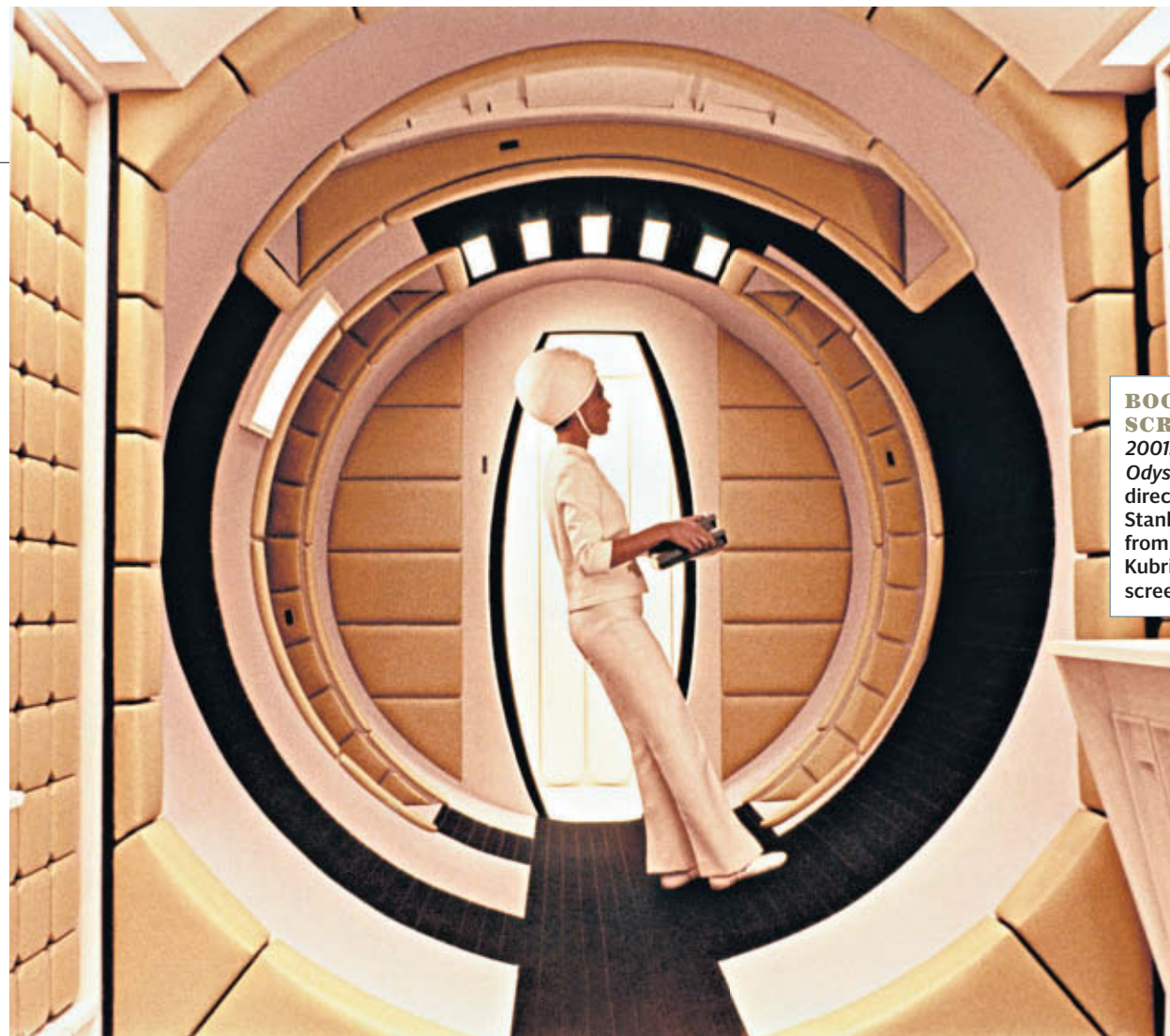## BOOKS
ARTHUR C CLARKE

Prophet of the space age

Arthur C Clarke predicted that everyone would own a computer. Will he be right about our colonising Mars, too? By Andrew Robinson

'O pen the pod bay doors, HAL." "I'm sorry, Dave. I'm afraid I can't do that." "What's the problem?" "I think you know what the problem is just as well as I do." "What are you talking about, HAL?" "This mission is too important for me to allow you to jeopardise it." "I don't know what you are talking about, HAL." "I know that you and Frank were planning to disconnect me. And I'm afraid that's something I cannot allow to happen."

This is one of the most famous dialogues in science fiction, as the astronaut, marooned in deep space, desperately negotiates with the rogue computer HAL (short for Heuristic Algorithm) for re-entry to his space-station in the 1968 movie *2001: a Space Odyssey*. Eventually, Dave forces entry through an airlock, and is able to "kill" HAL by switching him off.

HAL's eerie humanoid voice, and his rebellion against his human designers, was envisioned by one of the greatest science-fiction writers of all time, Arthur C Clarke, who would have turned 100 next week, and is the subject of Neil McAleer's revised biography *Odyssey of a Visionary*.

Clarke's best work combined science with psychology and philosophy, delivered with flair and humour. In his semi-religious 1953 novel, *Childhood's End*, for example, he imagined an extraterrestrial race, the Overlords, who supervise human society as a utopia while keeping their true identity invisible. The trouble is, "When the Overlords had abolished war and hunger and disease, they had also abolished adventure," he writes. "Curiosity remained, and the leisure to indulge in it, but the heart had been taken out of fundamental scientific research. It seemed futile to spend a lifetime searching for secrets that the Overlords had probably uncovered ages before." Eventually, the humans rebel against utopia. CS Lewis called the novel "an absolute corker… quite out of range of the common space-and-time writer". It remains Clarke's most celebrated fiction.

No wonder the 2015 biopic *Steve Jobs* opened with footage of Clarke from 1974, two years before Jobs founded Apple. A balding, British boffin in an office thrumming with room-sized computers, Clarke captivates the interviewer and his young son with a vision: "The big difference when he grows up – in fact you won't have to wait for the year 2001 – is that he will have in his own house […] a console through which he can talk to his friendly local computer and get all the information he needs for his everyday life."

Clarke's prescience stemmed from the fact that he trained as a scientist before taking up fiction in the late Forties. In 1945, he published the first concept of communications satellites in space, and predicted their importance. By *2001: a Space Odyssey*, comsats such as Telstar and Intelsat were in orbit. Today, their almost instantaneous planetary coverage is an awe-inducing illustration of the best-known of Clarke's Laws, viz. "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

Science always fed Clarke's fiction – true also of his friend and nearest rival, Isaac Asimov, the biochemist turned writer who invented the term "robotics". In the mid-Sixties, in a New York taxi, they agreed the "Asimov-Clarke treaty", by which, Asimov recalled, "I must insist at all times that Arthur is the best science-fiction writer in the world… while Arthur must equally accept that Isaac Asimov is the best science writer in the world."

Typical of Clarke's blend of hard science, optimistic speculation and wit is his article on Albert Einstein, written for the centenary of the theory of relativity, which ends with an "astro-theological paradox". Is God's influence throughout the universe literally instantaneous, or is it constrained by the finite speed of light, as required by relativity? "She's coming just as quickly as She can, but there's nothing that even She can do about that maddening 186,000 miles per second," Clarke sums up. "It's anybody's guess whether She'll be here in time."

Next year will mark the 50th anniversary of *2001: a Space Odyssey*, directed by Stanley Kubrick from a joint Kubrick/Clarke screenplay. Despite tensions arising from Kubrick's maddening unwillingness to approve the text of the novel that Clarke wrote from the screenplay – putting him $50,000 in debt – Clarke admitted when Kubrick died that his career "owes more to Stanley than to anyone else in the world". Kubrick, for his part, said of Clarke: "He has the kind of mind of which the world can never have enough, an array of imagination, intelligence, knowledge, and a quirkish curiosity which often uncovers more than the first three qualities." Even so, Kubrick declined to be interviewed for this biography, on the grounds that "Arthur is not an anecdotable character".

Almost every page of *Odyssey of a Visionary* is evidence to the contrary. It is the third iteration of McAleer's authorised biography, first published in 1992, then beefed up into an expensive collector's edition in 2012 after Clarke's death. Now, this revised centenary edition offers anyone with an interest in Clarke his entire life-story at an affordable price.

And what a story it is. As a Somerset farmboy, he built and launched his own rockets. Scoring 100 per cent in the arithmetic section of the civil service exam in 1936, he moved to London, where he audited teachers' pensions with the help of a slide-rule. In 1941, he escaped into the RAF and became a radar engineer, the topic of his only non-sci-fi novel, *Glide Path*. After the war, he took a degree in mathematics and physics from King's College, London. In the late Fifties, he settled in Ceylon.

By then, his literary success – and the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in 1957 – had made Clarke a celebrity prophet of the space age. His 1951 non-fiction book *The Exploration of Space*, given by Wernher von Braun to John F Kennedy, helped persuade the president to launch the Apollo space programme in 1961. Clarke's chapter on teleportation from his 1962 *Profiles of the Future* inspired *Star Trek*. In 1985, Ronald Reagan told his space engineers: "Arthur C Clarke says ideas often have three stages of reaction – first, 'It's crazy and don't waste my time.' Second, 'It's possible, but it's not worth doing.' And finally, 'I've always said it was a good idea.'"

In 1997, Clarke was asked: Was HAL gay? He "reared back in laughter", says McAleer, and said: "I never asked him. The voice does sound rather ambiguous." McAleer devotes a chapter, "Arthur Ambiguous", omitted from the 1992 edition, to Clarke's sexual activities. He had a brief, disastrous marriage in the Fifties, without any children, but later denied that he was gay: "No, just mildly cheerful." The whole truth may yet emerge: 30 volumes of journals, not available to McAleer, will remain closed until 2058.

By then, of course, humankind will have colonised both the Moon and Mars, if Clarke's predictions continue to come true.

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2001: a Space Odyssey was directed by Stanley Kubrick from a joint Kubrick/Clarke screenplay

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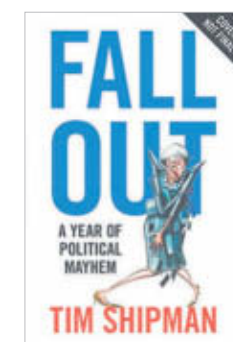Call 0844 871 1514 to order *Arthur C Clarke: Odyssey of a Visionary* by Neil McAleer (£16.99, Ashgrove) for £14.99