

The chief technician came forward proudly. 'We most certainly have, sir. And what's more we've added an extra in-out section, and arranged it so that one half of the computer can play chess with the other half. We thought a contest between a man and his machine might be a bit one-sided.'

McPherson was unimpressed. 'Let's see it work then.' He lowered his large body into the chair, specially provided, in front of the chessboard on which they would record the game. The technician signalled and the operator pressed the starting-switch.

The computer set to work, analysing, working out all the possible replies to the twenty-first move, and all the second moves to each reply . . . on and on, until it had worked out which first move would be bound to result in an optimum winning strategy. The figures involved were unimaginable, for in effect the computer was playing every possible game of chess. But figures meant very little to McPherson, who was soon shifting restlessly in his chair, convinced that his company's money had been wasted.

Suddenly a bell sounded and a punched card recording the optimum first move emerged from a slot. The operator translated the punchings into the language of chess: 'Pawn to queen's rook third is the optimum first move.'

'That's a damn queer move to start a game with!' McPherson grunted, moving the pawn on the board in front of him.

'Now we feed that move into the other half of the computer and it will find the best possible reply,' explained the technician.

After a few minutes another card emerged from a second slot. The operator decoded the message and the technician read it out. 'The computer says——' His voice faltered and stopped. 'The computer says that after analysing all the games possible after the first move supplied, it can find no defence against the attack which would logically follow, and therefore resigns.'

McPherson rose slowly to his feet, gave an artificial smile and turned to the technician, who had just watched the work of four years proved useless. 'Stick with it, boys!' he said and walked quickly out of the room, being careful to close the door quietly this time.

Later, in his office at the top of the building, he couldn't help wondering if the computer hadn't been right.

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## The Silly Prisoners

*A Note about the CF Choice for July*

### THE BIRDCAGE

by John Bowen

'THEY waited, sitting there nervously at the table in the heat of the lights. The woman, who couldn't remember whether they'd been given permission to smoke, lit a cigarette to represent female emancipation. The philosopher wondered whether port would boil. From the air came music. The Floor Manager brought his hand down sharply like a conductor. Peter Ash poured a glass of port, first for the academic poet on his right, then for himself, then passed the decanter easily to the left, and smiled a whimsical, welcoming, relaxed, *intelligent* smile. "Hallo there," he said to the camera. "Nowadays, as I expect *you've* noticed, we're always being told that the art of conversation is dead." He paused for a count of four. "But is it? Can we really say it is?" Immediately you knew that it wasn't. The art of conversation, like all the other arts, might take a bit of a pasting sometimes, but just as long as Peter Ash was around to see it safely through, you could be sure it would survive.'

This is a scene from *The Birdcage*—the shooting of one of a series of films called 'The Living Arts' for which Peter Ash is the commentator. Now it is always very difficult to 'describe' a novel; if a writer has taken some two hundred pages to develop the ideas in his mind, the reduction of them to one brisk paragraph will be simply that—a reduction, often to absurdity. This is certainly true for *The Birdcage*: it has a quite ordinary plot, easy to anatomize; what is extraordinary is its atmosphere—its effect as a whole.

On its surface the story has an air of blandness about it, of taking one into its confidence; it is also very, very funny. Then one becomes aware that there is a great deal submerged below this calm: that the humour is built on satire, that the blandness is an expression of contempt. With a light, implacable touch Mr Bowen demolishes his 'hero' and 'heroine'—and with them a good deal of 'contemporary society'—until they are left without even the cloak of their own pretensions.

This is the story: Peter Ash and Norah Palmer have lived together for nine years. As a sensible, uninhibited, adult couple they see no point in marrying when this would cost them so much more in income-tax. Peter Ash commentates on 'art' films; Norah Palmer is the script editor in the drama department of a commercial television company. Peter Ash decides to end their relationship because Norah Palmer does not respect him. As intelligent adults, they are able to part without 'scenes'. Much of the novel describes the intelligent, adult lives they lead while they are separated from one another, in the peculiarly anaemic world of the English 'intelligentsia'—the world of coterie parties and smart magazines, the world of men and women clinging grimly to the fringes of the arts, attitudinizing about 'Life' to save themselves from the difficult business of living it by accepting their own ordinariness.

'John Bowen writes poised and incisive satire but his work is more than this. He sees Peter and Norah as victims and he plays behind them on the social forces that produce our Peters and our Norahs.' *Spectator*. *Faber 18s; SFBC 7s*

THIS MONTH'S CHOICE IS  
**TALES OF TEN WORLDS**  
by Arthur C. Clarke

(Gollancz 16s; SFBC 6s)

NEXT MONTH'S CHOICE IS  
**THE FOUR-DIMENSIONAL  
NIGHTMARE** by J. G. Ballard

(Gollancz 16s; SFBC 6s)