

© 2001 by Terence M. Green

INTRODUCTION TO 2001 *Bakka Books* Reissue of  
PHYLLIS GOTLIEB'S *SUNBURST*

by

Terence M. Green

I first read *Sunburst* when I was seventeen years old. That was in 1964, the year it was first published. I'm in my fifties now, with thousands of books floating in my wake, a lifetime of moving and acquisition and loss accompanying me, as it does all of us. But when I was asked to write the Introduction to this new edition of *Sunburst*, I could still go upstairs to my study and easily pick up that original forty-cent Gold Medal paperback that I bought at the end of high school, open it carefully, smell the mustiness, smile with wonder at the yellowed edges of its pages, and hope that I had aged as well as it had, for it has made the journey into the future with me.

And I read it again. The verdict: it has indeed stood the test of time. Phyllis's love of the strange, her empathy with the rejected, the isolated, the lonely -- the flotsam and jetsam of mankind -- the fiery, poetic language that has become her trademark -- it's all here: seeds planted more than thirty-five years ago, that are still blossoming in new books now being written in her seventies.

At the heart of the story is the science fiction fear of its era -- the dread of nuclear power. *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *Fail-Safe*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *The Long*

*Tomorrow, Farnham's Freehold, Alas, Babylon, The Chrysalids, Davy...* They all appeared between 1955 and 1965. Phyllis was there with them – the first Canadian on the scene. Less than twenty years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, some fifteen years before the accident at Three Mile Island, more than twenty years from Chernobyl -- any writer with a vision could see that a Sunburst was indeed possible, and that it would blossom in the chromosomes of the next generation of children.

Phyllis is like these strange children: she has powers undefinable. But she is very much like Shandy, the Imperv who appears ordinary, whose talent is that she cannot be “read” by the psis surrounding her. Things depend on her. She sees what others do not.

Thirteen-year-old Shandy recalls her father without his shirt when she was three-and-a-half years old, and on his back she describes, “a sunburst with twisting rays of exploded scar, and between the rays thick brown keloids; a humped center of ruined flesh, cracking and oozing, ebbing out beyond the cancerous moles into coinsize blueblack naevi, paling and decreasing till they washed into freckles on white skin.” That was the day her father went into the hospital for the last time.

Through Phyllis's eyes there is even a brutal poetry in the description of a cancer. You can see it for yourself. For her, everything is poetry, everything is brutal, everything is beautiful. The sunburst is the metaphor for all possible future events, both large and small. This is anxious, reeling poetry, about all our children, about possibilities both wonderful and terrible, about our fears and hopes for what will happen to everyone when we are not there to help or to cry out or to lend solace. The book's new life here, in this edition, is well deserved and long overdue. Rejoice.