

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

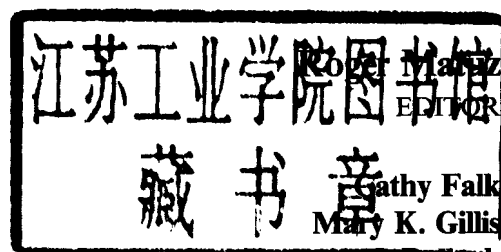
CLC

60

Volume 60

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the
Works of Today's Novelists, Poets,
Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters,
and Other Creative Writers



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series has provided readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC presents significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered by *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the dramatization of a literary work as a film or television screenplay. The present volume of *CLC* includes:

- ☞ Harper Lee—whose work *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the most widely studied contemporary novel in American high schools, according to *A Study of Book-Length Works Taught in High School English Courses* (1989), which was published by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, a research and development organization located at the University of Albany, State University of New York.
- ☞ Umberto Eco—whose work *Foucault’s Pendulum* was widely read in several languages and was the best-selling novel among American college students during the 1989–90 academic year, as reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- ☞ Annie Dillard and James Michener—who prove consistently popular among critics and readers with each new work.

Among other writers represented in the present volume are Carlos Fuentes, a major figure in contemporary literature whose novel *The Old Gringo* was recently adapted for film, and Ishmael Reed, a leading American experimental writer.

Perhaps most importantly, works that frequently appear on the syllabuses of high school and college literature courses are represented by individual entries in *CLC*. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Peter Shaffer’s *Equus* are examples of works of this stature in *CLC*, Vol. 60. Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign writers, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups within the United States.

Format of the Book

Altogether there are about 500 individual excerpts in each volume—with approximately seventeen excerpts per author—taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *CLC* supply them with vital information needed to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations facilitate the location of the original source and provide all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

A *CLC* author entry consists of the following elements:

- The **author heading** cites the form under which the author has most commonly published, followed by birth date, and death date when applicable. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.

- A **portrait** of the author is included when available.

- A brief **biographical and critical introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the excerpted criticism. The first line of the introduction provides the author's full name, pseudonyms (if applicable), nationality, and a listing of genres in which the author has written. Since *CLC* is not intended to be a definitive biographical source, *cross-references* have been included to direct readers to these useful sources published by Gale Research: *Short Story Criticism* and *Children's Literature Review*, which provide excerpts of criticism on the works of short story writers and authors of books for young people, respectively; *Contemporary Authors*, which includes detailed biographical and bibliographical sketches of nearly 95,000 authors; *Something about the Author*, which contains heavily illustrated biographical sketches of writers and illustrators who create books for children and young adults; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, which provides original evaluations and detailed biographies of authors important to literary history; and *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* and *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, which offer autobiographical essays by prominent writers for adults and those of interest to young readers, respectively. Previous volumes of *CLC* in which the author has been featured are also listed in the introduction.

- The **excerpted criticism** represents various kinds of critical writing, ranging in form from the brief review to the scholarly exegesis. Essays are selected by the editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's literary career in general. The excerpts are presented chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. All titles by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type, which enables the reader to easily identify the works being discussed. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.

- A complete **bibliographical citation** designed to help the user find the original essay or book follows each excerpt.

New Features

Beginning with Vol. 60, *CLC* has incorporated two new features designed to enhance the usability of the series:

- A list of **principal works**, arranged chronologically and, if applicable, divided into genre categories, notes the most important works by the author.

- A **further reading** section appears at the end of entries on authors who have generated a significant amount of criticism other than the pieces reprinted in *CLC*. In some cases, it includes references to material for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights.

Other Features

- A list of **Authors Forthcoming in CLC** previews the authors to be researched for future volumes.

- An **Acknowledgments** section lists the copyright holders who have granted permission to reprint material in this volume of *CLC*. It does not, however, list every book or periodical reprinted or consulted during the preparation of the volume.

- A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all the authors who have appeared in *CLC*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, and *Short Story Criticism*, with cross-references to these Gale series: *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, *Contemporary Authors Bibliographical Series*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Something about the Author*, *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, *Yesterday's Authors of Books for Children*, and *Authors & Artists for Young Adults*. Readers will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates

when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death date causes them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, Ernest Hemingway is found in *CLC*, yet a writer often associated with him, F. Scott Fitzgerald, is found in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*.

- A **Cumulative Nationality Index** alphabetically lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by numbers corresponding to the volumes in which they appear.

- A **Title Index** alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the current volume of *CLC*. Listings are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, novellas, dramas, films, record albums, and poetry, short story, and essay collections are printed in italics, while all individual poems, short stories, essays, and songs are printed in roman type within quotation marks; when published separately (e.g., T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*), the title will also be printed in italics.

- In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **special paperbound edition** of the *CLC* title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers and will be published with the first volume of *CLC* issued in each calendar year. Additional copies of the index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index: it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is disposable upon receipt of the following year's cumulation.

A Note to the Reader

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in the Literary Criticism Series may use the following general forms to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

¹Anne Tyler, "Manic Monologue," *The New Republic* 200 (April 17, 1989), 44-6; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 58, ed. Roger Matuz (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), p. 325.

²Patrick Reilly, *The Literature of Guilt: From 'Gulliver' to Golding* (University of Iowa Press, 1988); excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 58, ed. Roger Matuz (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), pp. 206-12.

Suggestions Are Welcome

The editors welcome the comments and suggestions of readers to expand the coverage and enhance the usefulness of the series. Please feel free to contact us by letter or by calling our toll-free number: 1-800-347-GALE.

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Authors Forthcoming in *CLC*

To Be Included in Volume 61

Nicholson Baker (American novelist)—Baker has received critical praise for his debut novel, *The Mezzanine*, a contemplative, detail-oriented work in which an escalator ride inspires revelations on the unexamined, seemingly trivial aspects of daily life.

Malcolm Bradbury (English novelist and critic)—A prolific author, Bradbury writes satirical novels about British and American university life in which he examines themes of social dislocation and liberalism.

Gillian Clarke (Welsh poet)—Considered an important new voice in contemporary Welsh poetry, Clarke utilizes traditional Celtic metrics that resonate throughout her primarily meditative verse. Clarke often employs these subtle sound and rhythmic patterns to explore the nature of female experience.

Maria Irene Fornés (Cuban-born American dramatist)—Winner of six Obie awards, Fornés is a leading off-Broadway dramatist. Although unconventional, her humorous, intelligent plays reflect such traditional concerns as human relationships and social and political corruption.

Larry Gelbart (American scriptwriter and dramatist)—Chief writer for the first five years of the television series "M*A*S*H," Gelbart has recently garnered praise for his comic plays *Mastergate*, a satire on the Iran-Contra scandal, and *City of Angels*, a parody of 1940s detective films.

Ernest Hemingway (American novelist and short story writer)—Recognized as one of the preeminent American authors of the twentieth century, Hemingway wrote powerful, terse narratives of disillusionment, personal loss, and stoic resolve in

the face of an apparently meaningless world. Critical commentary in Hemingway's entry will focus upon his acclaimed novel, *The Sun Also Rises*.

Zora Neale Hurston (American novelist and short story writer)—Regarded as an important writer of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston is respected for works that provide insights into black culture and the human condition. Hurston's entry will focus on her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which is enjoying renewed popularity through Women's Studies courses.

Jack Kerouac (American novelist)—Kerouac was a key figure in the artistic and cultural phenomenon known as the Beat Movement. This entry will focus on his novel *On the Road*, considered a quintessential work of Beat literature for its experimental form and its portrayal of a rebellious, hedonistic lifestyle.

Stephen King (American novelist and short story writer)—King is a prolific and popular author of horror fiction. Non-supernatural in emphasis, King's recent novels include *Misery*, in which a best-selling writer is held captive by a psychotic nurse, and *The Dark Half*, about a pseudonymous author attempting to shed his false persona who finds that his submerged alter-ego seeks revenge.

George F. Walker (Canadian dramatist)—Closely associated with the Factory Theatre, a group that promotes alternative drama in Toronto, Walker writes social satires in which he employs black humor and a variety of unconventional theatrical devices. His recent play, *Nothing Sacred*, for which Walker received his second Governor General's Award, was popular in regional theaters in the United States and Canada.

- Martin Amis (English novelist, critic, and short story writer)—Amis employs a flamboyant prose style in satirical novels that castigate hedonism in contemporary society. Criticism in this entry will focus on *Einstein's Monsters*, a short story collection, and *London Fields*, which is widely considered Amis's most ambitious novel.
- John Berryman (American poet and critic)—A key figure in the group of American poets known as the "Middle Generation," Berryman expanded the boundaries of post-World War II poetry with his intense, confessional verse and his imaginative adaptations of various poetic forms and personae. The recent publication of Berryman's *Collected Poems* has revived interest in the work of this influential poet.
- Anthony Burgess (English novelist, essayist, and critic)—Considered among the most important novelists in contemporary literature, Burgess is a prolific writer best known for his dystopian novel *A Clockwork Orange*. His work, which covers a vast range of topics, frequently explores the conflict between free will and determinism and the role of the artist in society.
- Henry Dumas (American short story writer and poet)—Considered an author of extraordinary talent, Dumas did not achieve critical recognition until after his death in 1968. His posthumously published collections *Ark of Bones* and *Goodbye Sweetwater* emphasize the African heritage of black Americans as he chronicles their divergent experiences in the rural South and the industrial North.
- Lorraine Hansberry (American dramatist)—The first African-American woman to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, Hansberry is best known for *A Raisin in the Sun*. This acclaimed play about a black working-class family's attempt to move into a white neighborhood will be the focus of entry.
- Tony Hillerman (American novelist)—Valued for their accurate and evocative depictions of Native American life on reservations of the Southwest, Hillerman's popular and critically respected mystery novels feature Navajo tribal policemen who employ both modern crime-fighting methods and ancient Navajo philosophy.
- Margaret Laurence (Canadian novelist and short story writer)—One of Canada's most prominent contemporary writers, Laurence is respected for her "Manawaka" works, a series of four novels and a volume of short stories that examine Canadian social and historical issues through their evocation of small-town Manitoba life.
- Cynthia Ozick (American short story writer and novelist)—Ozick is praised for her intricate, poetic fiction that incorporates magical elements within narratives concerning Jewish identity. This entry will focus on Ozick's recent works, *The Messiah of Stockholm* and *The Shawl*.
- Sylvia Plath (American poet and novelist)—Considered one of the most powerful poets of the post-World War II era, Plath examined conflicts relating to her familial, marital, and career aspirations. This entry will concentrate on her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, which portrays a young woman's struggles with despair and her attempts to assert a strong female identity.
- Thomas Pynchon (American novelist and short story writer)—A preeminent author of postmodern works best known for his celebrated novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon has attracted renewed critical interest with the publication of *Vineland*, his first novel in seventeen years.

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Douglas Adams

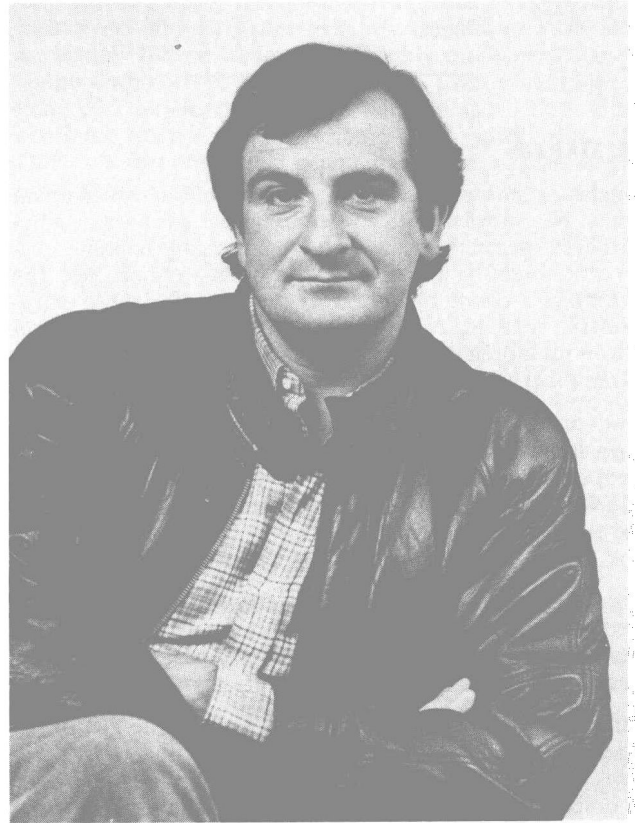
1952-

(Born Douglas Noel Adams) English novelist and scriptwriter.

Adams is best known for the series of interrelated books he began with his highly popular first novel, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Mixing deadpan humor, absurdism, black comedy, and satire, these works utilize elements from the science fiction genre to portray a chaotic universe populated by such entities as chattering objects and bizarre alien creatures with ridiculous names. Originally written as a series of radio scripts that were broadcast on British Radio, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* has proved immensely popular, generating a theater production, a television series, audio recordings, and four sequels to the novel. Although some critics have concurred with Mat Coward's contention that Adams is "a genuine [science fiction] writer, despite his irreverence for the genre," Adams has asserted that he is a "comedy writer" who merely uses "the devices of science fiction to send up everything else. The rest of the world . . . is a better subject to take than just science fiction."

Upon receiving his honors degree in English Literature from Cambridge University in 1974, Adams began writing scripts for radio and television. He stated that the idea for his first novel came while he was "lying drunk in a field in Innsbruck and gazing at the stars" and realized "that *somebody* ought to write a hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy." Described by David N. Samuelson as "Monty Python in Outer Space," *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* depicts the adventures of Englishman Arthur Dent and his extraterrestrial guide to the galaxy, Ford Prefect of Betelgeuse, after the Earth is scheduled to be destroyed by aliens to make room for an intergalactic highway. Initially compared by reviewers to the works of Lewis Carroll, Jonathan Swift, and Kurt Vonnegut, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* proved highly popular not only with adolescent and college readers but also, according to Philip Howard, "among those normally impervious to the mechanical charms of science fiction." Ensuing novels in the series include *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, in which Dent and Prefect travel to the perimeter of the cosmos to visit a chic restaurant where celebrities and press agents have gathered to observe the evening's entertainment, featuring the apocalypse; *Life, the Universe, and Everything*, in which Dent and Prefect once again avert the destruction of the universe, while a computer known as Deep Thought determines that the answer to the mystery of existence is equal to forty-two; and *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*, in which Arthur returns home to find that the Earth was not actually destroyed. Although occasionally faulted as sophomoric or uneven, these works garnered largely positive reviews for their irreverent and offbeat treatment of modern existence.

With his next novel, *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*, Adams draws upon science fiction elements to portray the adventures of Richard MacDuff, a character similar to Arthur Dent. MacDuff is unwittingly forced to save humanity from extinction with the help of Reg, a time-traveler and aged Cambridge professor who can no longer remember where he



came from, and Dirk Gently, a psychic who bases his work as a private detective on "the interconnectedness of all things." In a related novel, *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*, Adams satirizes the epic by focusing on Gently's inadvertent confrontation with a group of people whose violent tendencies and dissatisfaction with the modern world are revealed to express their true identities as Norse Gods. Marc Conly commented: "[*The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*] is sometimes absurdly funny, and provides an interesting insight into Adams' previous work."

(See also *CLC*, Vol. 27; *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 106; and *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook: 1983*.)

PRINCIPAL WORKS

NOVELS

- **The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* 1979
- **The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* 1980
- **Life, the Universe, and Everything* 1982
- **So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish* 1984
- Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* 1987
- The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* 1988

OTHER

The Original Hitchhiker's Radio Scripts 1985

*These works were published in Great Britain as *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: A Trilogy in Four Parts* and in the United States as *The Hitchhiker's Quartet* in 1986. The first three volumes were also published as *The Hitchhiker's Trilogy* in 1983.

SUE MARTIN

Douglas Adams is a . . . NUT. And not of the macadamian variety. Not satisfied with a reputation that has become a by-word in science fiction (a word not mentionable in polite society) or for creating a rush on hotel towels—and oh, yes, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a must for those extra-terrestrial minded. Noooo—he has to go write yet a *fourth* book in his aforementioned trilogy [*So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*] and extend his reputation (and career) even further.

When last we dealt with the peripatetic Arthur Dent (Our Hero) in *Life, the Universe and Everything*, he was left with the information that on a certain planet was God's Last Message to His Creation. The message is NOT the title to the book. . . .

Arthur Dent returns to Earth, to his favorite village pub, confused but glad to be here, since as last he knew, the planet had been previously destroyed by the Vogons to make way for an inter-galactic freeway.

Things grow more complicated. Dent meets the girl of his dreams, Fenchurch. He gets his job back with the BBC. He learns how to fly without the aid of a plane or glider, and—all the dolphins have disappeared, but they have left a clue behind. Dent and Fenchurch have an important voyage to make, to read God's Last Message, etc. etc. and well, that *would* be telling. . . .

There is much more wonderful, inventive Adams humor let loose between the innocent pages of this book in his wild, whiplash style and short chapters. I must give you an example, from the *Guide's* entry on San Francisco, we find:

A good place to go. It's very easy to believe that everyone you meet there is also a space traveler. Starting a new religion for you is just their way of saying 'hi.' Until you've settled in and got the hang of the place it is best to say 'no' to three questions out of any given four that anyone may ask you. . . .

I, for one, am grateful that we haven't seen the end of Arthur Dent (or the universe for that matter), and I sincerely hope that there is even a *fifth* book [in the series]. . . .

Sue Martin, "A Trilogy Transformed to New Lengths," in Los Angeles Times Book Review, February 3, 1985, p. 14.

PAUL M. LLOYD

[In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*], the Earth was supposed to have been demolished to make way for a new hyperspace bypass (progress, you know), and our hero, Arthur

Dent, has been bumming around the galaxy for eight years. [In *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*], he finds himself back on Earth, which seems to be none the worse for wear after having been blown to smithereens. No one on Earth seems to realize what happened, except for Arthur's hearthrob, the lovely Fenchurch. Everyone thinks Fen is nuts, while Arthur realizes that she is right but it doesn't matter anyway. All that matters is that he loves her madly. They manage to fly through the air more or less by denying that gravity has any effect on them. Meanwhile, back in space, another of our heroes, Ford Prefect, continues to zoom around from here to there in the galaxy.

Good natured silliness is fine in its place, and in fairly small doses, and science fiction parodies can be amusing at times. Unfortunately, I think this book is likely to provoke more yawns than smiles. Adams would have done well to stop while he was ahead. Maybe now he could turn his hand to something less fluffy.

Paul M. Lloyd, "The Hitchhiker Runs Down," in Fantasy Review, Vol. 8, No. 4, April, 1985, p. 14.

ALLEN VARNEY

[*So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*] takes its title from a joke in [Adam's earlier book, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*]: All dolphins vacated Earth with this exit line just before the planet was destroyed. The reference, like the entire story, will be incomprehensible to those who haven't read the first book and its sequels, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* and *Life, the Universe, and Everything*.

As with most bestsellers, reviewing this book is pointless. Either you've already bought it or you won't; whether it's good is irrelevant. In fact, this book is very bad, which has had no effect on its sales. And that's worth talking about.

The book-buying public, most especially including SF fandom, seems sequel-happy, series-happy. Authors who have done good work in the past—even one good story—have a free meal ticket for the rest of their careers. People will line up for all their future work, no matter how banal, boring or bad. They want to recapture that original thrill, or maybe they're lazy-minded and want to return to a familiar fictional background, where they don't have to make the effort to meet new characters or see new places or think about new ideas. . . .

Thus the recent work by our aging giants of the field and thus Douglas Adams. Perhaps tuckered out by the strain of inventing an entire hilarious cosmos in previous books, Adams stays mainly on a recreated Earth in this book. The hapless Arthur Dent falls in love, wanders around some, tells an anecdote that Adams has told on talk shows, and basically treads water for 150 pages (200 in paperback). There are two or three good lines, but the inventiveness is gone.

No novel provokes universal agreement, but I honestly can't see much in this lame isometric exercise that would appeal to readers who liked the previous books in this series. I've reviewed them all, . . . but I'm bowing out with this one. Still, it's a bestseller; I daresay Adams' future books will be as well. People keep lining up . . .

There's nothing we can do about this. Authors are either willing to give good weight or they aren't, and negative feedback

seems to have no effect. All we can do is vote with the pocket-book and stop buying the new novels. But there always seem to be new readers to take our places—so many new readers, in fact, that there must be one born every minute.

Allen Varney, in a review of "So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish," in Science Fiction Review, Vol. 15, No. 2, May, 1986, p. 57.

TOM EASTON

How many people are being introduced to SF by Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker* books? They're colossal bestsellers, so the tally must be immense. With luck, their readers will even turn to such as Asimov, in hopes of getting another fix.

Alas, Adams's readers are doomed to disappointment. Adams's books are a unique brand of utter, unmitigated, unalloyed, loony, foolish, trivial tripe. In past books, he had the Earth destroyed for a hyperspatial bypass, while Earthling Arthur Dent roams the galaxy with the aid of that marvelous electronic encyclopedia, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, complete with electronic, saucer-stopping Thumb, and *Guide* researcher and writer Ford Prefect bumbles along from crisis to crisis.

In *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*, we find the Earth mysteriously restored. Dent returns home with odd talents. Prefect bumbles some more. And we learn just a little about the dolphins that were the sole sentients rescued from Earth's destruction. . . .

And that's it. *Sui generis*. Tongue-in-cheek, cock-eyed, ridiculous tripe. Fun, too.

Tom Easton, in a review of "So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish," in Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact, Vol. CVI, No. 7, July, 1986, p. 182.

MAT COWARD

It must be quite a tough gig, being Douglas Adams. As a young man, you have this really marvellous idea for a radio show. What's more, you can still remember it when you sober up. Not only do you persevere with the idea until it is finished, and not only does the BBC buy it, but it also turns out to be the most original, acclaimed and thoroughly satisfactory use of the medium since Spike Milligan had his first breakdown. As if that wasn't enough, you then make the obviously suicidal move of adapting your radio scripts into book and TV form, and confound the doubters by succeeding brilliantly again. A decade after *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* first hit the airwaves you are still quite young, and your marvellous idea has been translated into every imaginable medium, including computer games and bath towels. . . . The difficulty, of course, is what do you do with the rest of your life?

The answer that Douglas Adams has come up with is to start all over again, only missing out the radio stage this time round. [*Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*] is, as before, a science fiction comedy in which the human race is saved from total extinction by a slightly wet hero and his bizarre friends. Instead of Arthur Dent we have Richard MacDuff, a computer software whizz, who becomes unwittingly involved in matters of a cosmic and life-threatening nature. His comrades in this are Reg, a time-travelling Cambridge

professor, who is so vague and so many centuries old that he can't remember who he is or where he comes from; and Gently, a psychically gifted pal of Richard's from student days, now working as a private detective specialising in 'the interconnectedness of all things'—which is handy, since of course, this is just what Adams himself specialises in.

The author's other specialism is that, like Shakespeare, almost every line he writes instantly transforms itself into a quotation. Indeed, there are probably more people in this country who could tell you who said 'I never could get the hang of Thursdays' than 'Out, damned spot'. Dirk Gently continues the tradition, describing the 'absurdly thin' MacDuff as 'a sort of pleasant genial mantis that's given up preying and taken up tennis instead.' . . .

As well as having a good radio writer's ear for a snappy, jolting gag, Adams also possesses an enthusiasm for eccentric ideas and 'What if . . . ?' speculations, as befits a former *Dr Who* script editor. He is, in other words, a genuine SF writer, despite his irreverence for the genre. This novel contains some wonderful wonderings and fascinating inventions, such as the Electric Monk, a labour-saving device from a decadent civilisation, which saves you the bother of believing in things, just as a VCR 'watched tedious television for you, thus saving you the bother of looking at it yourself'. Adams also explores the common idea that people become ghosts if, at death, they have left some important business unfinished. In part, this book is a genuinely eerie and haunting spook story.

All in all, this is a hugely entertaining novel, albeit a bit long. When science fiction and comedy come together, what they produce is insight into the human character and condition, and here they certainly do, much more so than in Adams's previous work. The characters, their reactions and motives, are much more real and affecting. Perhaps because of this, though, *Dirk Gently* is finally less satisfying than [*The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*]; the plot is less symmetrical and less of a fable, and in the end I was a little puzzled, unsure whether I had fully followed all its twists and turns. This was perhaps explained by the last words in the book: 'to be continued'. If he's serious about that, then clearly the problem I mentioned earlier—'what does Adams do next?'—has yet to be dealt with, and he has allowed his commercial instinct (to produce another best-selling saga) to overrule his writer's instinct (to write a real, self-contained novel). I worry that Douglas Adams may have suffered the worst possible fate for a writer who doesn't die before 30: that he wrote his best book first.

Mat Coward, "Connections," in The Listener, Vol. 117, No. 3017, June 25, 1987, p. 29.

TOM EASTON

The new book is *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*. It opens with a scene of primeval desolation; switches to an Electric Monk, a robot designed to believe in things, who passes through a plain white door from his world to ours; gives us Professor Urban Chronotis at an Oxford look-alike, who seems to have nothing to do on campus but accomplishes the most astonishing magic tricks; and tells us that Coleridge actually did not fail to complete "Kubla Khan."

And here we begin to twig: The professor has to be a time traveler, the Coleridge clue reveals that here is an alternate