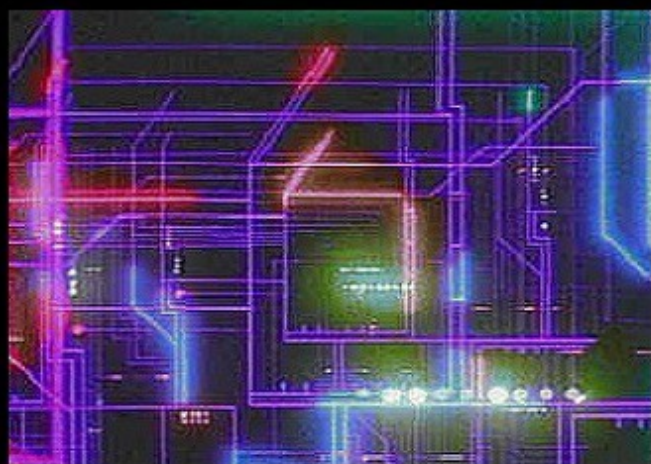


MICHAEL SAVAGE



John O'Loughlin

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A two-book volume comprising the novels

Changing Worlds & Fixed Limits by

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CHANGING WORLDS

Chapter One

Michael Savage wearily sat on his bed and casually ran his hand over its puffy white quilt, as though to brush away some loose hairs that had fallen out of his head during the evening. He had just ceased listening to side two of a cassette and, now that it stood motionless in its deck, he was in some doubt as to his next choice of musical entertainment, particularly in light of the fact that his tape library was, as yet, comparatively small in relation to the considerable size of his by-now redundant record collection.

Naturally, his neighbours wouldn't want to hear the same cassettes too often. Indeed, to judge by the philistine nature of their pursuits, it was more than probable that they wouldn't want to hear anything of his at all; though what he was supposed to do with himself, all evening, other than listen to music and play his acoustic guitar, God alone knew! Perhaps his neighbours would have preferred him to watch TV or listen to some serial on the radio, to do something they could all relate to, irrespective of the fact that young Savage had never felt any great inclination to acquiesce in what he considered to be philistine indulgences. True, he did possess a small radio of reasonably decent hi-fi, but he had no qualms about being rigorously selective, and only listened to it when there was anything worth listening to, which, from recent experience, didn't seem to be all that often!

However, there occasionally came moments when he was at a complete loss for something to do, when he didn't fancy walking the drab-looking local streets, listening to music, reading a book, or practising blues runs on his clapped-out acoustic guitar. Then, in desperation, he would turn to the radio, find a discussion, broadcast, story, or play and, if the subject-matter didn't particularly appeal to him, just listen to the words, noting pronunciations, vocal inflections, tonal changes, individual mannerisms, etc., and contenting himself, so far as possible, with the English language, that ubiquitous tongue of the modern world. At least that sufficed to keep one in touch with the human voice. One could learn a lot from that, indeed one could! But not tonight. For some reason the thought of listening to the radio never even crossed his mind.

He got up off his bed, wearily shuffled across to his radio-cassette player

and removed the tape. 'Too much dust here,' he thought, giving the tape deck a quick inspection. 'It wouldn't cost me that much to buy some head-cleaning fluid. I suppose I don't normally take such things that seriously, not being particularly fussy about the condition of my equipment.'

He quickly slid the cassette into its plastic case and returned it to its allocated place in one of the three racks which served to house the rudiments of what he fancied to be a quintessential distillation of choice sounds, the making of a musical obsession. As usual, he scanned both the composers' names and titles of these tapes, as if to reassure himself that nothing *infra dignum* or irrelevant to his tastes had crept-in on the sly, that he wouldn't have to throw anything out because of a suspicion of being duped by incompatible material. How often, in the past, had he waded, with critical self-doubt, through both books and records in search of misfits, cultural pariahs which seemed a grave obstacle to his peace of mind, a source of sporadic incertitude and sleepless nights! Ideally, he wanted his various collections to be representative of his current tastes, the essence of a private and highly personal culture that changed as he changed, enabling him to discard those examples of his literary or musical curiosity which somehow failed to satisfy him. He had no desire to participate in the habit of one who hangs-on to everything he buys. For the sight of a work the cover or contents of which he detested was not beyond evoking an analogue, in his wayward mind, with the sight of a crucifix to Count Dracula!

He turned away from both tapes and ruminations alike, walked slowly across to his one and only clock (which rested face-down on the top shelf of his bookcase because it rarely worked in an upright position), picked it up and noted the time. At 9.30pm it was much too early to go to bed. It didn't do to acquire a sort of defeatist complex from turning in too early. He would just have to preoccupy himself as best he could for the next couple of hours.

"Hello? Oh, hello!" As usual it was for the ugly-looking female student from the room above. "How are you? Yeah, fine. We went out for the day. Are you? When? Well I never! Oh, don't! You're kidding! He's such a ... Ha-ha! Yeah, I thought as much. Aren't men ...?"

Michael turned away from his bookcase, from where her strident voice was

all too easily overheard, and wearily sat down on his bed again. Not once in over six months had he answered that damn telephone. He had consistently shunned it, even though it usually rang dozens of times a day.

It was never for him anyway, so what would have been the point? He certainly wasn't one to run around in the capacity of unofficial servant to his neighbours! He didn't even know who they all were anyway; they came and went and, so far as possible, he took little or no notice of them. In this house, people generally kept to themselves and didn't ask questions.

"I see. So you're going next week? Oh, damn! Too bad. Okay then. Bye." The telephone clicked off and heavy feet, shod in high heels, ran up the thinly carpeted wooden stairs to the first-floor landing, leaving him to his thoughts again.

'Subdued conversation, footsteps above the ceiling, coming to a halt, starting again, stopping, starting, shuffling across her floor. Be helpful if I had eyes that could see through the ceiling, see exactly what goes-on up there. Frustrates me, listening to their noise every evening without being able to see the cause of it. Better still if she's wearing a short skirt. See if her legs are any better than her face.... Reminds me vaguely of when I was about three years old and used to crawl between my mother's feet to discover what she kept up her skirt. She usually kicked my toy cars away when I got too close, so I never did get to see very much. Something in the order of an early rebuff, you could say. Made it difficult for me to get the impression of being wanted. Like that time after she had cold-bloodedly sent me to the Children's Home, several years later, when the house parents there kicked me around the floor and told me that I was the lowest thing on earth because their infant son had a moment before wriggled through my arms and fallen onto the carpet, slightly bumping his head in the process. Hard to forget an experience like that because your emotions are so highly charged at the time, and that's generally how memories stick. Of course, in the heat of the moment his parents wouldn't have realized they were inflicting nasty memories on me, and even if they had they probably wouldn't have cared, considering that their only child was slightly hurt in falling and I was adjudged responsible for it. Then in the throes of what one can only suppose to be a repentant mood they later turn around and tell me that God knows all about my sins, but that He will stick by me in times of need if only I give my heart to His keeping. Yeah, and a vengeful old jerk He must be too, if they were anything to judge by!'

He angrily stared a moment through the narrow French windows of his bedsitter, seeing but not looking. He had no real desire to look at anything anyway, since the view beyond them hardly constituted anything particularly worth looking at, so overgrown with weeds was the back garden. He might just as well turn back to his thoughts again.

'Thank goodness that phone doesn't ring quite as often as the one in my last lodgings! Conversations going on most of the night, and sometimes as late as 2.00am. Always some nuisance blabbering about his misfortunes, some idiot trying to induce his ex-wife or girlfriend or whatever to meet him for a weekend get-together, to wear her best clothes, etc., because he would be nicely soused and eager to get his end in at the first favourable opportunity.

Blabbering and swearing for up to an hour on the damn thing, and rarely getting anywhere either! A doss-house if ever there was one! Sheer hell!

Well, I'm glad that much is over and done with anyway. I certainly wouldn't want to live in a dump like *that* again!'

On the opposite wall the large colour poster of a painting by Salvador Dali entitled *Swans Reflecting Elephants* began to impose its outlandish landscape on his lethargic sensibilities, and the almost instantaneous mental assimilation of it engendered, in his imagination, the notion that he was driving some space vehicle through uncharted territory towards the edge of a lake where the aforementioned scene suddenly arrested his stunned attention and brought the vehicle in question to a jolting halt. He was staring through the windscreen at what might well have been a scene on Mars. For had a weirder vision previously crossed the windscreen of any imaginary space-vehicle of his, he would have known it and been able to corroborate it with dozens of examples freshly culled from the repository of a memory well-furnished with such landscapes.

However, for the time being he was both highly absorbed in the insight afforded him by this latest discovery and secretly elated that he should have conceived of such a notion in the midst of several more down-to-earth ruminations. Indeed, Dali's brilliant idea of fusing the watery reflections of swans and nearby tree trunks with the heads and legs of on-the-spot elephants had already appealed to his imagination, and he now thought it just as well that you didn't discover everything about any given thing all at once but, on the contrary, gradually woke up to various aspects of it when

the time and mood were propitious. For such a gradual process of enlightenment helped to make life more interesting. As with a multitude of other things, you had to wait until you had matured into them before really acquiring a worthwhile appreciation of their true worth.

'When I was in the local bookshop the other day', he resumed thoughtfully, 'that book on Dali easily caught my eye. Bit I read about his meditating in front of a Vermeer and subsequently sketching a pair of rhinoceros horns ...

very surreal indeed! The essence of Dali. Surrealism-while-you-wait; camera poised to click real-life surreal montage. Vaguely reminds me of a former friend of mine who thought Dali a lunatic because it was reported that the painter had told some interviewer he would rather go to a restaurant and order a lobster with telephone, or lobster telephone, than the usual gastronomic fare. Typical example of what Baudelaire called "Universal misunderstanding", as if Dali were a plumber, insurance agent, clerk, or lawyer to spend time mouthing their jargon instead of his own, i.e. that of a fully fledged genius of the surreal. I suppose few people would think it odd if a lawyer discussed law in a restaurant. Perfectly feasible, if a shade tasteless. Could even give his fellow diners indigestion. More lawyers in the world than artists of Dali's calibre anyway. The sanity of numbers.'

The old woman who lived in the next-door room had just closed the front door behind her return and was busily rattling her keys about in the hallway. 'She always makes such an abominable row in trying to find the keyhole to her room that anyone would think the damn thing kept moving about!' thought Michael in exasperation.

However, she wasn't quite the doting old crone he liked to imagine, and he half-surmised that she made a nuisance of herself on purpose, as a form of retaliation for the music he habitually played in the evenings. Bearing in mind the thinness of the wall separating their two rooms, that seemed a fairly plausible conjecture, at any rate!

Succeeding with the key at last, she entered her room and Michael Savage's thoughtful head heard the door slam-to behind her. 'Safe at last!' he went on, with her still in mind, 'safe from an evil spirit, perhaps one of her former accomplices in life who, like Maupassant's *Horla*, will continuously dog her steps, inhibit her from either feeling or touching herself, make her imagine she's being watched, etc. Old spinsters like that usually don't have

any company. They gradually disintegrate. Probably wouldn't want to make fools of themselves by trying to gain access to the company of people well accustomed to it. They gradually become more wrapped-up in themselves, more suspicious of others, increasingly the prisoners of their personal circumstances. I don't even know her full name. Just an ugly old bag who occasionally receives a formal letter addressed to a Miss J. Bass. Creeps around in her room as though she were at a private séance. Often has the radio on. Usually classics. Not much else a woman of her age can really listen to, is there?

'Well, I would sometimes like to feel sorry for her but, try as I might, it's no use. The net result is that I only end-up feeling sorry for myself, having to live next to her. Pity really, because there are so many lonely people in the world, these days, and not all of them are elderly either. No-one with whom to talk. Probably wouldn't feel like talking to anyone even if the opportunity were to arise. I mean, where could she begin, assuming solitary deprivation hadn't rendered her wholly inarticulate? Does part-time work somewhere during the day though, so she evidently has something going for her.... Wonder if she's ever had a man? It wouldn't be impossible but, all the same, I'd hardly be surprised to learn that she hadn't. Must be awfully frustrating for a woman, living alone so many years. All work and no play. And they say the sexual urge is stronger in women? I suppose it depends on the woman really. Some of them are awfully tame. If I've seen each of the three or four females who live in this house more than a handful of times since moving here, over six months ago, I'd be very surprised. Like the rest of my neighbours, they scuttle away into their own rooms before anyone can accost them.... Not that I'm a man for forming crab-like gestures! Heaven forbid! But they don't know that, so they scuttle away in good time. Saves embarrassment, I suppose.'

He lay back on his bed and languidly watched a large fly darting around the room. It seemed to be getting highly annoyed with itself as it flew round and round, up and down, in and out of one thing or another, while buzzing vehemently and colliding with just about every damn thing that got in its way.

It was always the same on warm evenings. You opened the window to let-in some fresh air and, before long, some winged insect had found its way through the opening and commenced torturing itself between the walls.

However, the most obvious solution, namely to acquire some cotton mesh with which to prevent ingress, hadn't exactly met with Michael Savage's approval, in view of the fact that his room was rather dingy and he preferred, in consequence, to let-in as much light as possible. It was simply too bad that these unfortunate insects had to stick their snouts into everything! Short of shooin' them out again or swatting them to death, he would just have to put up with it. At least he had the consolation of knowing that a fairly clean room wasn't something that would greatly appeal to flies.

He rose from his bed again and wandered over to the mirror, which appeared to hover atop the dressing table like a guardian angel. The sun had lightly tanned his face, and this aspect of his overall facial appearance now pleased him. His hair was growing beyond the six-inch mark, but that didn't particularly bother him because he was due to visit his local barber within the next few days. A six-inch growth of hair was no great inconvenience to a young man who hadn't yet turned twenty-four!

He closely looked at his eyes and nose in the mirror. The former was indicating, through some puffy rings, signs of tiredness, the latter, through its gently aquiline contours, the mark of what he took to be a man of literary and philosophical, though especially philosophical, disposition. 'No boils in view anyway,' he thoughtfully mused. 'Grew out of them some time ago. Still get the odd one sprouting from the epidermal undergrowth now and again, but it seems they're fast running out of virgin pasture. They don't thrive on the old spots quite so well. Have to find somewhere else to sprout up, like my back and chest. But I usually nip them in their purulent bud before they get a chance to really tarnish my relatively handsome appearance. A few small scars, but nothing serious. Worst place is up in the nostrils. Bad on the lips, too. Used to put me through hell as a youth.

Probably some blood trouble at the root of it. Might even have had something to do with that burst appendix I experienced at sixteen. Some of the poison seeped into my bloodstream. Seem to recall getting my first boil at around that time. All very unnatural, when you think about it.

Adolescent tribulations! Had a difficult time obtaining the right prescription from the local doctor; everything he prescribed only seemed to exacerbate the problem, making the boils worse. Ended-up going to him every other week with the same sorry story: "Those pills didn't work for me. Have you any other suggestion?" Must have exhausted most of his

options by the time he got around to prescribing chest pills. At first I didn't realize, but they seemed to do the trick. A question of faith. Got the psychology right in the end. Faith works miracles we're told. Believe something will do you good and the chances are you may pull through. Believe it won't and, no matter how applicable it may be, you might as well write yourself off there and then. Comes down to the witch-doctor principle, the frame-of-mind you're in at the time. Reason doctors are generally so positive about things, to prevent you from worrying yourself into a worse condition. More or less the same principle with fortune-tellers and astrologers. Giving people what they want, flattering the ego, conciliating, appeasing. "Why, yes, you ought to become a poet with that sort of gift for words. – Why, yes, I think you'll do very well in that field if you utilize your considerable diplomatic potential. – Ah, yes, you'll meet a highly attractive and very intelligent young woman pretty soon, during the next few weeks in fact." Financially shrewder than giving them a lot of bad news, I suppose. People don't usually consult fortune-tellers and astrologers for bad news anyway. They're mostly screwed-up at the time, hoping for an indication of better things ahead, a favourable prognosis, as it were.

'It's strange when you think about it really, but there are planets in the Solar System by the names of Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, which are in turn symbolically identified with different abstractions culled from Roman mythology, like Venus with love, Mars with war, etc., and astrologers tell you that you came under the influence of certain of these abstractions when you were born in a certain place at a certain time. But if you're honest with yourself and look at astrology from a sort of existentialist angle, you'll see clearly enough – and without the need ...