Before we start I'd like to make a disclaimer. I think I'm not really ready for this Guest of Honour speech business. I haven't made a great study of the phenomenon but I do remember a little, and I know you're supposed to start, first thing, by being modest about your achievements - a few throw away lines about the awards and the film rights 'n all that. Well, I don't happen to have a great deal to be modest about, in a genre to which I've contributed one published story and two books, only one of which anyone has read. So although as a good socialist I thoroughly approve - it's like one of those Utopian stories where everybody has to take their turn at being President, for half an hour or so a year - I don't think you ought to expect too much. In the circumstances it's going to be a bit difficult for me to spend forty-five minutes discussing my hoover (that's oeuvre. It's an American expression meaning all of your writing that you'll own to in public) and dwelling lovingly on the highspots in my career . . . my nights with the famous 'n all that. But I'll do my best. What I'm going to be talking about mainly is a relationship - because I'm a girl and that's what girls are into isn't it, relationships, not rocketships - my relationship, tangential or antagonistic or whatever, with science fiction.

So let's talk about science fiction. That seems to make sense because I spent the whole of the space alloted to me in the convention programme notes talking about fantasy, and saying how I really didn't consider myself a science fiction writer at all. But as everyone knows these days, or you certainly ought to, opposites don't so much attract as imply and contain one another - or maybe, as I also said in the programme notes, I have a highly selective memory. Anyway, when I was a little girl growing up in Blackley, Manchester, I used to read a lot of science fiction - mainly for the exotic travel and the knowledge. The exotic travel was a very important feature - I remember vividly my response to a Gene
Wolfe story which I now know as "The Fifth Head of Cerberus", but which I thought at the time was called Mr Million. I had no idea whatsoever that it was to do with clones. I had no idea what was going on at all. It was the city that struck me: the kind of all-purpose corrupt-oriental milieu which Gene Wolfe borrows and intensifies so well. But I didn't know about the borrowing. I'd never seen or heard of anything like this place, in my wide experience, so I assumed, quite naturally, that it didn't exist. In fact this is one of the serious disappointments of my life as an sf writer. When I was a little kid I thought those alien cultures and strange landscapes were imaginary, I mean completely made up out of nothing, in a way that I knew my own fantasies were not. I thought if I kept on I might be able to do like that one day, I might be able to invent places that were like nothing on earth. Alas, I know better now. This is the trouble with becoming an initiate in the hermetic rites. You have to learn all these disillusioning little details; you find out about the sordid airline ticket stubs or the British Army service record; you find out that it takes gold to make gold.

But though the travel was fun, the knowledge was the real gear. In those days, it was all topology. You know the way nowadays it is all private health scheme prosthetics; in those days when I was starting out it was all doughnuts. That's donuts, for the Americans here today. I used to read this stuff about the universe being like unto a rubber sheet, and oh, some Larry Niven story or other about two boy scouts scrambling about inside a giant donut, and I would be walking round in a daze meditating on the wonders. A few nights ago I saw an interview with Richard Feynman, one of the tribute repeats, and he was chatting away making lots of disclaimers about how it could have happened to anyone and he hated all the silly fuss and Nobel prizes and so on – just like me up here. Then he tried to explain what was in it for him – and he ended up sitting there with a big cheesy smashed-looking grin on his face saying "I know what it means to know something". Well, I would not go that far. But I do believe I knew what it meant to think, for a while, that I knew something: not by fallible circumstantial means but by logic, by the irreducible necessities. Unlike Feynman, I never did anything earn the privilege. I did go on to study something like a philosophy of science course, and I've always been interested in the science of fiction: but I did not find my way to the scientific experience – the joy – through anything like hard graft in a