

CRITICAL MASS 5



CRITICAL MASS: A review of Science Fiction, Fantasy, & Supernatural Fiction

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NOTE TO PUBLISHERS: All books new and reprint, fiction or associated criticism, artwork, calendars, records, etc. received will be reviewed. Ancient astronaut, esp, occult, and allied non-fiction will not. Two Xerox copies of each review are sent out as they are written; a copy of the entire issue will be provided upon publication.

RATING NOTES: The numerical ratings following reviews of novels are assigned in accordance with Gil Gaier's PPEN personal preference system. Readers interested in Gil's project can reach him at 1016 Beech Avenue, Torrance, California 90501.

This issue contains reviews of 66 books. There were 56 novels with an average rating of 59.7. This is the lowest average per issue to date. Either the quality is slipping or I've been in a rotten mood.

FORMAT NOTES: The most obvious change in format is the switch from mimeograph to offset, reduced. I am also using a better typewriter, and will be changing again with the next issue. You can also expect to see some slight experimentation with layout, although I don't plan to use much more interior artwork than you see with the present issue. For all prospective artists, I have enough interior work for one more issue only. I am interested in that and cover art, preferably with a booky theme.

The mini-letter column will continue, but as stated will be limited to specific informational pieces about reviews from previous issues. Outraged authors may be allowed to air their opinions of the editor's critical acumen. Contrary to an earlier statement, this issue will also be mailed first class. This, as well as the size of each issue, will depend on future contingencies. There is a chance that the length will increase to forty or more pages, depending on the number of subs I pick up, and the speed with which I am able to read.

ALL reviews are by the editor, as a matter of policy. The intent of CRITICAL MASS is to provide a reasonably consistent viewpoint with regard to new fiction.

PLUGS: Readers of previous issues will remember that I recently discovered William Goldman. Non-fantasy plug of the issue is for THE TEMPLE OF GOLD, his relatively short but excellent first novel.

EQUALITY IN THE YEAR 2000 by Mack Reynolds, Ace Books, 1977, \$1.50

Just as Edward Bellamy was forced to write EQUALITY, a sequel to his famous LOOKING BACKWARD, so too was Mack Reynolds coerced into producing this sequel to his own LOOKING BACKWARD IN THE YEAR 2000. Reynolds' proposition in the first book was that society would change so radically in the next three decades that we would be unable to recognize it. Among his predictions was the disappearance of English as a language, the disappearance of crime, government, and most aspects of commerce.

Reynolds really wasn't attempting to predict the future, any more than was Bellamy. Bellamy was posing various social and political questions; Reynolds is playing more with economics, and using radical ideas to demonstrate his proposition of extreme change. Unfortunately, Reynolds repeats the same novelistic errors of Bellamy, namely, virtually no plot. The discussions themselves are usually interesting, but it is not very gripping to read about a group of people sitting around talking about the world. (48)

PERCHANCE TO DREAM by Mack Reynolds, Ace, 1977, \$1.50

There are two separate novels in this book, although it is written as one. The first is the story of Kingsley Cusack, a scientist who borrows an experimental dream machine and an intuitive computer. With their aid, he is able to construct a dream, based on historic fact, through which he learns about the past.

Unfortunately, while Cusack is engaged in his solitary research, a number of unsavory characters and organizations learn of the dream machine's experiential capacity and become determined to gain possession of its operating principles. Although they are not successful, Reynolds went on to explore the possibilities of this in other novels, mentioned below.

A far more interesting story is Cusack's dream of Horatio at the bridge. In a series of episodes, we follow the life of Horatio as he grows up among the Etruscans, unknowingly sleeps with a forbidden vestal virgin, and finally throws in his lot with the Romans in their revolt against Etrusca. (62)

AFTER UTOPIA by Mack Reynolds, Ace Books, 1977, \$1.50

Reynolds' continues his theorizing about economics, politics, and social systems, far more successfully than in many other of his novels. Tracy Cogswell is an anarchist whose will is mysteriously possessed, forcing him to entomb himself. He is revived in a future Utopian society where a group of three revolutionaries attempts to convince him to lead a revolution.

Cogswell discovers that the Utopia has achieved all the idealistic goals of his political movement, abolished poverty, crime, etc., but the heart has gone out of it. With nothing to strive against, humanity is retreating into a world of synthetic wish-fulfillment dreams, aided by the ubiquitous dream machine.

The novel is an odd combination of good and bad elements. The occasional flashbacks to the 20th Century are quite well done, on the other hand, the "external enemy" solution to the novel's major premise is too familiar, too awkwardly done, and too simplistic. The inevitable lengthy discussions are more interesting than usual, but are still rather intrusive. (62)

SPACE VISITOR by Mack Reynolds, Ace Books, 1977, \$1.50

Werner Brecht, one member of a small complement of individuals from all over the world, discovers an extraterrestrial starship lying abandoned on the moon. Brecht is fearful of the consequences of releasing such advanced scientific equipment among factionalized humanity, so he initially conceals its existence. Eventually, giving in to one or another impulse, he reveals its existence to the other members of his team, but only after concealing its location.

The entire team is immediately held incommunicado by Earth authorities. Every nation alone or in consort is determined to possess the secrets of the starship. Various members of the team are contacted individually and seduced or corrupted into approaching Brecht on the sly. Brecht perseveres, however, despite pressure and a Mafia kidnapping, insisting that he will only reveal its location when presented with adequate safeguards to prevent misuse of the technology thereby made available.

SPACE VISITOR has more plot than many of Reynolds' recent novels, and is reasonably plausible, if you assume that leading world political leaders are much nicer than they have thus far demonstrated and that good triumphs over evil. (62)

THE BEST YE BREED by Mack Reynolds, Ace Books, 1978, \$1.50

This is the third volume in the North African trilogy, the previous volumes of which appeared as an Ace Double Book, and are now out of print; they are BLACK MAN'S BURDEN and BORDER, BREED, NOR BIRTH. They feature El Hassan, a charismatic Black American sociology professor whose real name is Homer Crawford. Crawford and a small group of friends (all non-Africans) hope to unite all of North Africa into one new nation, totally independent of all big power influence.

In this volume, Crawford's fledgling state of Ifriquyah has taken control of most of the desert country, and has just finished defeating an invasion force from Egypt. Fresh threats arise. An Islamic prophet arises in Libya to challenge his authority. Foreign agents and assassins, including a crew of mercenaries, are intent on manipulating the new nation's leaders for their own purposes.

Despite a number of cavils, this is the best of Reynolds' recent novels. Crawford may be a bit too good to be true, and it does rankle a bit that there is so little involvement by North Africans in their own salvation. But ignoring the minor implausibilities, and the necessarily inconclusive ending, it's a good adventure story with an element of social commentary, inevitable in a Reynolds novel. (65)

THE FRACAS FACTOR by Mack Reynolds, Leisure Books, 1978, \$1.50

Joe Mauser, hero of MERCENARY, FRIGID FRACAS, and SWEET DREAMS, SWEET PRINCES, returns in this new novel of the near future where mercenary armies are the chief form of entertainment, and where political and economic differences are resolved through trial by combat. Mauser is a veteran mercenary banned from further participation because of a technical violation he committed in a previous fracas. Now he is allied with a group who are working toward a non-violent revolution against the institutions of People's Capitalism and the fracas and caste systems.

The major stumbling block is the Nathan Hale Society, a group of right wingers who are staunch supporters of the status quo. Mauser's close friend, Max Mainz, infiltrates that organization in order to be apprised of planned violence against the pacifist movement.

Mauser's political beliefs don't necessarily have a perfect correlation with his personal ones. There is nothing pacifistic about his defense when he and Max find themselves stalked by killers in a Mexican desert.

This is basically an action adventure novel with political overtones. As it progresses, the action gives way to the politics, and the concluding chapters are not nearly as satisfying as the opening ones. (52)

TRAMPLE AN EMPIRE DOWN by Mack Reynolds, Leisure Books, 1978, \$1.50

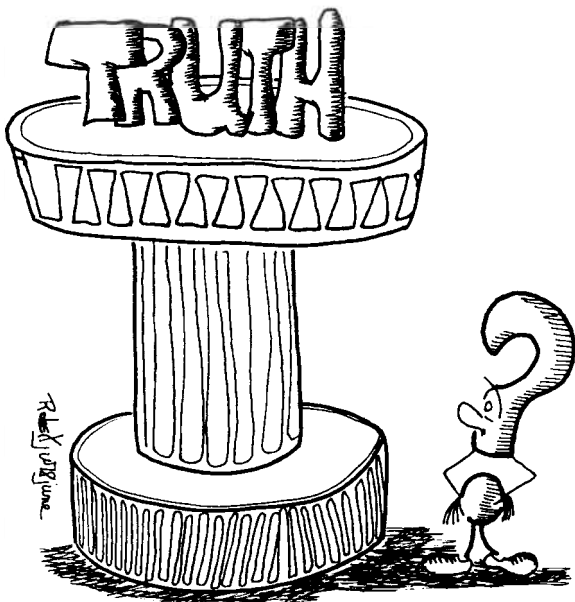
Reynolds has begun to get a bit redundant in his recent novels. Here we have Morris Malone who, along with a group of irreverent and bored friends, decides to subvert People's Capitalism and overthrow the government. They run for office on an absurd platform that includes giving Texas back to Mexico and sending all the children in the country to nudist camps.

Much to their own surprise, they begin to pose a real threat. There are a number of malcontents in any society, and Malone's party provides the only organized opposition to the status quo. As their membership grows, the government begins to take serious notice as well and assigns a government agent to infiltrate the organization and neutralize it.

There's little of interest in this except for some of the absurd propositions made by the revolutionaries. The saddest thing is that the idea of a truly nonsensical group getting a great deal of public support is not incredible. Lately, it almost seems logical. But it's not novel enough, or well executed enough, to carry the book. (35)

BRAIN WORLD by Mack Reynolds, Leisure Books, 1978, \$1.75

This is the most recent novel in another of Reynolds' continuing series, this one dealing with Ronny Bronston of Section G, United Planets. In theory, United Planets recognizes the autonomy of every independent world and would never think of interfering in their internal affairs. In practice, Section G is responsible for doing clandestinely whatever is necessary to goad every planet



us of a major talent, just as the depth of that talent was becoming apparent.

Haverstock's Traveling Curiosus and Wondershow is a carnival troupe that features such authentic shudders and wonders as the Minotaur, Medusa, a snake goddess, Tiny Tim, and Angel, the wonderboy. And they are authentic, make no mistake. There is no trickery here. Audiences are allowed to examine the performers in enough detail to assure themselves that this is no trick of mirrors, lights, or costuming. They are the real thing.

In a small southwestern town, Haverstock's band is scheduled to make its final performance, unbeknownst to anyone involved. Angel, a mute, is to find a better form of communication with a young girl who yearns for something larger than the boundaries of her hometown. She discovers this in Angel, and discovers something else as well. Haverstock is not what he seems, but something far stranger, and far more evil.

I don't want to reveal the various surprises that Reamy has in store for you, but I do want to recommend this book highly. And it is science fiction, not fantasy, despite all that I have said above. Don't wait for the projected Berkley paperback. The hardcover was one of those wiped out in the flooding of Putnam's warehouse, but the book club edition is probably still available. Buy it. (88)

OPUS 200 by Isaac Asimov, Houghton-Mifflin, 1979, \$10.95

Asimov is up to 200 books now, so here's the followup to his earlier OPUS 100. It contains a variety of selections from his second 100 books, and covers an incredible variety of subjects. The eclectic Dr Asimov here expounds on black holes, roman numerals, photons, nuclear reactors, germs, ethnology, French history, telescopes, the War of 1812, jokes dirty and otherwise, limericks, and about his favorite subject, himself.

Asimov is a lucid, entertaining writer, particularly in his autobiographical writing. As a non-fiction book, this would be fine in itself. But there is also a sampling of his fiction. The most significant story is his award winning "The Bicentennial Man", in which a robot runs for public office. Asimov's robots also appear in the vignette "Light Verse".

Other stories include "Good Taste", an acceptable story that struck me unaccountably as a bit awkward. There is also one of his light tales of Ben Franklin, "The Dream", and two of his mysteries, "Earthset and Evening Star" and "The Thirteenth Day of Christmas". The excerpt from his Hugo winning THE GODS THEMSELVES is short, and from one of the more interesting portions of the book, but really doesn't stand well by itself.

As a sampler, this is very successful in providing a glimpse of the range of Asimov's writing. Some of the articles and article extracts stand well of themselves, but others seem lost out of context. I don't know why anyone would buy this instead of whichever of the individual books struck one's fancy, but this is probably as representative a sample as you could find.

LAND OF UNREASON by L. Sprague de Camp & Fletcher Pratt, Dell, 1979, \$1.75 (Originally serialized in UNKNOWN in 1941, and with a previous paperback edition from Ballantine)

The story of Fred Barber, kidnapped from England during World War

Two into the land of Faerie, is one of the classic novels of the genre, representative of what became known as the "Unknown" school. It's a joyous fantasy, with villainous villains, and a variety of imperfect, often nutty, heroes and heroines.

Barber is sent on a mission by Oberon, King of the Fairies. It seems that the basic magical laws of Faerie are changing, and in some fashion it appears that Barber may be instrumental as a force to settle them down once more. So Barber is off to the land of the kobolds to convince them to stop manufacturing weapons out of iron, which is anathema to fairies.

On his adventures, Barber is seduced by a tree sprite, chased by an animated tree spirit, changed into a frog for a series of adventures in a pond, before he returns to Oberon and then sets off for his final confrontation with the powers of change.

The novel abounds with delightful whimsy, wry humor, and sheer good story telling. De Camp has never been surpassed at this and this is one of his best, probably augmented by Pratt's own undeniable skill as a writer. (88)

THE HOSTAGE OF ZIR by L. Sprague de Camp, Berkley Books, 1978. \$1.75 (reprint of 1977 hardcover)

De Camp wrote some of the best SF as well as fantasy, and this is his most recent novel of the planet Krishna. Fergus Reith, tour guide from Earth, is presented with the job of escorting a crowd of troublesome tourists on a trip across the varied cultural surface of the planet. At every seeming opportunity, one or another of the tourists finds some way to run afoul of the humanoid but definitely not human Krishnans.

Reith has to deal with the disruption of a sporting event, theft of religious artifacts, and photographing of military secrets before being confronted with the really serious problem of having his entire retinue kidnapped by soldiery from Zir, a principality that wants to trade them for advanced Terran weapons. At this point, Reith starts to get very busy.

De Camp sword and swashbuckles with the best of them, but this novel seems to have lost much of the spirit that infused De Camp's earlier work. Perhaps he is allowing Robert Howard's dour moods to affect him when he writes his occasional Conan pastiche. For whatever reason, much of the humor in ZIR is flat and not very amusing, and the adventure sequences aren't particularly exciting. There's some good light adventure, but the zestful writing of THE SEARCH FOR ZEI and LEST DARKNESS FALL is missing. (64)

CONVERGENT SERIES by Larry Niven, Del Rey/Ballantine Books, 1979, \$1.95

The latest collection of Niven stories brings all but two of his short fictions into book form, I believe, and reprints several stories that have been unavailable since his early collection, THE SHAPE OF SPACE, went out of print. There are twenty one stories in all, ranging in quality from trivially amusing to excellent.

The excellent ones include "Bordered in Black", a nightmarish SF horror story about the risks involved in one particular space colony. Most of the better stories are the older ones, though, with the newer ones consisting of jokes, vignettes, and minor efforts. Niven apparently saves his best for novels nowadays.

DOCTOR WHO AND THE DOOMSDAY WEAPON by Malcolm Hulke, Pinnacle Books, 1979, \$1.75 (reprint of the 1974 Target paperback)

The enormously popular DR WHO television show has spawned more than thirty novels in England, and I'm surprised it took this long for an American publisher to pick them up (Avon did reprint one title many many years back). For those who have never seen the show, the doctor is a Timelord exiled to Earth, who has various adventures on his own or at the direction of his fellow timelords. He does this often through means of his Tardis, a time and space travelling device that resembles a police call box

In this adventure, the timelords send the doctor and his human assistant, Jo Grant, to a colony world sometime in our future. A small group of settlers is in conflict with a giant mineral concern for control of the planet, the disagreement being heightened by mysterious deaths, a decadent race of indigent aliens, and the intervention of the Master, the doctor's long time enemy.

For juvenile TV, the complexity and ambition of the plot are extraordinary. It is not as successful as an adult novel, although most of the novel's faults are the necessary result of a series such as this. (58)

DOCTOR WHO AND THE DAY OF THE DALEKS by Terrence Dicks, Pinnacle Books, 1979, \$1.75 (reprint of 1974 Target paperback)

This time we have the Doctor in a change war adventure. The Daleks, organic brains in mechanical bodies, have invaded 22nd Century Earth after a devastating internal war has weakened human resistance. A small group of human revolutionaries is using a time machine to return to our present, planning to assassinate the man they consider responsible for the war. Following them, of course, are a contingent of Daleks determined that they will do no such thing.

The Doctor and Jo Grant find themselves in the middle of all this, and get things straightened out as usual. Again, the book is not a classic adventure novel, but it is competently done and, like the preceding volume, is entirely true to the film version. (62)

CHILDREN OF THE DRAGON by Frank S. Robinson, Avon Books, 1979, \$1.95

This is a very long, very brutal barbarian fantasy novel, apparently the first book by a new writer of some talent, and displaying many of the awkward touches that frequently characterize the newer writer.

The plot of the novel is fairly straightforward. The Empire of Bergharra consists of two tribes, the dominant northern Tenemghadi and the subservient southern Urhemmedhins. The Emperor, Tnem Sarbat Satanichadh, is a dissolute, evil man who occasionally recognizes the inevitable fall of his line. His attempts to avoid prophecies do not take into consideration that the prophecy might have some of the details inaccurate. A southern bandit leader, one Jehan the Man-Eater, is tortured at the Emperor's direction, but escapes to become the charismatic leader of a resurgent south.

There are some very good sections in the novel. Jehan's deranged daughter is handled with deftness. The eventual corruption of

the revolution is very plausibly handled. The writing itself is only occasionally awkward.

But there are some avoidable errors as well. It is stressed early in the novel that the southerners ascribe to a religion that makes the taking of a human life a sin. This is never reconciled with their constant revolutionary activity and murder of northern soldiers. Robinson also indulges in the sin of having most of the proper nouns be common words spelled backwards, a ploy I've never seen used to such excess since Damien Broderick's SORCEROR'S WORLD. Among the words so used are opossum, Taj Mahal, Vassar, Artaxerxes, Santayana, invest, and Asterisk. The two most annoying are Kassavubu Manhattan and Benjamin Herzberg. Hopefully, Robinson will have outgrown this sort of thing by his next novel. Hopefully there will in fact be a next novel. Robinson is not at all a bad writer. (63)

THE POWER THAT PRESERVES by Stephen Donaldson, Ballantine/Del Rey Books, 1979, \$2.50 (reprint of 1977 hardcover)

What can you say about the concluding volume of the best fantasy I've read since William Goldman's THE PRINCESS BRIDE. This is superior to volume one, LORD FOUL'S BANE, but not quite up to the level of volume two, THE ILLEARTH WAR. It should not be read before the other two, as it is really one continuous story, not a series.

Thomas Covenant is faced now with his final confrontation with the evil Lord Foul. With civilization nearing collapse, the friendly giants all apparently dead save Foamfollower, it looks like evil might triumph after all. Covenant has finally begun to accept this other world as equally real, and is attempting to come to grips with his guilt and his personal responsibility to those around him. Apparently this trilogy makes friends or enemies, with few in between. I find it far more interesting, though admittedly not quite as well executed, than even Tolkien's LORD OF THE RINGS. (95)

THE SCIENCE FICTION AND HEROIC FANTASY AUTHOR INDEX compiled by Stuart W. Wells III, Purple Unicorn Books, 1978, \$9.95 in paperback. There is a hardcover edition as well.

This is an attempt to present a complete checklist of all SF and heroic fantasy fiction published in the last several decades. As such, it was as doomed to failure as any such attempt, but it succeeds far more than anything I have seen previously. Wells lists his criteria for inclusion, which make sense though I personally disagree with some, but like everyone else, he can't read everything, and inevitably a lot of titles are missed.

As a sample of the kind of novel he missed, there is GORGO, the novelization of the movie, published by Monarch books. There is also a living dinosaur in GORGONZOLA WON'T YOU PLEASE COME HOME by Delano Ames, a communist takeover of the US in John Ball's THE FIRST TEAM, an immortal alien being in John Blackburn's BURY HIM DARKLY, a lost race under England in the same author's CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT.

Nevertheless, this is a useful tool for the habitual reader or the beginning collector. You won't find a guide to the various borderline cases here, but you will be able to get a comprehensive listing of almost everything published clearly as SF or heroic fantasy. That ought to take up a lot of collecting time

On the planet Kesrith, soon to be ceded to the humans, a small group of surviving mri ponder their fate. Niun is a young, untested warrior: Melein, his sister, is heir apparent to the priesthood of knowledge. They are soon to be thrown together with Sten Duncan, aide to the arriving Governor George Stavros of Earth.

The plot in the first novel is highly complex. The Regul mistrust their mri allies, even in such highly diminished numbers. There are as well two distinct parties within the Regul hierarchy, corresponding with family lines. Stavros is a pragmatist, but is also concerned with revenge on the Regul family that was responsible for the destruction of his home world during the war. Both Stavros and the Regul have definite reasons for ignoring the disappearance of the mri as a race.

The initial volume then deals with Duncan's inadvertent capture by Niun and the understanding that begins to form between them. It is a gripping novel of interstellar and interracial politics, and contains some of the best writing Cherryh has yet done. All of her characters are distinct individuals, her plot is interesting and well paced, her descriptive sections crisp and thorough. Unfortunately, this doesn't hold true in the second volume.

Duncan falls from favor with Stavros, partly because it is politically expedient for him to shun the young man, hated by the Reguls cooperating with the governor. But Stavros also distrusts Duncan's affection for the two remaining mri. He learns through Duncan that there are records of the mri homeworlds and, ostensibly dispatches the three of them to reunite the mri. In fact, warships are to follow them, in order to come to a final solution of the mri problem.

But Duncan's loyalties are even further dissipated, as he takes personal service to Melein, effectively casting off his allegiance to humanity and becoming a mri himself. So his actions become quite unpredictable as the final confrontation looms upon everyone.

Timing is off in the second volume. The journey itself is so long and relatively uneventful that the reader is lulled into restlessness. The final climax is slow in starting, then resolves itself too quickly. The impression is of a long slow book with a hastily written final chapter. If there is in fact a third volume, hopefully the action will pick up again. KESRITH (78) SHON'JIR (58)

SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES by Ray Bradbury, Bantam Books, 1978, \$1.95

This recent new edition gave me a perfect excuse to re-read one of my all time favorites. The adventures of Jim and Will as they explore, are menaced by, and triumph over the many facets of Cooger and Dark's Pandemonium Shadow Show are genuinely nostalgic, even for those whose childhood is nothing like that described in the novel.

There is a variety of menaces as well, the mirror that swallows souls, the merry-go-round that steals years of your life, and my favorite, the weird witch who floats around in her balloon. Bradbury's writing ability was rarely again as full flowered as in this novel, one that seems far overdue for a film version.

THE MAN RESPONSIBLE by Stephen Robinett, Ace Books, 1978, \$1.75
(expansion of a story that originally appeared in ANALOG under
the same title)

Harry Penny is a lawyer whose income is mainly derived from very unromantic activities, divorces and such, and what looks like an amusing if not very important investment scheme seems to fit in quite well. But an awful lot of coincidences arise. Edward Sterling, head of the trust, asserts that he is building the city of tomorrow in South America. But several of his investors want their money back, despite an agreement freezing it for one year, and one even claims to have visited the building site -- only to find it vacant.

The more Penny investigates, the more intrigued he is. Sterling seems obsessed with death and was, until recently, funding a number of diverse research projects, including one to catch departing souls, another to allow people to ingest the personality of another person.

More peculiarities show up. Sterling is never seen in public, leaves much of the business up to his wife Nora and his liaison man from South America, one Colonel Vargas. Vargas is apparently having an affair with Nora, at least according to the colonel's alcoholic wife. And why is it that an apparently innocuous graduate student keeps blacking out and making homicidal attempts on Sterling's life?

I have not been fond of Robinett's short fiction, usually until recently written under the name "Tak Hallus". Even the original version of this novel seemed stilted and contrived. But the expanded version is far superior, and it is the first example of really entertaining writing I have seen from this author. The only significant flaw is perhaps a too heavy reliance on coincidence as a plot device. Nevertheless, if Robinett can continue to improve along the lines demonstrated here, he may well become one of the more interesting new writers in the genre. ((66))

A CITY IN THE NORTH by Marta Randall, Warner Books, 1979, \$1.75
(previous Warner edition in 1976)

Toyon Satak and his wife Alin Kennerin are wealthy merchants who take a vacation on the primitive world of Hoep-Hanninah. Satak is fascinated with an abandoned city deep in the forest of the planet, forbidden to humanity by the apelike resident sentients. The aliens are an enigmatic race, apparently too primitive to have built the city, a race that never shows emotion, even in the face of torture and death.

Although there is a commercial group exploiting Hoep-Hanninah, under the leadership of a villain named Haecker, the rights of the aliens are supposedly being protected by Governor Rhodes. In actuality, Haecker is blackmailing the governor into ignoring the lucrative trade in drugs that Haecker is controlling. Haecker also suspects that Satak and Kennerin are actually spies for the interstellar government, and decides to arrange an accident for them.

Kennerin is able to secure permission for a visit to the city from the Hanninah, but the two of them and a minor company employee named Quellan find themselves fleeing for their lives from a group of company thugs instead. Compounding their problems are the strange Hanninah rites, which seem to be having some effect on their own emotional stability.

NEW VOICES II edited by George R.R. Martin, Jove Books, 1979, \$1.75 (reprint of hardcover edition)

This collection of five original stories by former John W. Campbell Award nominees has the highest average quality of any original collection I've read in some time. It would not surprise me to see several of them on the Hugo ballot next year. This makes two consecutive above average anthologies from George Martin, and I wonder how long the string can last.

Lisa Tuttle opens the collection with a novelet that will inevitably be compared to Robert Silverberg's "Born With the Dead". "The Hollow Man" explores the emotions of a woman whose husband has committed suicide, but who is revived thanks to a new scientific breakthrough. But although his body is alive, there is something missing. He no longer feels emotions, hate, love, even interest. Superficial readers may dismiss this as too imitative of Silverberg, which would be a shame, because the story definitely stands unaided.

"Lady of Ice" is a space opera set in the asteroid belt. Guy Snyder has had only a single novel published previously, so I was very interested to see how his style might differ in a shorter piece. But like the Tuttle, this is a novelet, and there is little to distinguish it stylistically from his earlier TESTAMENT XXI. Our hero, a miner, is forced to sacrifice all to save the sole survivor of a space disaster, and a not very likable victim at that.

Thomas F. Montealeone has always struck me as a fine narrative writer lacking in subtlety. "The Dancer in the Darkness" goes, a long way toward dispelling that image. Lisa is a young woman travelling in Spain, intent upon discovering every possible flamenco dance and learning to perform it. But there is one dance that is only spoken of in hushed tones. The story is narrated in a low key manner that is extremely effective. Montealeone does an excellent job with his characters as well. Although the fantasy element is small, the story is nonetheless a stunner.

The remaining two stories are acceptable but weaker. Jesse Miller's "Twilight Lives" is set in a female dominated society that has deteriorated into a sort of nomadic feudalism. Spider Robinson tells us in "Satan's Children" of a drug that compels the truth, and of a young couple's mission to distribute it amongst us unknown to the authorities. The former story seems rather shallow; the latter an oversimplification of the human condition and a wish fulfillment solution to complex problems. It's still one of the best buys around though.

HEROIC FANTASY edited by Gerald W. Page and Hank Reinhardt, DAW Books, 1979, \$1.95

This is an anthology of original sword and sorcery stories. To be fair to this book, though, I'm going to have to admit to a prejudice. In general, I don't care for this sub-genre. The plot of nearly every story in the genre (and in this book) is the standard hero-meets-menace, hero-overcomes-menace formula. There are some writers who can write this type of thing very well; I particularly enjoy Robert Howard and Fritz Leiber. But the bulk of the stories being written are incredibly imitative, lack anything new or original, and are often poorly narrated as well. Most of the stories in this collection fall into that category.

One of the exceptions is Andre Norton's "Sand Sister", a Witch World story about a young girl fated to fulfill a strange destiny, and save her people. It is not top quality Norton, but is one of the best stories in this present volume. Don Walsh does write the formula, but features a samurai warrior in "Ghoul's Head" that is at least novel, and Walsh writes well.

Adrian Cole writes a non-formula story, "Astral Stray", which combines dull writing with characters impossible to identify with or care for. H. Warner Munn's "The De Pertriche Ring" is a tale of the Crusades that is competent, but unexceptional. Hank Reinhardt does a creditable job with "The Age of the Warrior" in which a man past his prime sacrifices himself in defense of the realm he helped to build.

The remainder of the stories all fit the formula. There are some good ones, notably those by Tanith Lee, Charles Saunders, and F. Paul Wilson. There are several acceptable ones, including those by Galad Eflansson, E.C. Tubb, Darrell Schweitzer, and A.E. Silas. The biggest disappointment has to be "The Seeker in the Fortress" by Manly Wade Wellman, in which a hero has to rescue a not-particularly-pleasant heroine from a besieged castle. It's not up to Wellman's usual standards at all.

THE FOURTH "R" by George O. Smith, Dell Books, 1979, \$1.75 (originally published by Ballantine in 1959, reprinted by Lancer as THE BRAIN MACHINE)

James Holden is a five year old boy whose father and mother have invented a machine to augment learning abilities. With its use, they have developed him intellectually to an adult level, although he is practically and emotionally still a child. Paul Brennan, a friend of the family, covets the machine, and engineers the murder of the Holden family. Fortunately, Jimmy escapes, and is able to destroy the prototype machine. The secret is now safely locked in his brain. Unfortunately, Brennan is named his guardian.

Jimmy runs away at age 5, but is returned by his grandparents; he runs away at 6, but is turned in for the reward. When he runs away at 8, he is ready.

Smith has written a thought provoking novel, based on the assumption that Jimmy could in fact support himself by writing children's fiction. Given that precondition, his successful efforts to avoid Brennan's control are very plausible. The ultimate court test to determine his future is resolved in a manner both cynical and hopeful, and probably pretty close to what would actually be the case. (68)

THE WEATHERMAKERS by Ben Bova, Charter Books, 1979, \$1.95 (originally published in short form in ANALOG, with a hardcover and Signet paperback edition in 1973)

This early Bova novel features Ted Marrett, a researcher close to achieving effective weather control. His opposition consists of a jealous colleague named Rossman, the President who wants nothing controversial in an election year, the FBI, who are reluctant to issue security clearances to top flight but unorthodox people, and the Pentagon, which wants weather control as a weapon, not a tool.

Although the story does have a plot, a beautiful but empty-headed girl, and a climactic confrontation with Hurricane Omega, it remains one of those novels where the idea is everything, and

if you don't find that idea interesting, you're out of luck. I tend to think of this type of novel as a "science fiction procedural", comparable to the mystery field's "police procedural". Characters and other literary considerations are window dressing; the novel functions more as a narrative speculation on the mechanics of the problem, with cardboard villains to maintain interest during the dull parts. (44)

MASTERS OF THE PIT by Michael Moorcock, DAW Books, 1979, \$1.50 (This is the third in the series, previously published as BARBARIANS OF MARS in England, under the pseudonym Edward Bradbury. There are previous editions from Lancer under both titles.)

Michael Kane's third adventure on a Mars very similar to that envisioned by Edgar Rice Burroughs pits him against a world threatening problem. The city of Cend-Amrid is threatened by a plague of mindlessness, as the entire population seems to be sinking into a zombie like state from which they can all be transformed into a single organic machine.

Kane, with friend Hool Haji and the beautiful Shizala, are off to the ruins of an ancient civilization to discover the source and remedy of their problems. Along the way they are faced with intelligent dogmen and the usual run of Burroughsian menaces, chases, captures, and escapes.

Moorcock does this better than any other imitator I can think of, and in some ways it is a shame that he stopped the series at this point. He has a witty style that shines through the intentional anachronisms and flowery language required of this sub-genre. Good fun throughout, but certainly not typical of the kind of novel for which Moorcock is best known. (58)

THE MAKESHIFT GOD by Russell M. Griffin, Dell Books, 1979, \$1.95

The author's name sounds very familiar to me, but insofar as I can discover, this is a first novel. That's surprising, because it is as well done as many novels by veteran writers.

Arthur Caine is an out of work professor of language in a future where America has splintered into a number of more or less repressive states, where the Arabs dominate the world, despite their own subsequent lapse into decadence. Caine is shanghaied into a group studying the reports of an interstellar probe launched before the collapse of the US.

On the planet Albar, the probe encounters a group of primitive humanoids, led by an apparently totally human male. The male addresses the probe in Latin, and it soon becomes evident that he is in fact the Wandering Jew of Earth legend. Caine, among others, soon conclude that he is in fact a robot that was formerly present on Earth doing research for another race (which we eventually learn collapsed into the decadent primitives among which the robot now exists).

Unfortunately, the probe fires upon the robot in what it interprets as self defense. But an aborted starship still exists in orbit, and Caine is selected as part of a group sent to contact the other world. What follows is an above average adventure as the humans attempt to survive among the varied tribes of Albar and achieve access to the stored memory of the apparently defunct robot.

Griffin demonstrates great skill in his narrative technique,
(20) CRITICAL MASS #5

TIME OF THE FOURTH HORSEMAN by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Ace Books, 1977, \$1.50 (reprint of 1976 hardcover)

This is the first novel by California author Yarbro, which fails not for the usual reasons first novels often do; rather than being too ambitious and falling short, it isn't ambitious enough, and lacks life.

The world is very much overpopulated, and certain repressive measures have had to be employed. So it is that government agencies can clandestinely neutralize vaccines in test communities, making one third of them totally ineffective. The desired result is a totally impartial disease incidence which will reduce the population. If successful in the test areas, it will be employed over the country at large.

Dr. Natalie Lebbreau discovers what is going on, and that her husband Mark is head of the project. She and a small group of other doctors insist that even if the project was moral, it was conceived improperly and will result in a pandemic all out of proportion to what was intended.

What follows is the standard doctors versus plagues plot. Although Yarbro writes plausibly about her characters (with the exception of Mark, whose evil side is all we ever see), her plot is not. Even medical functionaries should be able to see that if one third of all vaccines are invalid, more than one third of the population is going to be susceptible to something, since everyone will get a mixture of valid and invalid medicines. Worse, the large numbers of deaths in the early stages are ignored by all but the doctors. Surely there would be some public outcry.

With those implausibilities, it is very difficult to become involved with the plot. The narrow viewpoint we see most of the action through reduces our interest still further. (42)

HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Signet Books, 1979, \$1.95 (reprint of 1978 hardcover)

There has been a trend lately to make the vampire if not a hero, at least a sympathetic character -- INTERVIEW WITH A VAMPIRE, THE HOLMES DRACULA FILE, etc. This lengthy vampire novel set in mid-18th century France portrays Count Saint-Germain, alias Baron Ragocty, as a lonely but heroic figure.

Saint-Germain is a mysterious but popular member of high Parisian society. He is noted for his musical interests, high degree of culture, mysterious background, and his unpopularity with certain gentlemen who form a circle around the cruel Saint Sebastien. Saint-Germain is a vampire, we learn, who has lived for thousands of years. His interest at present is to thwart the circle of Satanists led by Saint Sebastien.

Yarbro has selected which aspects of vampiric lore to use and which to avoid. Saint-Germain is not frightened of holy relics, for example, nor is he harmed by the daylight (although his powers are radically diminished and he must wear boots the soles of which are filled with the inevitable moist earth). And he does not kill to nourish himself; he appears in dreams to women whom he truly cares for, and takes only enough to survive.

He falls in love with young Madelaine De Montalia, who coincidentally is the prime target of the satanists. The novel proceeds

along fairly predictable lines to its inevitable final confrontation. And it is superb throughout. Yarbro shows us the decadent Parisians at their best and worst. The interplay among the varying characters is intriguing and totally convincing. We believe Saint-Germain both as a man and as a supernatural being. The truly evil forces are all human, of course, and the supernatural elements are actually understated. What results is a fine historical fantasy novel, with elements from the mystery genre, and some of the finest writing to appear in the last couple of years. (92)

FALSE DAWN by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Warner Books, 1979, \$1.95 (reprint of 1978 hardcover)

This is a peculiar and not entirely successful novel set in the United States a decade or two after what was apparently a series of major ecological disasters, brought on by pollution, radiation leaks, and other similar man-made problems. Most of the population is dead, and what remains is split up into nomadic raiders and settled communities with more or less sane societies.

Thea is an artificial mutant woman altered to better survive in the disintegrating environment. She encounters Evan Montague, formerly leader of a violent raiding group known as the Pirates. Montague has changed his mind about survival at any cost, and has been deposed by his former lieutenant.

The two of them flee from one shelter to another, but wherever they go, the Pirates are right behind. In fact, part of the problem with the novel is that the Pirates seem to have an almost supernatural awareness of where the two are going, and are always right on their trail, even though there is no evidence that they are actually being tracked. This artificiality, coupled with personality interactions that seem to jump erratically, make this a difficult novel to become involved with. There are sections that are quite good, as in the case of the crazy old woman who butchers her guests and hangs them in the meatlocker, but for the most part things are too unsettled for the reader to really learn to know the two characters. (58)



THE UNIVERSE AGAINST HER by James H. Schmitz, Ace Books, 1979, \$1.95 (originally serialized in ANALOG in 1964 and with a previous Ace edition)

This was the first full length adventure of precocious Telzey Amberdon, a fifteen year old from the planet Orado who develops a strong psi ability while vacationing off-planet. Upon her return, she is spotted by members of a secret psionic group who want to control her activities, because they want to stage manage the introduction of psi powers to human society. Telzey, unsurprisingly, takes unkindly to being controlled,

but is unable to do anything about it until a chance encounter with a telepathic alien gives her the ability to hold a mind shield.

Then the real plot opens. Telzey's powers enable her to spot a plot to murder her friend Gonwil Lodis. How can she prevent it, or even warn her friend, without revealing that she is using her psi powers?

Schmitz has a misleadingly open style that masks the fact that he is a very fine writer. His stories have never seemed to attract much attention, and I believe he has only once made a final ballot for any award (his novel, THE WITCHES OF KARRES). Although this is a low key and unambitious adventure, it is highly competent, engaging, and thoroughly crafted. I can't help noticing though that the previous paperback edition sold for one fifth the price of the current one. Gas may be rising rapidly, but I don't know of any other consumer commodity that has quintupled in less than fifteen years. ((64)

MESSENGERS OF DARKNESS by Hugh Walker, DAW Books, 1979, \$1.50

This is the third novel set in the fantasy world of Magira, translated from the German; the previous two titles were WAR-GAMER'S WORLD and ARMY OF DARKNESS.

Those who have read volume two will remember that the fugitives from the Yshite soldiers have now escaped by subterfuge, and have managed to kill the evil sorcerer Daran Sorc along the way. The third novel takes up immediately, with the priestess Ilara and her protector, Bruss, disappearing magically into another plane of existence. Their friend Thoric is captured by a few remaining Yshite soldiers and returned to their king to give testimony against Peshkari, a fanatic who almost started a war.

Thoric is made an unwilling spy for the king against the priesthood of Aoape, which continues to plot against his throne. Imprisoned in their temple, he learns that there is even darker work afoot, as he watches the evil magician TrondasKhyn initiate a war between darkness and light. Thoric escapes the ruin of the temple, and is then off on another adventure to rescue a pair of fair maidens and battle a giant lizard.

Although Walker's writing remains competent, this seems a far more disjointed adventure than the previous two, and wanders about aimlessly for quite a while. We lose track of the other major characters entirely, and the new elements revealed are just allowed to sit there, undeveloped. Hopefully later volumes will get the series back on the proper track. (47)

THE CITY by Jane Gaskell, Pocket Books, 1979, \$1.95 (This is the third volume in a trilogy - sometimes published in four volumes - that includes THE SERPENT and ATLAN. There has been a previous paperback edition from Warner Books. Original publication date is 1966.)

This was the third adventure of Cija, princess of Atlantis, and was an early forerunner to Gor and such. Cija, estranged wife of the evil and degenerate Emperor Zerd, is subjected to one degradation after another as she flees her husband and her tyrannical parents. Among other things, she is impregnated

by an ape (one of the few likable characters in the book), is in constant danger from predatory dinosaurs, and in general goes through a series of adventures that makes The Perils of Pauline look tame. Even the good parts of her life are somewhat soiled; her lover Smahil is, for example, her brother.

This is for fans of soap operas, Gor, and similar books. If you like your sex deadly serious and rather depraved, with a frame story of competent adventure, this is your meat. No pun intended. (48)

ASTRA AND FLONDRIX by Seamus Cullen, Pocket Books, 1979, \$1.95 (reprint of 1976 novel with a quality paperback edition from Pantheon)

If, unlike the preceding novel, you like your sex bawdy unself-conscious, and prolific, this should get a rise out of you (and this time the pun is intentional). This is an epic quest fantasy in the traditional style, with a sexual content that would put Henry Miller to shame.

Flondrix is half human, half elf, conceived through rape. As punishment, his father must forever experience every pain that Flondrix does. The young lad is, naturally, ignorant of his heritage, and the curse that links him to his evil father. As a rather precocious young man, Flondrix falls in love with the elf girl Astra, and the two of them are off to meet various adventures on the way to the...er...climactic meeting with the evil sorcerer-scientist Kranz.

Cullen tries to live in both worlds in this novel, for the fairies, elves, and such are not those of our mythology but new ones created in the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust. This doesn't do much for verisimilitude, I'm afraid, but on the other hand, despite the solemn sounding plot, the novel is more of a romp than anything else. If you're offended by rather explicit (in fact, insistently explicit) sex, pass this up. If, on the other hand, you found the sexlessness of the Hobbits rather bland, this will more than make up for it. (72)

HELLO, LEMURIA, HELLO by Ron Goulart, DAW Books, 1979, \$1.50

Jake Conger and the Wild Talents group return to battle the menace of Lemurian mind controllers in this wacky, disjointed new Goulart. Conger is attempting to retire, but an abortive assassination attempt, followed by an attack on his wife, causes him to reluctantly team up with an egomaniac girl with precognitive talents.

It seems that a science fiction magazine has been publishing theories that ancient evil Lemurians from under the earth are tampering with the minds of surface dwellers preparatory to a takeover of the world. Conger, whose gift is invisibility, tries to track down the missing author. His path crosses that of editors, pop singers, and orbiting heavies, most of whom end up dying in front of him.

Plot is really irrelevant in most of Goulart's comic novels, which are mainly vehicles for presenting one absurdity after another. Alone, one of his novels makes a light entertainment; as a body, they are beginning to be awfully repetitive and forgettable. (48)

MATURITY by Theodore Sturgeon, Rune Press hardcover, 1979, \$12.95 (Edited by Scott Imes & Stuart W. Wells III, with bibliography by Dennis Lien and Jayne Sturgeon, cover by Rick Sternbach, interior art by James OdBert)

This is a special edition of three of Sturgeon's best stories, brought together by the Minnesota SF Society, with the most complete and up to date bibliography of Sturgeon's work ever published.

The title story, originally published in 1947, is the classic story of a mutant superman attempting to discover the nature of maturity. Robin English, the protagonist, is one of the best delineated and most sympathetic supermen ever created, a man full of self doubt about his own superiorities. This is Sturgeon at his finest.

"Bulkhead" (also published as "Who") is inferior only because of the company in which it finds itself. Prolonged starflights have proven to be disastrous, because space crews end up trying to kill one another. To offset this problem, the two person crews are separated by a bulkhead, allowed to speak but never see or touch the other. But there is more to the story than there seems, and this is one of the few stories with a surprise ending that is something other than just a gimmick.

The third story, "The Graveyard Reader", is a gentle, touching fantasy about the interpretation of people's lives from their state of their graves. If this doesn't sound plausible, read the story.

I imagine this volume will become a collectors' item, particularly for those of us who are long time Sturgeon fans. Personally, I welcomed the excuse to re-read three of my favorite stories.

THE ILLUSTRATED ROGER ZELAZNY, a Byron Preiss production, Ace Books, 1979, \$2.50 (reprint of 1978 quality paperback) Illustrated throughout by Gray Morrow.

I think my objection to this book is rooted in the desire to see more straight prose from Zelazny, and resentment that he would spend time reworking his existing fiction into semi-comic strip form. But if we grant that the project was worth doing, he certainly made a good choice in the stories to be illustrated.

There are four stories included. One, "Shadowjack", is original, an early adventure of Jack of Shadows. The other three are his famous "A Rose for Ecclesiastes", in which a researcher on Mars saves a dying race but at the expense of his own peace of mind, "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth", about a leviathan on Venus, and "The Furies", in which three men with extraordinary abilities pursue a misogynist through space. There is also a gallery of portraits of characters from the Amber books.

There is no question that the stories are excellent, even in their watered down versions. The art is excellent, particularly on "Shadowjack" and "Rose". If this book causes some readers to look for the full length versions, or for more Zelazny fiction, then I imagine it will have served some useful purpose, but for hardcore readers, it's just froth.

THE VERY SLOW TIME MACHINE by Ian Watson, Ace Books, 1979, \$1.95 (reprint of 1978 hardcover)

This collection of thirteen stories includes almost all of the short fiction published to date by one of the more interesting new writers in the genre, author of five successful novels. Watson is a writer concerned with psychological and philosophical concepts, but his stories generally revolve around genuine scientific speculation.

The title story, also the best in the collection, concerns itself with a time machine that appears in our near future, containing an elderly and obviously deranged passenger. It is impossible to enter the machine or extract its passenger, which is probably fortunate, as it is soon apparent that he is growing younger, that the time machine is moving in a time continuum exactly opposite our own. But what of its origin some time in the future?

There are five more superior stories in the collection. "Thy Blood Like Milk" is set in a polluted future, where the rich "wasps" live in protected domes, and the majority of the population is exposed to a heavily polluted atmosphere. A criminal from the outside, maintained as a perpetual blood bank, corrupts his nurse into releasing him and accompanying him outside, but his treatment in captivity has driven him insane and he sacrifices her in a pagan ritual. Except, it seems to work, although not with the results intended.

"Sitting on a Starwood Stool" deals with a piece of wood that cures sicknesses and induces longevity. "Our Loves So Truly Meridional" is set in a future where force barriers have dissected the world into a number of separate cultures, between which no contact is possible. "The Roentgen Refugees" is another tale of disaster, wherein a supernova has scoured the Earth of all but those wealthy enough to find shelter. In the aftermath, a strange new religion arises. "A Timespan to Conjure With" is set on a colony world where the indigenous natives can perceive duration.

Not as successful but still interesting and entertaining are five more stories. An astronaut trainee has an unpleasant encounter with a robot gardener in "Agoraphobia 2000 AD". A man loses touch with reality while experimenting with dream therapy in "Innume Dreams". The title of "My Soul Swims in a Goldfish Bowl" tells its own story. "On Cooking the First Hero" is a brief look at a rather strange alien culture. Communication between humanity and a being imprisoned in a black hole is the subject of "The Event Horizon".

There are two stories that fail to hold much interest, dealing with the nature of art and reality. "The Girl Who Was Art" and "Programmed Love Story" are almost sketches rather than stories. Overall, however, this is one of the best single author collections of the last couple of years. Watson is better at longer lengths, but his short stories are not to be ignored.

VERTIGO by Bob Shaw, Ace Books, 1979, \$1.95

Last issue, in reviewing Shaw's collection, COSMIC KALEIDOSCOPE, I mentioned that Shaw really should write a novel about his future wherein antigravity belts have made individual flight possible, and police have an entire new area to control. Well,

no sooner said than done.

Rob Hasson is an air patrolman who was seriously injured in a fall in the line of duty. Recovering from severe injuries, both physical and psychological, he is convinced he will never wear an antigravity belt again. To protect him from reprisals during his convalescence, the government sends Hasson from England to Canada, to live with a fellow airpatrolman.

Hasson soon finds that all is not well with Al Werry. He is apparently the bought agent of Morlacher, a wealthy resident who hopes to revive interest in a derelict super-hotel built by his father. Morlacher uses his influence to cover his extralegal means of dealing with trespassers. The plot is complicated by the shattered illusions of Werry's blind son.

The plot is very predictable, but no less entertaining for that, and the characters are done with some subtlety -- though not a lot. (63)

SHIP OF STRANGERS by Bob Shaw, Ace Books, 1979, \$1.75

This "novel" is a cobbled together collection of shorter pieces, six altogether, of which at least four have appeared elsewhere. Ace, unfortunately, does not credit them, but I recognize "Retroactive", "Appointment on Prila", "Unfaithful Recording", and "Gambler's Choice".

Basically, the stories revolve around the explorations of the survey ship SARAFAND, captained by the eccentric computer Aesop. The bridge character is Dave Surgenor, an old hand at the job, who watches as a succession of younger crewmates come and go.

Their adventures include an encounter with a shape changing being who impersonates one of their landcraft, a time traveling race that uses real time bombs, an internal quarrel over possession and use of dream tapes, and the discovery of millenia old automatic space torpedoes. The novel ends with the malfunction of Aesop and the expulsion of the ship into extra-universal space, and its ultimate return. The stories were not among the best Shaw wrote, and except for a little bit of characterization in the final segments, there is little of note here. (55)

MEDUSA'S CHILDREN by Bob Shaw, Doubleday/SFBC hardcover, 1979 reprint of 1977 British edition, I think.

The first few chapters of this novel alternate between two settings. On one hand, we have Myrah, a young woman who is part of a primitive underground culture, apparently on another world. On the other we have Hal Tarrant, a sea farmer in a future where most of the governments of the world have settled into a kind of technological feudalism. Myrah is faced with a strange new current that threatens her way of life; Tarrant is faced with unprecedented giant squid who endanger his source of funds.

Shaw introduced another of his awesome speculations in this novel. It seems that in prehistory, a former technological race decided to stabilize the water levels on Earth throughout any future rise or drop in temperature. Spotted throughout our oceans are matter transmitters, which automatically shunt excess water off to two watery planetoids in orbit near Venus. What they did not expect was that giant squids would be able to cross back to Earth, or that a primitive form of colony life would achieve intelligence and use humans as puppets.

Both story lines work well, although the necessarily brief treatment of each makes character development somewhat skimpy. The story lines converge as Myrah and some of her fellows emerge in our own ocean and encounter Tarrant, contaminating him with a remote agent of Ka, the master life form, which temporarily controls his mind. The novel is pretty standard and relatively uninteresting from there on. (62)

THE HOWARD COLLECTOR edited by Glenn Lord, Ace Books, 1979, \$1.95

This is a collection of fiction and non-fiction by the late Robert E. Howard, along with a number of brief articles and letters about his life and works. All of the contents were originally published in amateur periodical form as The Howard Collector, copies of which are now collectors' items.

There are five fantasy stories by Howard. "Two Against Tyre" is a well written and very familiar tale of a wandering barbarian (in this case Eithriall the Gaul) who, as a matter of honor, rescues another man from the foul clutches of the authorities. Howard writes this at least as well as any modern writer save possibly Fritz Leiber.

"The Sea Curse" is an above average ghost story, sort of, about a woman who casts a curse on two ruffians who have driven her daughter to suicide. A man fatally wounded by Conan's predecessor, King Kull, uses sorcery to set an everlasting curse on his bones in "The Curse of the Golden Skull". Solomon Kane, another of Howard's recurring characters, has a brief encounter with a mysterious horseman in "Death's Black Riders". "Ye College Days" is a satire about the brutal way of life at Killeme College.

The best pieces of fiction in the book, however, are not fantasy. "Knife, Bullet, and Noose" is a standard but well done western adventure. "Spanish Gold on Devil Horse" is an exceptionally good story of a modern hunt for lost Spanish treasure. There are a couple of respectable straight fiction pieces as well. A scoffer plays a practical joke on a pastor in "The Heathen" and a dubious theatrical skips town in "The Thessalians". There is also a fine essay about cats, titled "The Beast From the Abyss".

The non-Howard material is interesting, particularly the letters dealing with his death, and Robert Yaple's history of the Hyborian Age, reconstructed from internal evidence in the Conan stories. All in all, an interesting and readable collection.

THE GODS OF BAL-SAGOTH by Robert E. Howard, Ace Books, 1979, \$1.95

This collection consists of eight complete stories and a long novel fragment. The title story is an adventure of Turlogh O'Brien, a Gael, who is shipwrecked along with a former enemy, Athelstane the Saxon. They promptly rescue the beautiful but ambitious Brunhild from a giant flightless bird and set about restoring her to a throne deprived her by the sorcerer Gothan. With a cast of thousands, they are off to a rousing and thoroughly readable adventure.

In "Casonetto's Last Song", a dead satanish attempts to exact revenge by means of an ensorcelled phonograph record. This is

your basic gimmick story and Howard doesn't make it any more gripping than anyone else.

"The Curse of the Golden Skull" is an acceptable but minor story also included in THE HOWARD COLLECTOR, reviewed above.

"King of the Forgotten People" is quite reminiscent of A. Merritt's lost race fantasies. A warped but brilliant scientist is installed as ruler of the fabled lost pleasure city of Genghis Khan.

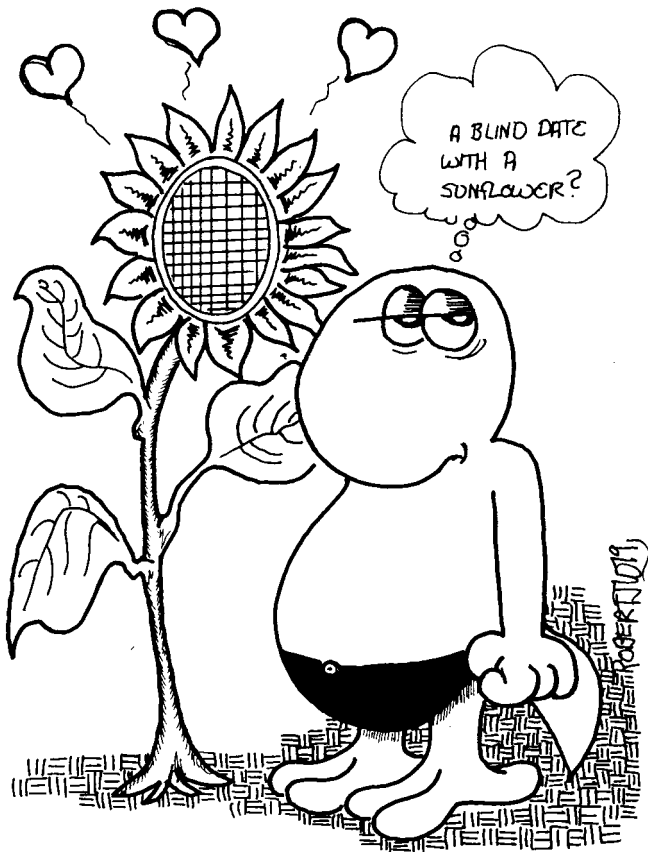
"Usurp the Night" is, on the other hand, a typical Lovecraft story. A

series of mysterious disappearances seems somehow linked to a reticent cripple who keeps some hooved animal in his attic. Not bad, but Lovecraft did it much better. Another standard horror story, done somewhat better, is "The Shadow of the Beast", in which an abandoned house is haunted by the ghost of an ape.

"Nekht Semerkeht" is another lost race novelette, with a lost Spanish soldier wandering into a walled Indian city. This story was completed by Andrew Offutt with no obvious splints. The last complete story is another ghost tale, with a man murdered at sea returning to seek revenge. The novel fragment, "Isle of the Eons" features another pair of shipwrecked heroes.

Most of the really excellent Howard fiction has long since been reprinted in one or another collection, but even the lesser stories are of high quality. This is of interest to even those of us who are tired of illiterate barbarians with bulging biceps and a crippled plot.

TENTACLES OF DAWN by Robert Wilson, Major Books, 1979, \$1.75



A nameless man wakes from suspended animation, bereft of any memories, in an enigmatic cavern world. He is almost immediately captured by Zarko, leader of a primitive band, for reasons never revealed to him. Agents of a mysterious prophethess rescue him in a timely fashion, but then lose him to a swarm of giant bats.

Our hero is rescued a second time, this time by agents of Fraka, a gigantic being whose tentacles reach throughout the cavern world. Eventually we learn that the prophethess is in fact the tip of one of these tentacles, but perfidy on the part of the devious Zarko leads to murder and ultimately a rebellion against him.

Then the plot starts to get complex. It seems that there is another power structure, dominated by a man named Pylox, which also rules the cavern world. There are as well the dark invaders, literally slimy denizens of another world, or are they? There is the Watcher of the World, as well, who may or may not be concerned with humanity.

I would not want you to get the impression that this is an important first novel that you should rush right out in the rain or sleet or hail and buy. It is actually only tolerably well written, with minimal characterization, very little stylistic ability, and with frequent stretches of too much plot and not enough meat. But it is one of the more inventive minor novels I've read, and imagination ought to count for something. I'd rather read a poorly written but interesting novel than a finely crafted dull one any day. (58)

DOCTOR WHO AND THE DINOSAUR INVASION by Malcolm Hulke, Pinnacle Books, 1979, \$1.75 (reprint of 1976 British paperback)

The incorrigible Doctor is back again, this time reappearing in a deserted London. It seems that dinosaurs have started appearing out of no where, scaring the neighbors, and then vanishing as quickly as they appeared. As a safety precaution, London has been evacuated. When the Doctor runs into the military, therefore, he is promptly arrested as a suspected looter.

The reader is soon made aware of what is going on. A group of nuts, including a number of high government officials and a long time friend of the Doctor, Captain Yates, have decided that modern civilization must be scrapped. They are handpicking people to start a new world, and hope to create that world by bringing prehistoric times forward, wiping out our own existence in the process. Yates and the machine's inventor, Professor Whitaker, have been duped into cooperating with them.

This is a typical adventure (one I somehow missed when it was on television recently) and the novelization is faithful and competent, though not particularly brilliant. But then, the whole series is designed to be light fun, and this is that. ((54)

DOCTOR WHO AND THE GENESIS OF THE DALEKS by Terrance Dicks, Pinnacle Books, 1979, \$1.75 (reprint of the 1976 British paperback)

This adventure, on the other hand, I did see...and enjoyed. The Doctor has an opportunity to go back in time to the origin of his arch enemies, the murderous cyborged Daleks. With Sarah

Jane Smith and Harry Sullivan, he journeys to the planet Skaro, a war torn planet which has become increasingly dominated by the evil genius of Davros, possibly the best villain in the entire series (far better in my mind than the incompetent Master). Davros pretends that he is developing the Daleks to help win the war for one of the two contending forces on Skaro, but he actually wants to create a race that will supplant all other lifeforms in the universe, and make him immortal by association. Davros himself is crippled, and looks more than slightly similar to the awkward and menacing Dalek machines.

Davros cannot fool his allies forever, however, and a majority demands that he destroy his creations, or at least provide them with human emotions. But Davros is more devious than even the Doctor expected, and he uses the Daleks to massacre the opposition. In true Frankensteinian fashion, the Daleks then decide that if they are the perfect life forms, then there is no reason to continue accepting orders from Davros.

This is one of the best adventures of the Doctor, and Dicks seems to rise above the already high quality of the series whenever the Daleks are involved. This is actually worth reading in its own right. (64)

RENAISSANCE by A.E. van Vogt, Pocket Books, 1979, \$1.95

The alien Utt have invaded the Earth. Their rule is designed to be benevolent. Having determined that all of the evils of the world result from male domination, they force all males to ingest a drug which makes them nearsighted. They are then provided with rose colored glasses, which somehow sap their masculinity and make them subservient to women. To reinforce the set up, only women are allowed to own property, drive vehicles, etc.

Our protagonist is Dr. Peter Grayson. His glasses crack one day, releasing his male potency, and the various women in his life mysteriously begin to swoon in his presence and beg to be dominated. Grayson is then contacted by an underground organization that seems every bit as repulsive as the aliens themselves.

This is a perfectly dreadful book. Even ignoring the ridiculous premises of the novel, the plot itself creaks along, no, it lurches along, from imprisonment to escape to treachery. There are attempts at melodrama that seem more stilted and artificial than an old Charlie Chan movie. The characterization is not only superficial, it is non-existent. I can't imagine how any editor could possibly have bought this, and if van Vogt's name had not been on the manuscript, I strongly suspect it would never have been published. (25)

HAMMER'S SLAMMERS by David Drake, Ace Books, 1979, \$1.95

This is yet another "novel" cobbled together from previously collected short stories, and this one holds together even less well than Bob Shaw's SHIP OF STRANGERS, reviewed earlier. Although some of the characters from each story appear in one or more of the others, there is not enough lineality to truly call this a novel. Five of the segments were independently published as stories during the past few years.

Hammer is leader of a group of mercenaries originally organized to fight one particular war, but which assumes an independent status when its former employers try to arrange the destruction of the entire force in "But Loyal to His Own". In the second story, "The Butcher's Bill", a soft hearted client is revolted by the carnage it has initiated.

"Under the Hammer" is a brief, bloody encounter in which a new recruit is quickly introduced to the exigencies of combat. There is an inadvertent war with indigenous aliens in "Cultural Conflict". The last independent story is "Caught in the Crossfire", which concerns a woman noncombatant who is pulled into the current war through happenstance. There follows two original sections, in one of which a rival mercenary group clandestinely violates conditions of an armistice, and in the second of which, Hammer uses assassination to gain control of the planet that originally tried to destroy his command.

One cannot help but compare these stories to those of Jerry Pournelle's Falkenberg (Pournelle in fact wrote the introduction to this book). But Pournelle writes a more lucid story, seems better able to transfer real incidents of the past into plausible future battles. Drake's stories are sketches, at best. There is no single continuing character to follow through the novel version, and even its linearity is implied rather than demonstrated. Re-read Pournelle instead. (38)

KEEPERS OF THE GATE by Steven G. Spruill, Dell Books, 1978, \$1.50 (reprint of 1977 hardcover)

This is a promising, though occasionally embarrassing, first novel, originally published by Doubleday. The blue-skinned Proteps have established an embassy on Earth, but allow no humans to travel to their pastoral planet, Eridani III. Their science is clearly superior to ours, but for some reason they have not established themselves through much of space.

Jared Hiller is a member of Earth's intelligence community, who commands a spy ship in Eridani's vicinity. When his ship is destroyed, only he survives, and only with some bionic amplifications. He is the six million dollar spaceman. Retired, after a fashion, Hiller is approached by Anne Cantrell, an out of work news reporter about whom Hiller harbors some suspicions. He is also suspicious of a mysterious human from his past, who has reappeared with a missing arm restored and with no signs of aging.

We embark from there on a typical SF mystery story, written in a quite entertaining fashion. Spruill writes very well, has interesting characters, and his plot is well constructed. But his premises are awkward. I won't spoil the ending, because the novel really is worth reading, but I wish Spruill hadn't revived yet another hoary old cliché. (65) but it could have been much higher.

THE PSYCHOPATH PLAGUE by Steven G. Spruill, Dell Books, 1979, \$1.75 (reprint of 1978 hardcover)

In his second novel, Spruill seems to have introduced a pair of recurring characters. Elias Kane is an idiosyncratic earthman who wins and loses fortunes at the drop of a hat. In one encounter, he wins possession of and immediately liberates Pendrake, a gigantic humanoid alien who eschews all violence, even in self defense.

Earth, meanwhile, is beset by the psychopath plague, a wave of criminal violence that threatens to destroy civilization within weeks if it cannot be stopped. Scientists are stymied; they can find no reason for the fits of insane anger that are striking more people every day. The other colonies have already quarantined Earth. Even the alien Chirpones are terrified of us.

Kane cannot explain it rationally, but he has a hunch that the Chirpones are somehow involved, either wittingly or unwittingly. He notices what appear to be inconsistencies in their account of their own nature.

As with his first novel, Spruill writes very fine narrative. He maintains the action adequately, doesn't rush things, answers all questions in due course, and eases into his climax skillfully. But there is again a failure in the premise of his resolution. The mechanism of the plague is, to my mind, absurd. The secret of the Chirpones is rather hard to swallow. (64) but again, it should have been much higher.

FOUR DAY PLANET and LONE STAR PLANET by H. Beam Piper, Ace Books, 1979, \$2.25 (The former novel originally published in 1961 and the latter, written in collaboration with John J. McGuire, was published as an Ace Book in 1958 as A PLANET FOR TEXANS)

The late H. Beam Piper wrote only a few novels before his death, and FOUR DAY PLANET is, I believe, the only one never to have appeared in paperback before this edition. Walter Boyd is a 17 year old reporter on Fenris, a barely habitable planet that experiences a thousand hours of daylight and night, alternately. Fenris has a population of about 25000, and its only export is monster wax.

The oceans of Fenris harbor gigantic sea monsters, which are hunted for the waxy substance that cushions their internal organs. The wax is sold through a cooperative, which has become dominated by Ravick, a crooked manipulator who is personally pocketing most of the profits. The pressure he is applying on the hunters is leading inevitably to a civil war, an outcome feared by Walter, and by the mysterious drunkard, Bish Ware.

This is an excellent novel, almost a juvenile, full of shipwreck, battle, villains and good guys, and simple but entertaining narrative. It alone is worth the price of the book; it is doubly worth it when paired with the long out of print LONE STAR PLANET.

New Texas was settled by almost the entire population of Texas on Earth. It is a fiercely independent world, on which the murder of a politician is a political crime rather than murder, and one can only be punished if it cannot be shown that the political victim was irresponsible in office.

Stephen Silk is an unpopular member of the diplomatic corps sent to New Texas for the obvious purpose of being murdered. Earth can then justifiably (in its eyes) conquer the planet, in order to prevent its takeover by the canine aliens, the Z'Srauff. But Silk has other ideas.

This isn't a particularly deep novel, but it is great fun, well written, and well worth reprinting. Even at the higher cover price, this volume is a bargain. (FOUR DAY PLANET 67, LONE STAR PLANET 66)

THE VEILS OF AZLAROC by Fred Saberhagen, Ace Books, 1979, \$1.95

Azlaroc is one of the more interesting creations in the genre in recent years. It is a star, though effectively a planet, upon which a veil of time falls each year. The veil seals everyone and everything on the surface away from all other times. It is possible to communicate with those separated by relatively few veils, but as the separation increases, one can pass through others, or in some cases not even see them. Once caught, it is impossible for a person or object to ever leave Azlaroc.

Against this setting, Saberhagen plays out a number of subplots. Chang Timmins is one of the oldest inhabitants of Azlaroc, determined to warn the current tourists that the veil will fall early this year. Sorokin and Ramachandra are investigating the possibility of escaping through a wrinkle in the veils. Leodas Ditmars has been commissioned to steal a book from a time locked tomb.

Unfortunately, the plots are not the equal of the setting, and the novel doesn't work particularly well. The individual story lines seem to peter out rather than climax, and there is the nagging feeling at the end that one has read volume one of a two part novel (which might in fact be the case). (58)

CRITICAL MISSIVES

Jim Mann writes: Sam Lundwall is right. THE GREEN SLIME is Japanese. It was a co-production of MGM and Japan's Toei.

Jim is apparently right, although my TV Guide described it as Italian, in the same series with WILD WILD PLANET and others gems about a space station crew. I assume that two different films were not released with the same title, so TV Guide either was confused, or was not given the proper information by the station.

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