean that I was in the least self-satisfied. I was much given in my early seventies to glancing back – to opportunities missed, messed up, to live-in women misread. Each introspection leaving me surprised just how quickly the future had come – things once SF now all around, turbines, solar-fields and handheld phones – and simultaneously dismayed at how much had remained the same – use of pesticides, car-thrown litter and corrupt politicians.

There in that caravan, in Somerset, I felt stuck.

Oddly, in that then looking back, I believed that my SF efforts were way more important than any of my other scribblings. And I must have thought so at the time of writing. Much as Iain M Banks added or removed the M for books he considered less or more important, those SF books of mine were the only ones to which I affixed my full name, Benjamin Barracough. (Can't recall offhand whether Banks' *The Wasp Factory* was authored with an M or without.)

Even when offering arty poems for publication I did so as Ben. Not that I have written much poetry, arty or otherwise, while in this caravan. I had been on my lonesome here for too long; and poets need new people, new places, fresh input. Why do you think they travel so much? The trees, roads, seasons here quote themselves back at me.

Stuck and directionless: as founder and web-master of *Futuricity* I believed that I was the one getting the most out of it, used *Futuricity* to test out possible plots. Mostly I asked what more was needed to make a plot credible. Or as credible as my readers' imaginations would allow that plot to be.

As I wrote 'stuck and directionless' a small voice in the back

of my head was wondering what our space travels might soon have me say. How they might have me say it.

Remains to be seen. For the moment I will go on fulfilling my self-assigned role of privately – for now – documenting what we have so far achieved. While keeping *Futuricity* as cover.

Six: *Futuricity* and the state of the world

We noticed only later that Julian had contributed little if anything to *Futuricity* for six months or more. Within those six months Julian's absence hadn't been that remarkable: we all four of us, when we had nothing pressing to be said, myself included, often took a break.

It was my posting about Apollo that got us four off on this particular track.

Being called *Futuricity* didn't mean that we couldn't post about the past, especially when we believed something old relevant to our future.

'Concept of conservation, of valuing all life,' I wrote, 'is by no means new. Take the ancient beliefs surrounding Apollo. The griffin, the cock, the grasshopper, the wolf, the crow, the swan, the hawk, the olive, the laurel, the palm tree... All were considered sacred to Apollo. Albeit that Apollo's championing of all life was even then brought into question – by critics of Apollo worship. They pointed out that wolves and hawks were seen as suitable sacrifices to Apollo. Defenders of Apollo responded by saying that as a god Apollo also represented shepherds. Wolves and lamb-taking hawks were the natural enemies of the flocks over which Apollo, as god, presided...'

And I went on to bring up the interconnectedness of all global life.

'This has an awful contemporary ring to it,' Steve started the thread critical of the obvious inconsistencies within Apollo worship. 'Even then always an opt-out. Bit like those who still come up with reasons to continue using fossil fuels and nuclear.'

A peculiarity of online threads, keyboard campaigners all, is

that they aren't strictly consequential, bear little resemblance to a same-time same-place face-to-face conversation, a conversation that can be led as much by gesture and grimace as the words used. And in any online thread not all the contributions from all the correspondents arrive at once. A participant can well be responding to something said, thought about, several days before.

Bart for instance, and in apparent response to Steve, came up with this, 'We stand each in our country on our invisible planet.'

'Not invisible,' Steve came back. 'You poet you. We all know that we're on a small planet. Small, but one large enough for us to be able to appreciate how life, in its seasonal migrations, moves over the surface of the planet. The assumption, the near blessing of ignorance, of small-mindedness, is of no help at all.'

'That's you told Bart.' My attempt to lighten the thread. 'You poet you.'

Any discussion of Earth's probable demise is depressing. And with just us *Futuricity* four, fruitless. Unlikely that we four alone can change anything.

Steve though is *Futuricity*'s premier nature writer. Steve it is who excitedly puts up photos of red squirrels, geese in flight, says how pleased and proud he is to have captured the green sheen of a plover's plumage, its crest erect. And on this thread, he inevitably laments that, as with so many other species no longer at ease in their ecological niche, the lapwing too is in danger of extinction. If not from seasonal misalignment of food staple, then from disease enabled by global warming.

'Nothing new,' I told Steve. 'In 1938 Edgar Rice Burroughs had this in his *Carson of Venus*: 'Earth, where overpopulation and increased means of transport have greatly spread and increased the number of bacteria.'"

The one book nature-loving Steve promotes above all others is Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*.

Talking of trees, Bart in South Wales was happy to tell us how exciting it was, after the depredations of the coal mines, to see how year on year even the spoil tips were being colonised. First by lichens and mosses, low-lying plants, then a willow or an odd spruce seedling taking root. And on top of that natural regeneration, Bart was pleased to tell us, the Welsh government had a tree-planting programme – for every child born in Wales a tree had to be planted somewhere in Wales.

A result of that programme, Bart told us, was that his valley sides were becoming forested. Oak, beech, birch and even sweet chestnuts were taking over from the bracken. Self-seeded sycamores and maples too were spreading. Countering this optimism daylight gaps were appearing in the new canopy, where diseased ash and larch were dying back.

That same two-steps-forward-one-back holds sway too here in Somerset. The Levels have for decades now been returned to their natural state, flooded in winter and farmed in summer, that being how Somerset came by its name. That programme of reversal has seen cranes come to regularly nest, bitterns return to the reed beds, and in the narrow tines [drainage ditches] white egrets small and large competing with our indigenous grey herons.

Set against that Somerset positive is the amount of building that has gone on along the M5 corridor. Since the motorway's coming Bridgwater, Taunton and Wellington have quintupled in size, and not with anything of architectural merit – housing estates of kit-built houses, some on flood plains, along with huge retail estates and the seemingly endlessly grey roofs of industrial estates.

Fortunately, low-lying Somerset is cut about by hills. The Mendips, Quantocks, Blackdowns, Brendons and Poldens. But, and as with Wales, on their wooded hillsides the ash are diseased and dying back.

'And what with agricultural herbicides and pesticides,' I complained to my three friends, 'towns here have become

wildlife reservoirs, the farmed fields a too-green wasteland.'

Regards global warming what we on *Futuricity* most lamented was that all the many futures imagined by SF writers will be lost in a humanless future. At the same time, we drew a perverse solace from those SF writers who had so predicted. Steve, his house not that far from the prone-to-flooding River Derwent, often cited as handbook J G Ballard's *The Drowned World*. Such drowning would see the Levels under water the year round. Possibly even the Deane.

Looking to a positive future, to what might await a surviving humankind, exemplified how different are us four lovers of SF. For instance, when we as humans go beyond *homo sapiens* Julian thinks the metamorphosis will be by machine, Steve by – his own definition – mind-flight, and Bart by something he calls time-melding. My own guess, and it is not necessarily a good thing, is that the transition from human will come about, not by state eugenics, but – given the choices already on offer by IVF and gene manipulation – by privately-funded selective breeding.

Often, I have consoled myself, during my less than successful literary career, that although my work might not have been widely read during my own lifetime there could come future times when my books might find a devoted readership. Increasingly however that posterity – in which my efforts might find a readership – is becoming only a possibility.

In the valleys, Bart told us, year on year landslips are becoming more frequent. 'Climate change means all year-round weather extremes. Even here in Wales. I've actually found myself lamenting those long-gone wet Welsh summers, those gentle drizzles drifting up the valley. Droughts are now followed by torrential downpours, which increase the likelihood of yet more landslides. And this is not just the UK. Look what's happening in Africa. The landmass entire is baking.'

'Human life on this planet is nearing its end,' Steve put in. 'It

may continue to exist in small pockets, but the human species will be unlikely to dominate again.'

Bart told us of the Welsh poet Dannie Abse describing humanity's absence from early history as *The Great Silence*. In his *Wanderers of Time* John Wyndham said that mankind, like the dinosaurs, just 'ceased to be.' And he wrote that in 1933.

'We're returning to silence,' Steve wrote.

Followed by Bart asking, 'Think we should put up a sign – for visiting aliens post-Climate Change? Have the sign say, 'It was our fault that so little's left. Sorry.'"

We on *Futuricity* however claim to be not of those minded to revel in post-apocalyptic futures.

Steve: 'Those SF folk who desire a clean post-Armageddon slate fail to comprehend the intricate continuity of life here, the many smallnesses of it, but smallnesses which can nevertheless produce gigantic structures. I sometimes look up in awe at what civilised humanity has built, and with despair at what uncivilised humanity has destroyed.'

'I'm no Johnny-cum-lately nationalist,' Bart almost spoke my mind. Then didn't. 'Don't think I've ever joined in the singing of *Land of my Fathers*. I was more concerned about keeping a home for my sons. My son.'

It was just as well at this point, before we three sank into the pit of despair, the slough of despond, that Julian came to our rescue with news of his space adventure.