

# PAPERBACK INFERNO

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Brian Aldiss -- HELLICONIA SPRING (Granada,  
555pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Nick Lowe

By the time you read this review, summer will have come on Helliconia. As the planet's primary approaches periastron with its supergiant companion, the cyclical ascendancy of humans over phagors reaches its zenith. Little Embruddock/Oldorando, relic of a dimly-remembered phagor settlement in the ruins of a wholly forgotten ancient palace, has grown to a colourful, sprawling metropolitan centre, shielded from Freyr's scorching noon by the vault of rajabaral foliage to which the snowfields have yielded. In this Malacian hothouse, the continuing struggle between knowledge and power is played out in a ballet of glittering intrigues, while the memory of winter fades into the memory of a dream. The immediate business of empire has no place for thought of the coming dark, centuries distant. Meanwhile, on Earth Station Avernus, the unseen watchers follow the immense cosmic soap epic in an agony of non-participation, wondering, like us, whether a fractious humanity can unite in the final instalment to

break the wheel of history at last.

That, at least, is the story Helliconia Spring seems to anticipate. It's surely wrong in some or all details, but I record it because this moment of suspension, at the time of writing, between Spring and Summer seems to me a peculiarly precious one, never to be recovered once volume two collapses the wave function and ninety percent of the possibilities raised in eighteen months of brooding sink away towards the original boulder. It seems to me a nice time for one final review, in the most literal sense, of that remarkable first volume, especially as (I hope) a lot of us will just be coming round to another reading.

A year and a half on, Helliconia Spring still looks like a masterpiece. It's survived remarkably well the surge of hype on which it was launched, topped at least some of the charts, and successfully evaded the completely naff awards in favour of the comparatively hip BSFA and JWC. This has to be seen in perspective, as Aldiss will probably make more (such are the vicissitudes of art) from the ongoing Kubrick deal than from the whole Helliconian trilogy. But it's still a pretty impressive record, especially for a novel this good.

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What's more, everyone likes it — very unusual for the protean Aldiss. It used to be possible to ask a roomful of fans to name their three favourite Aldiss books and tick off the titles until only Equator and The Interpreter were left unominated. (Since you ask, The Shape Of Further Things, Brothers Of The Head and The Hand-Reared Boy, but I realise it's an eccentric preference.) Nowadays you have to leave Helliconia out of the deck to get a game at all. True, a few dissidents don't get on with it, but I find their attempts to rationalise their dislike invariably fizzles away in feeble nitpicking. I freely concede there are mildly irritating inconsistencies, repetitions, oddities of nomenclature, implausible details, some outrageous coincidences, and a strange accelerated ending. But all this looks awfully trivial to me when measured on the scale of Aldiss's ambition and achievement.

There are a lot of different things about Helliconia Spring that excite different kinds of reader. The invention and texture of the imagined world set a standard against which future world-building epics will have to be judged; the human story is nevertheless complex and satisfying. These are oft-repeated comments, and I hardly intend to labour them now. But what I value most about Helliconia is that it is SF's boldest assault yet on its fundamental theme of individual human values in the context of large-scale historical, or cosmic, processes. Aldiss is perhaps the only writer to make this issue central to all his major work, as to his programmatic definition of science fiction itself. But, more than that, his vision is really absurdly life-affirming, when you consider his chief preoccupation is the way everything that matters becomes completely insignificant when viewed from the universal perspective proper to science.

In theme, Helliconia is essentially a more complex reworking of Aldiss's early short story "The Failed Men". No matter how negentropic and upbeat Helliconia Spring seems, we know that we will eventually see the Oldorandan civilisation sink back into the inexorable oblivion of Helliconian winter and the reascendancy of the phagors. (At least, I'll feel jolly cheated if Avernus successfully intervenes to prevent it.) But that pervasive awareness does nothing to diminish the successive thrills of reinventing civilisation and technology in Embruddock, or the empathy felt for the characters. All it does is colour them with the kind of bittersweet pleasure in fragile joys that's so characteristic of Aldiss's most affecting work. If there's an optimistic moral being urged, it's that scientific and historical understanding is the one currency that can redeem humanity from decadence and self-destruction. Whether it will on Helliconia, we won't know until winter arrives.

In the meantime, if you're hanging about for Summer to appear in library or paperback, or if you've read it already and can't take the suspense, you could do a lot worse than read Helliconia Spring again. Remember all those marvellous moments like Yuli's glimpse of the world of the Takers, the miracle of Fish Lake, Shay Tal's pauk, the birth of the Imagos; remember the children, and above all remember those marvellous phagors. It scarcely matters if some of the female leads are a bit pasty, or if Yuli is still two years too old on page 29 of the (reset) paperback. You'll be hard put to find

this much pleasure between a single set of covers unless you invite a friend in with you.

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Martin Gardner — SCIENCE FICTION PUZZLE TALES  
(Penguin, 148pp, £2.95)

Reviewed by Dave Langford

You can rely on Martin Gardner for amusing toddlers up the foothills of mathematics, and of course these 36 "tales" are mere spoof-SF camouflage for puzzles. For fans of his old Scientific American column "Mathematical Games" (collected in numberless anthology volumes), he offers the mixture as before — diluted and flavoured with hokum, since this lot appeared in Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine, of which it has been said, in Paperback Inferno, frequently.

The hokum consists of in-jokes. Characters in the mercifully brief non-stories are forever swearing By Asimov!, gazing for inspiration at Asimov icons on their spaceship bulkheads, or being called things like Azik Isomorph, while Dr A.'s name appears with inordinate frequency (and some admitted ingenuity) in puzzle solutions. Gardner himself appears to tire of this at one point, on page 123, where the ineluctable Asimov mention is curiously coupled with the word "fat". What can this mean?

Normal reaction to most of the puzzles, if you've dipped into these waters before, will be a quick nod — "Ah, that one again, Hilbert's imaginary hotel with infinitely many (aleph-null) rooms, etc." Newcomers to recreational maths will have fun and perhaps be attracted to the bibliography's less supersimplified works. Also, there are a few clever twists for old-timers: sneeringly you check the answer — "Yes, right all the time" — but with the answer is a trickier variant puzzle, elucidated in a second section of answers, and so on sometimes to a third, plus interesting postscript comments.

Stripped of the hokum, this is what Gardner is good at. He attracts by his wide range and light touch, never riding his hobby-horses too far. By contrast, the awful Raymond Smullyan's Penguin efforts have far greater pretensions but induce rapid brain-death with what seems like five million variants of "One tribe always tells the truth, the second always lies, the third says whatever will most confuse you while the fourth invariably remains silent and picks its nose..."

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Rudy Rucker — SOFTWARE (Ace, 212pp, \$2.25), THE  
57TH FRANZ KAFKA (Ace, 243pp,  
\$2.50)

Reviewed by Pascal Thomas

Rucker has recently been in the news (of the SF field) as the winner of the Philip K. Dick Memorial Award for his third published novel, Software. And a fitting winner of a Phil Dick Award it is: where Dick's work has featured more than its share of robots and addicts, Software introduces us to some addicted robots. "Box the red socket bashers are" quips one of them in a stoned utterance, but it really has no relevance to the plot of the novel, which revolves around Dr. Cobb Anderson, the man who created a race of self-aware robots by introducing a measure of randomisation in their programs. It only earned Anderson a trial for treason, since his Moon-

based "boppers" quickly gained their independence from the humans. The boppers routinely revile the name of Asimov, that disgusting human chauvinist...

The story takes place long after that, when the immortality of his software is offered to Anderson by some of the boppers — the first move in a complicated game which pits the big boppers against the smaller ones. Robot class struggle, of a sort. The plot is fast, even furious, and the tone always light and humorous, even if Rucker does not go in for full-scale parody. I liked the boppers' lack of human features, a trait seldom seen in robot stories. Unfortunately, the same is to some extent true of the human characters in the book, which suffers from the author's lack of attention to style (although it avoids the total clumsiness of the earlier Spacetime Donuts).

Cobb Anderson's basic idea about robot programming stemmed from Gödel's theorems, and this mathematical streak runs strongly through Rucker's works (in an unlikely mixture with sixties rock music and underground culture). His mathematical hand shows more strongly in the collection The 57th Franz Kafka, where he can essentially dispense with the requirement for characters in short stories built around a single idea, very often of a mathematical or theoretical-physical nature.

I'm trained in maths myself, and can't help being partial to stories in which mathematics (usually topology) are an integral element. But I still think Rucker pushes it too far when he includes a whole article (reprinted from Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine) which is essentially a reworking of Flatland. One of the stories is even a sequel to Flatland, but I can't see that there's much point in being Abbott's successor, and it does make for some repetitiveness.

I much prefer Rucker's more humorous vein, as exemplified in "Jumpin' Jack Flash", "Pac-Man" (with a cameo role for Ronnie Raygun) and "The Facts Of Life" (which would be a more convincing send-up of Gernsbackian SF if it had been better written). This last story is original to the collection; there were obviously too many sex scenes in it for Isaac Asimov's. However, it is much better than the fairly forgettable series of 3 stories involving a team of tinkerer-scientists, Fletcher and Harry, one of which did appear in Isaac Asimov's (the other two appearing in F & SF).

Rucker also tries his hand at some more unusual stuff, like "The Jack Kerouac Disembodied School Of Poetics" and "Tales Of Houdini"; you may want to read the book for these. Or for a handful of original ideas, a couple of laughs, and a smattering of clever diagrams to help you understand the lot.

Lem wrote a large number of stories about Pírax (a further collection has just appeared), and the five collected here would fit snugly into a "Golden Age" anthology, particularly as they appear to have been translated into what can only be termed Asimovese. (The doubts about the veracity of Lem translations still linger.) Pírax is the typical lumpen space cadet who matures into a craggy space captain as the stories progress, casting a rational, Nietzschean mind over the problems he encounters and coming up with solutions that are all too often predictable. It is only with the final tale, "Terminus", that Lem casts off from the orthodoxies of SF to chart his own course. It is a ghost story, with a rational solution and a neat ending, but for the first time Pírax cannot understand why he feels fear and unease, emotions also experienced by the reader following him around a rusty space freighter while a robot unceasingly taps out the morse code messages passed between its doomed crew. It is the one satisfactory Pírax tale, and an epitaph for the simplistic one-dimensional yarns that preceded it.

Return From The Stars is also about man struggling to comprehend; in this case, the crew of an FTL expedition return to find the Earth changed out of all recognition and that instead of heroes they are outsiders. Yet this tale has to be read with an eye on Lem's background.

Betritization has suppressed fear, the desire to make war, the need to venture into deep space. To the hero, Bregg, the cost of this discovery is too high, because no one can understand his motivation for spending ten years in space; the sense of adventure has gone and society is gutless. Robots do all the work, money is not needed, wealth counts for nothing. Bregg visits a robot chanel house where broken robots scream at him for rescue; subconsciously, he sees Auschwitz, whilst the human controllers cannot comprehend his reactions and his concern. His rebellion is simple: he removes a fail-safe device from his car and embarks on suicidal drives in an effort to frighten those around him.

The crew are reforming to return to the stars but Bregg begins to perceive that this new world has advantages over the old; the people are not devoid of feelings, but simply suppress them. He thus becomes reconciled to the new order, and it's here that Lem betrays his adherence to the principles of socialist realism so beloved of Stalin: the individual must fall into line with the dictates of society or remain an outmoded remnant of the past. The USSR doesn't publish Lem for his democratic ideals, and Return From The Stars is typical communist fiction in that the hero sees the error of his ways and is saved for the future. On the other hand, why must every future be bleak and Orwellian? The welfare state Lem pictures here is suffocating and the cityscapes with their false skies dwarf the individual with their splendour — but then, if this is the price man pays for an idyllic worry-free existence might it not be worth it? The book is contentious, argumentative, and lingers in the mind.

In many respects, The Invincible is a classic hard SF tale. It has all the elements: a malevolent life-form on a barren planet, granite-jawed spacemen who want to nuke everything to make it safe for mankind, and wondrous events all glued together by glorious amounts of plaus-

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Stanislaw Lem — TALES OF PIRX THE PILOT, RETURN FROM THE STARS, THE INVINCIBLE (King Penguin, 590pp, £4.95)

Reviewed by John Hobson

The second Lem collection from King Penguin provides more ammunition for those who consider him arguably the greatest living SF writer. Whilst there is not an obvious theme running through the works here, there is a consistent preoccupation: man's attempts to understand his environment, wherever it may be.

ible scientific reasoning. The story unfolds in a mechanistic manner, as befits the insect-like machines which inhabit Sirius III; the products of a machine evolution that has given them control of the planet and enabled them to destroy an earlier exploratory flight. Much SF about exploration barely hides its conquistadorial origins, whereby any society not measuring up to Western perceptions gets its comeuppance. Lem's strength here is that having let his knuckle-brained crew wage war on the insects with little effect and then plan a nuclear attack without considering the moral or ethical grounds of their actions, he suddenly broadens his perspectives — one of the protagonists, Rohan, is on a journey to locate some survivors of an ambush when he is surrounded by a swarm of insects. They have a terrible beauty, tracing patterns in the sky, forming images of the land around them, eventually constructing a mirror image of Rohan himself, forcing him to realise that they have as much right to exist as us, despite his not understanding the nature of their existence.

This is a welcome volume for those who demand their SF be both entertaining and intelligent.

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C. J. Cherryh — DOWNBELOW STATION (Magnum, 432pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

"Winner of the 1982 Hugo Award"; enough said. These days it is fashionable to condemn the Hugo as a lowest-common-denominator award, received only by those books which aspire to the dizzying heights of mass-appeal mediocrity. This is both fair and unfair: fair because the Hugo does concentrate on mass-appeal books; unfair because "middle of the road" is a state of mind, a style rather than a value-judgement. There are good and bad "literary" books, good and bad "pulp" books (let's hear it for your favourites, now, but don't all shout at once), and good and bad "mass market" books (well, I liked The Snow Queen, so there).

That was the good news. The bad news is that Downbelow Station is a very bad mass market book, a lacklustre production full of gaping holes and loose ends in its plot, background description and characterisation; and it's boring. Cherryh takes a potentially exciting scenario — the struggle for control of an orbital space station by a Union (seceded colony planet) force, and independent Merchant fleet, an increasingly remote and incompetent Earth, and a breakaway military arm of Earth's moribund space exploitation Company — and relates the ensuing swings in the balance of power with all the breathtaking excitement and involved sense-of-wonder of a newsreader.

Furry liquid-eyed aliens come and go without much explanation or purpose, and the most interesting and original character is a programmed and displaced man-without-a-past left over from Cherryh's earlier and vastly superior Serpent's Reach, which I urge you to read instead of Downbelow Station. I am annoyed and disappointed by it; I know the author is capable of far better work, and that it should be hailed as a masterpiece — by anybody — rankles. It is not a masterpiece. It isn't even a good enthusiastic try. It is a poor potboiler, Cherryh marketed as wine; don't let the packaging fool you into buying it.

George R. R. Martin — SANDKINGS (Orbit, 238pp, £2.25)

Reviewed by Brian Smith

The appearance of a new George Martin collection has become something of a noteworthy event, if only for its rarity value. Sandkings is only his third (following the 1976 A Song For Lya and the 1977 Songs Of Stars And Shadows), now enjoying its first British edition some two years after first publication. And, considering its lengthy gestation period, I found it rather disappointing. When inspired, Martin can produce works of surpassing beauty; four years' work, at even a modest rate, might reasonably be expected to contain the makings of, if not an actual blockbuster, then at least a definitive landmark, a statement of his progress and direction. But Sandkings is neither of those things, being instead a distinctly uneven and fragmented collection, almost the only thread of continuity with its predecessors being that five of its seven stories lie within Martin's rather diffuse future history, the largest element of which is his novel Dying Of The Light. This is, to say the least, a highly tenuous continuity, since Martin's is possibly the most redundant such framework in the whole of science fiction, since some stories could be excluded by simply altering the name of a planet or two, without affecting the story in any major way. Such considerations are trivial and misleading — a true understanding of Sandkings must be sought at a more fundamental level.

To gain any insight at all into this collection, its short stories must be viewed in a historical context, and I know of no writer with whom it is easier to do this than George Martin. In all of his collections, he has made it a practice to note, at the end of each story, the time and place at which it was written, thus enabling a kind of fossil record to be built up. This I have done, and a most peculiar distribution is revealed. The three collections contain a total of twenty-six stories, or which nineteen were written in 1971-74, and only four in 1975-79. This massive imbalance stacks the odds against the success of Sandkings from the start. The first two collections performed a logical division of stories from the late sixties and early seventies, but Sandkings is a quite motley assortment. Three stories from the boom years of 1973-74, two from the renaissance of 1978-79, and two in between make this almost a retrospective.

The two earliest stories form a distinct pair, both dating from December 1973, and both have at their core that hardy perennial, star-crossed lovers. "Fast-Friend" is the name of a symbiosis created when a human merges with an energy being called a "dark" — against such fringe benefits as immortality and personal FTL capacity is a 75 percent of instant death when the merger is attempted. Brand and Melissa had a dream of becoming fast-friends, and of going to the stars together. Melissa merged with her dark successfully but, after seeing a second mergee die rather messily, Brand's courage failed him. Now trapping darks for a living, tormented by the sight of the woman he loves, lost to him and slowly becoming something other than human, he pursues a wild scheme to reach the stars without the risk of merger, haunted by the memory of his cowardice and clutching desperate-



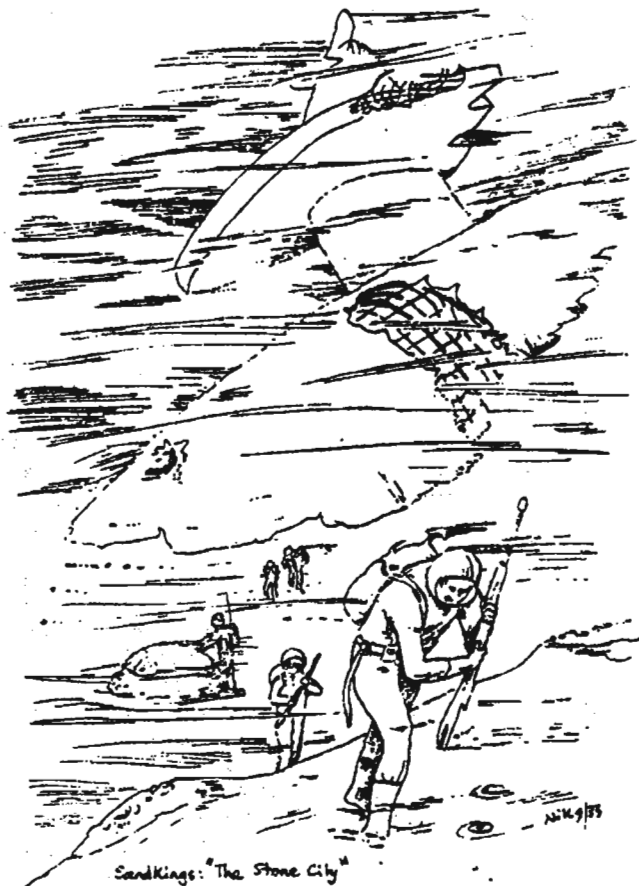
Sand Kings: "Fast-Friend"

ly at the rags of a past hopelessly lost. Similar themes of loss and cowardice are addressed in "Starlady", which is something of a future myth, with a strong Cordwainer Smith influence. (Like Smith, Martin has often portrayed futures rich with their own mythology; this stems from his steadfast championing of romanticism against rationalism.) The Starlady is a tourist, raped, robbed, and stranded on the remarkably colourful and lawless world of Thisrock. Without means of support or escape, she and her silent golden companion come under the dubious protection of Hairy Hal, an amoral, self-serving pimp who wastes no time in putting them into prostitution. Hal is a pathetic has-been, thoroughly small-time behind his bombastic facade, living in continual fear of the big-leaguers who once crippled his arm for becoming overly ambitious. In time, this worthless creature falls in futile love with Starlady, as he himself corrupts away her idealism and innocence, the qualities which awoke something approaching finer feelings in him.

These two stories, written so close together, full of love betrayed and dreams which turn to ashes, are significantly more defeatist in tone than anything else in the book, or indeed in the other two collections. Their position is summed up by the bitter postscript of "Starlady": "In the end, some of them were dead. The rest survived." I believe that their explanation may be found in the introduction to Songs Of Stars And Shadows, wherein Martin said "In between "Patrick Henry, et al" and "The Lonely Songs Of Laren Dorr", I wrote a number of other stories which are not included in this collection for one reason or another". The period in question is July 1973 to May 1974. He went on to say that the second story mentioned was written as a personal restorative, since "my philosophy and my psyche had both been sorely battered by various personal trials in 1973-74, and from time to time the corners of my mouth would tremble and I would begin to mutter surly, cynical things".

It would seem, therefore, that "Fast-Friend" and "Starlady" are a record of a highly traumatic period in Martin's life, deeply coloured by his mental state of the time. It would be invidious to speculate on their possible autobiographical roots, especially since Martin originally suppressed their collection, doubtless on the grounds that the public picking of emotional scabs is best left to Harlan Ellison.

The second half of 1974 (immediately following his "recovery") saw some of Martin's stories, and it is from this period that "The Stone City" dates. It is at once a more assured and less anguished work; there is a sense of balance being restored. Slow and poignant, it deals with a human space crew marooned on a barren and windswept world (the wind is a pervasive image in Martin's better work) by alien bureaucracy and their lack of a ship. Their morale slowly disintegrates, one by one they die or become entangled by the local vices, then Holt kills a native official and flees into the forgotten depths of the ancient stone city where they have been squatting. There he discovers a gateway between the worlds, bringing planets which are almost legend a mere step away. This is a wish-fulfillment device, since several flashbacks have established Holt's lifelong fascination with the vastness of space and time; indeed, the whole story exudes a deep awe and wonder of the universe, allied to an aura of serene evanescence which manages to render questions about pessimism completely irrelevant.



Sand Kings: "The Stone City"

Here we leave the period which Martin has documented and are obliged to enter the realm of speculation. The recovery appears to have been short-lived, and two years of the doldrums to have followed. No story from 1976 has ever been collected, and from 1975 there is only "In The



House Of The Worm"; and it is poor. It is also quite probably the most un-Martinesque story that Martin has ever written, set in a future so far distant that not the slightest memory of anything near our time remains. The sun is a half-dead ember, and a people who may or may not be the descendants of mankind pass their time in bored revelry and the worship of the White Worm. It is by no means a new scenario, falling somewhere between William Hope Hodgson and Clark Ashton Smith, but Martin could not achieve the languid, decadent style which such a story requires to be successful and the chase-through-the-catacombs-of-the-ages plot is just tedious. In terms of Algis Budrys's famous line, there is too much steel trap and not enough poet — this is particularly noticeable when Martin attempts to convey the terror of claustrophobia in absolute darkness, and fails completely. On the positive side, the main sub-plot, concerning arrogance and self-delusion in a society, makes some trenchant comments.

In "Bitterblooms", from 1977, the pendulum has swung yet again, producing a swan song for the classic Martin style. Shawn, a huntress alone and near to death in her world's deepwinter, stumbles across a derelict spaceship and is taken in by Margan, an old woman of questionable ability who lives there. Seduced by Morgan into an uneasy relationship, Shawn is taken on a guided tour of the worlds of men; fabulous places, but seen only through a large "window", for they never leave the ship. This is almost a companion piece to "The Stone City", in that both examine the conflicting urges of the dream against the possibly harsh but reassuring familiarities of the mundane, and that both are suffused with an air of bittersweet resignation, as if to say that only the inevitability that the choice must be made is relevant.

And, as it should always be in an ideal world, the latest are the best, as reflected by the fistful of awards that they collected in 1980. In "The Way Of Cross And Dragon" (best short story: Hugo, Locus) an inquisitor of a future Catholic church is despatched to crush a heretical sect who have unilaterally canonised Judas Iscariot (Martin seems to be borrowing a leaf from Borges's "Three Versions Of Judas", in which Judas was the real Messiah). The life of St. Judas is wonderfully baroque, in which he appears as a dragonlord and one-time king of Babylon, complete with an explanation as to how it came to be "replaced" by the New Testament story. An entire world believes in it, as their history tapes have been edited. The story is a marvellous exercise in conceptual breakthrough; having had your imagination ravished by this splendid legend, it comes as a shock to realise that this barefacedly buccaneering hagiography is nothing more nor less than Stalinist revisionism, and then that information (which includes history) is the most subtle power of all, a fact recognised by every dictatorship which has made control of the media its first priority. Later, Martin goes in search of the philosophical bedrock underlying the romance/reality conflict and examines its role in the rise of religions, together with some hearty swipes at the hermetically sealed world picture. A twenty page story with much content, absolutely no wastage, written with complete control and total certainty as to where it is headed: Borgesian in more than just inspiration.

Last, of course, is "Sandkings" (best novel-

ette: Nebula, Hugo, Locus), probably his most famous story since "A Song For Lya". Bored sophisticate Simon Kress, dilettante in alien lifeforms, buys a tankful of the insectoid sandkings, hive intelligences who fight ritual wars and worship the effigies of their owner which they themselves have carved. Dissatisfied with them, Kress begins to play God, and as always retribution is never far behind the heels of hubris. The sandkings escape, and Kress is suddenly fighting for his life. "Sandkings" is a quite excellent horror story, drawing its power and tension from brooding atmosphere and steadily increasing suspense. It is an intensely visual story, some scenes reminding me of a couple of The Outer Limits episodes featuring giant alien insects with almost human faces, making me wonder if they were at the back of Martin's mind when he wrote it.

At the outset, I said that this collection is disappointing, and I stand by that. A good collection requires a strong central theme or a consistently high standard of writing to enable it to become more than the sum of its parts. As a work of art, Sandkings is less convincing than either of its predecessors; as a documentary of transition, I believe it will prove valuable indeed. The old style stories depended heavily on a delicate emotional balance which was easily disrupted by an adverse mental outlook (which proves that the man cares about what he writes), at which time the second-hand nature of some of their trappings could be cruelly exposed. In the new style stories (judging from "The Way Of Cross And Dragon", "Sandkings", and the excellent "Nightflyers" (1980), sadly omitted here), the old wistfulness has vanished, to be replaced by something much darker and infinitely harder-edged. They ring with a vibrant, almost Wagnerian intensity. But, having said all that, I cannot find it in me to claim that the new stories alone are worth the price of the book. It is ludicrously overpriced (with a dreadful sub-Badger Books cover, too — MIG lookalike spacefighters pointlessly zapping a Moon lookalike, with a blurb which would look crass on a Robert Bloch collection. God knows what Orbit think they're doing foisting this amateurish package on a recession-hit public), and the prizewinners have been anthologised in uniformly better company. If you have never read either of them... well, I will merely say that I consider about half of this collection worth paying money for, and quietly murmur "caveat emptor". There will be a blockbuster collection from George R. R. Martin, but not today. Be patient — he may only now be bringing his powers under full control.

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Frank Herbert (ed.) — NEBULA WINNERS FIFTEEN  
(Bantam, 219pp, \$2.95;  
Star, 221pp, £1.75)

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

As might be expected of the professionals' selections, these stories are slickly proficient and — sadly — lacking in originality of imagination (and any real science). On the other hand, they aren't dollar-a-line hackery either, all being serious if sombre speculations. Which is a problem. In a single volume the depressed tone of these stories is overwhelming, and the pretentiousness of the shorts doesn't

help much either!

Jack Dann's "Camps" mixes an intensive treatment unit with Dachau, to no real effect. The potential is there to investigate pain and the border between the will to live and the decision to die, but Dann begins and ends in limbo and doesn't take in anywhere interesting on the ride. Go and read some Solzhenitsin and see just how far out of his depth Dann is. A definite ending might have rescued this, but there isn't one. The ending of Edward Bryant's "GIANTS" is pure B movie stuff, just like the rest of the story — brave lady journalist saves the world from the burgeoning menace resulting from technological cock-up. Bryant even gives a mention to the B movie, confident that he's treading the high road of art. He's wrong; ~~There~~ is better. When I read the story I thought it acceptable, if weak; closer acquaintance convinces me it is resprayed dross. Joann Russ's "The Extraordinary Voyages Of Amelie Bertrand" isn't dross. She describes it as an "hommage à Jules Verne", which sets her stall out right from the word "go". A petitbourgeoise French housewife discovers she can visit all manner of exotic places if she enters the tunnel beneath the railway at the station of Poaliou-cur-le-pont at a precise moment just before the arrival of the 2.51 to Lyons. This makes it a pleasant stylistic exercise, but little else. The atmosphere of a Verne story is captured very well, but that most essential ingredient of any Verne story — action — is missing.

In the future predicted by Orson Scott Card in "Unaccompanied Sonata" everyone is allowed to do what they do best, so long as they do it within given parameters. Card's hero is permitted to make his music until he succumbs to the lure of listening to someone else's (some unknown keyboard belted by the name of J. S. Bach) Bach), after which crime (polluting his own unique creativity by cross-pollination with someone else's genius) he is forbidden to make music by the ubiquitous "Watchers", who ride shotgun on this wonderful world. Persistent music-making sees our Christian gasp fingers and gasp voice, but with a job for life as — you guessed it — a Watcher. There is more to this story than meets the eye, and it easily the best of the four, even if Card does teeter on the brink of feyness and if I don't buy his future, not for one second.

The volume is bulked out with Barry Longyear's novella "Enemy Mine" and George R. R. Martin's novelette "Sandkings". "Enemy Mine" is my favourite in the collection. Clichéd and devoid of dramatic conviction, nevertheless it has a character who comes alive and feels like someone I might meet, rather than a character who has been brainstormed into being in the coffee room of a small college English faculty, which makes it unique in this company. The story is a rip-off (Hell In The Pacific springs immediately to mind), with implacable orcs forced to accommodation by the exigencies of survival, and coming to realise that all over the galaxy folks is just folks. The alien is pregnant, and dies aborning, leaving the human to bring up the sprog true to its cultural heritage. He succeeds — of course, this is Isaac Asimov's fare after all — but Longyear imbues his very ordinary story with a degree of humanity, vigour, and (dare I say it?) entertainment lacking everywhere else in this volume. Indeed, this is the only story lacking a whiff of spiritual ennui,

which seems to have been de rigueur in 1979.

Spiritual ennui is the core of George R. R. Martin's "Sandkings", which are toys for the man who has everything — contending colonies of insects which fight like armies and carve the worshipful likeness of their lord and master in the walls of their castles. Unsurprisingly, this lord and master grows tired of their limitations and contrives to relocate them, suffering the consequences when they then begin to grow, and grow. As distasteful a story as any of those catching the Stephen King wave, Martin's sandkings are at least an invention which doesn't create a feeling of deja vu. I did not enjoy this story, although favourably inclined to such stories, because the nastiness is too concentrated. "Sandkings" is a novel masquerading as a novelette, and it needs the fleshing out of more detailed characterisation, not to mention some contrast of character and situation. I have a fancy that, suitably pumped up, "Sandkings" could make Martin a lot of money, but as it stands it is much too unremitting.

And speaking of unremitting unpleasantness, we come to Frank Herbert's "Introduction". The cover claims that Herbert "edited" this volume, although Herbert denies it in his seventh sentence. What a pity he didn't stop right there, because he goes on to deliver an obnoxious and astonishingly meretricious homily which does no service whatever to the authors. These stories may not be the greatest ever written, but they deserve something much better than Herbert's flatulence.

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John Varley -- THE BARBER MERCHANTS (Orbit, 260pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Bar "Options", a story in Terry Carr's Universe 9 (reviewed in Vol 4 No 3), the last actual book by John Varley that I read was Titan (reviewed in Vol 3 No 1, if anyone's collections stretch back that far), almost four years ago. His second novel, it represented an improvement over his first (The Grinch) by virtue of its rather more coherent plot, but in other respects was no improvement at all — it consisted almost entirely of unacknowledged plagiarisms from the work of other writers, was pitched wholly at the level of adolescent wish-fulfillment, and was badly written to boot. (Varley himself has remarked that his style, such as it is, is modelled on that of Larry Riven, which is more or less an indictment in itself since Riven's novels and stories are so devoid of depth and feeling that they read more like synopses for novels and stories than the finished works.) Wide-ranging though his imagination might have been, it was apparent from Titan that he was incapable of fully realising, never mind fully exploring, his ideas, and I have since steered well clear of him.

Until recently, when The Furies Murders arrived in the UK and I found myself wondering whether he might have improved in the interim. Not, I suppose, that the book was the best means of discovering as much; a collection, all bar one of its stories ("Debnik Payou", 1980) pre-date Titan, and all are in much the same mould as his previous work: shallow, flabby ideas the exposition of which is insufficiently skilled to make them real. The opening story, "Bagatelle",

sets the general tone:

"There was a bomb on the Leystrasse, level forty-five, right outside the Bagatelle Flower and Gift Shoppe, about a hundred metres down the promenade from Prosperity Plaza.

"I am a bomb," the bomb said to passersby. 'I will explode in four hours, five minutes, and seventeen seconds. I have a force equal to fifty thousand English tons of trinitrotoluene."

And twenty-five pages later the police manage to defuse it and that's it, the end. Who put it there, and why (and, considering its size, how), are never explained; instead, as though trying to cover for his glossing over of them, Varley gives us some stagey and implausible interaction between the female police chief and the male bomb disarmer, most of which revolves around his trying to ask her out for dinner when it's all over. (So much for plot development, eh?) She attracts him because of her nudity, and although Varley tries hard to stress that nobody bothers with clothes in the heated lunar environment it's apparent that he, feminist though he may claim to be, is rather drawn to the idea that women might routinely walk around with their breasts uncovered. (And so, presumably, will his predominantly adolescent audience, who will thus be encouraged to treat women as sex-objects rather than as people; thus he defeats his avowed feminist aims.) The fact that men and women wear (at least) underwear for comfort and practicality rather than as the result of an elaborate taboo seems to have passed him completely by.

Women are often protagonists in Varley's fiction, but they are no more truly female than Heinlein's females; worse, they are often — particularly when the stories are told in the first person — described so inadequately that they cannot be told apart from the males, and only their names provide a clue to their sex. And sometimes not even that, since a main feature of his "Nine Planets" future history is the easy availability of instant sex changes thanks to major advances in biological engineering. His intention, no doubt, is to demonstrate how alien the future will be and how plastic is human behaviour; but if so he fails miserably. In "Villifying Varley" in The Patchin Review 3, Charles Platt phrased it as follows:

"Real-life sex-change patients have written powerfully about their tormented longings and their ambivalence towards their bodies. Most of us harbour deep curiosity about how it would feel to be of the opposite sex. But Varley trivialises such difficult questions and complexities of emotion. He uses clones and sex-changes much as hyperdrives and tractor beams would have been used thirty years before — not to illuminate, but to amaze. His stories are reassuring in that his characters have never heard of Future Shock; but this is the reassurance of a fairy tale."

Quite. And what makes it even more unreal is his characters' ability to record their memories so that, should they die, the said memories can be implanted into their clones; so that, in other words, they can never really die at all. How can we possibly empathise with someone to whom no threat is real and who is to all intents and purposes immortal? And how can we take any of it remotely seriously when all he does with it

— as in "Picnic On Nearside", featuring a boy who runs away from home because his mother won't let him experiment with a sex-change — is play games?

Playing games, however, is all Varley really does with his ideas. "Goodbye, Robinson Crusoe", for example, is set in a giant underground cavern on Pluto, artificially hollowed-out and constructed to look like a chunk of the Pacific, coral islands and palm trees and happy laughing natives and all. The immensity of such an engineering enterprise is almost beyond belief, and if handled properly would evoke a true "sense of wonder"; instead, God help us, he refers to it throughout as a "disneyland", reducing it to something mundane and unremarkable. This is (again) no doubt his intention: to demonstrate how off-handedly his characters manipulate their environment and how blase they are about their technology; but the climax of the story is the falling-in of part of the "sky" and the destruction thus caused, and because he has desensitised us to the scale of his creation we are completely unable to appreciate the enormity of the event. (The plausibility of the "disneyland" is not helped by the revelation, towards the end of the story, that the solar economic system is discriminating against Pluto and that the two are about commence economic war against each other, because if the planet was that badly off how could it afford to build the thing in the first place? The physical destruction of the cavern environment is presumably intended to parallel and counterpoint the economic destruction that will be wrought by the war, but any such nuance is completely swamped by the foregoing gross inconsistency.)

Varley is generally incapable of realising distance and spectacle anyway. In "Equinoctial", for instance, his protagonist is drifting alone in orbit around Saturn:

"Ringography is an easy subject to learn. There are the Rings: Alpha, Beta, and the thin Gamma. The divisions are called Cassini and Encke, each having been created by the gravitational tug-of-war between Saturn and the larger moons for possession of the particles that make up the Rings. Beyond that, there is only the Upper Half and the Lower Half, above and below the plane, and Inspace and Outspace. The Ringers never visited Inspace because it included the intense Van Allen-type radiation belts that circle Saturn. Outspace was far from the travelled parts of the Rings, but was a nice place to visit because the Rings were all in one part of the sky from that vantage point. An odd experience for children, accustomed from birth to see the sky cut in half by the Rings."

A nice place to visit, indeed! Very breezy and straightforward, yes, but conveying nothing of the actual scale involved.

It's incredible, it really is. How can a writer so manifestly bad be so popular, enjoy such success? Charles Platt supplied one possible answer:

"John Varley emerged at a time when the older generation — Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke, Heinlein, Simak, et al — had largely abdicated and were no longer moulding the field, and the 1960s' generation — Dick, Disch, Malzberg, Silverberg, Moorcock, Delany, Zelazny — had peaked and dispersed. Readers



were eager for a new direction, a new talent. Varley was new, his stories used new science (no matter how simplistically) and were 'optimistic'."

I feel, however, that this is only part of it; the other part has to do with the nature of the SF readership itself, which is concerned less to explore and come to terms with either our place in the universe (the mythopoeic impulse, to which I subscribe) or the real possibilities that the future may open up (the Gernsback-Campbell prognosis, which informs most genre SF) than to escape from the world altogether, into a never-never wonderland of (metaphorically if not literally) spaceships and aliens and rayguns. It's futuristic, man it's mind-blowing...or at least it's mistaken for such by the people who read it, when in reality Varley's fiction is so childish and irresponsible as to be contemptible.

Piers Anthony -- SPLIT INFINITY (Granada, 382pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Helen McNabb

In the interests of brevity, I shall make a concise and elegant summary of my recommendations concerning this book at the beginning of the review so that anyone who has been frantically debating whether or not to buy it can be put out of their indecisive misery: Don't Bother.

It's a tremendously busy book; Our Hero, Stile, has his life threatened by an unknown persecutor but also has it protected by another unknown who sends him a sex mad, very female, robot. Imminent death causes him to leap through the curtain(!) into an alternate universe where (surprise, surprise) magic works. Our Hero spends a long time taming a unicorn who can also turn into a girl when necessary (nudge nudge, wink wink), discovers he is a great magician, befriends a werewolf; and the three of them poke into the Adepts' private houses, getting imprisoned in various ways for their nosiness.

Our Hero keeps popping in and out of both universes getting caught, playing the tedious but supposedly enthralling and addictive Game, having sex with robot and unicorn, and generally wearing us all out. But Our Hero has a Flaw! I presume this is an attempt to give him some character and personality, and if this is the case all I can say is that it fails dismally. Stile is short, under five feet high, and harps on about his lack of height at every conceivable moment. As he'd make Superman feel inferior in every other way, and his height is vital to his great career as a jockey, his great hang up about it seems as best unconvincing. Which is also the best word with which to describe the whole book, because there's an enormous amount of activity but no characters; they are puppets with less personality than Mr Punch on a wet day. The writing is pedestrian and extremely monotonous, occasionally lecturing the reader about details which s/he probably doesn't want to know and which have no relevance to the story anyway.

I found no redeeming features anywhere in the book. I took it away for a weekend and although I was sorely tempted to replace it with the excitement of the back of the cereal packet in the masochistic but dedicated spirit of the true re-

viewer I plodded on to the end. I think Chapter Six best represents the book; it is entitled "Manure" and is all about the texture, content, consistency and location of horse manure, discussing this fascinating topic at great length. In other words, it's horseshit.

Philip Jose Farmer -- THE BOOK OF PHILIP JOSE FARMER (Granada, 318pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Bill Carlin

Judging by the vast number of Philip Jose Farmer titles on display in local bookshops, it's fairly safe to assume that he is rapidly becoming a Big Name in the eyes of the SF-reading public. This may in future present a problem for blurb-happy publishers -- Asimov is billed as "the Good Doctor", Heinlein as "the Dean of Science Fiction Writers", and Clarke as "the Grand Master". But what label can be applied to Farmer?

Leslie A. Fiedler, a well-known American literary critic, could perhaps help them in their extremity: Farmer, from a strictly Freudian viewpoint, can now be called "the Phantom Flasher" of the SF field.

Fiedler's commentary on Farmer's career is the only piece in this collection which does not stem from Farmer's own pen. Its inclusion is hardly surprising considering its general tone of fulsome praise:

"He has an imagination capable of being kindled by the irredeemable mystery of the universe and of the scul, and in turn able to kindle the imagination of others -- readers who for a couple of generations have been turning to SF to keep wonder and ecstasy alive."

If Fiedler was a drama critic he would probably classify indecent exposure as a form of street theatre; yet Farmer seems flattered by his comments -- and by the conclusion which emerges from seven pages of Freudian ramblings that "he is the most oral of men". (Farmer's own anti-Freudian piece, "The Sexual Implications Of The Charge Of The Light Brigade", included in this collection, seems restrained by comparison.)

To me, Farmer has always been no more than an entertaining writer, in the sense that he provides escapism rather than intellectual stimulation. His work does not stand up to detailed analysis, and the stories in this collection tend to confirm that opinion.

"The Alley Man", featuring a Neanderthal man who has survived his race's extinction, and "My Sister's Brother", basically a rewrite of Weinbaum's "Martian Odyssey" with a few extra-terrestrial page 3 girls thrown in as extras, are probably the most well-known, and most frequently anthologised stories here. Both stem from what Farmer calls his "sexo-biological phase", and were genuinely innovative and somewhat shocking for the early 1950s. Today they seem rather timid, but remain relatively fresh because they contain frequent glimpses of the author's distinctive sense of humour. Fiedler (apparently mesmerised by the overt sexuality which made his early work so controversial) tends to place a false emphasis on sex, ignoring this more obvious trademark. "The Last Rise Of Nick Adams" and three very short pieces linked under the heading "Polytropical Paramyths" show

further glimpses of this Farmerian humour (far too unsubtle to be called Farmerian wit), indicating a preoccupation with comedy rather than biology.

Similarly, the author's current obsession with fictional biographies, represented here by "An Interview With Lord Greystoke" and "Skinburn" (a sequel to the old "Shadow" stories and by far the weakest story in the book), owes more to a voracious appetite for light-hearted pulp fiction than a taste for private perversions. Even when Farmer decides to take a serious approach to his work, his favourite theme tends to be religion (witness his "Father Carmody" and "Riverworld" series) as opposed to ribaldry. Perhaps the most thought-provoking story included here is "Towards The Beloved City"; though the writing is slapdash the idea behind it, a science fictional interpretation of The Book of The Apocalypse, is a fascinating one, and characteristic of Farmer at his best.

Rounding out the collection are two horror stories and "Uproar In Acheron", a western-mystery hybrid, which are all reasonably entertaining but hardly memorable (except for Farmer's bitter introduction to the latter, in which he claims that the plot was stolen by his former agent and sold as a television script).

Each story is tagged with such an introduction, and the occasional note of peevishness which sounds in several of them may cause even long-term addicts of Farmer's work to question some of the views expressed. (I for one was saddened to see J. G. Ballard being pilloried for pretentiousness in one instance while Fiedler was praised for his "insightful analysis" in the introduction to his piece of Freudian egoboo.) However, addicts are addicts, and this book will sell on the basis of that alone — on the basis of the escapist entertainment that Farmer fans have come to expect without the guidance of Fiedler or Freud.

Roger Jones — PHYSICS AS METAPHOR (Abacus, 254pp, £3.50)

Reviewed by Dave Langford

The thesis of this "re-evaluation of the physical world" is as difficult to argue with as Bertrand Russell's disprove-this-if-you-can propositions that (a) the universe as we perceive it was in fact created five minutes ago, complete with our false memories of an unreal past; and (b) somewhere in space between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter there exists a spherical object one foot across, composed entirely of chocolate cake.

Jones's book is a little like (a), or Gosse's nineteenth century *Omphalos* (which reconciled Darwin with current theology by explaining that having built the world in 4004 BC as per the latter, God had forged extensive fossil records in readiness for the former), and a lot like Charles Harness's SF story "The New Reality". This argues *inter alia* that pi really was equal to three in Babylonian times, as in contemporary records, and that only perverse refinements of human imagination led to its becoming by stages fractional, irrational, transcendental... Echoing Harness's mad philosopher-villain, Dr. Jones states: "I reject the myth of reality as external to the human mind, and I acknowledge consciousness as the source of the cosmos".

In other words, the pragmatic argument for

science as we know it — that it gets results — is, to Jones, meaningless because the results were implicit in the chosen mathematical models forced by physicists onto a subjective universe. (I'm not quite sure whether this means Newton had space shuttles somewhere at the back of his head right from the start.) According to Jones, mediaeval people were much more holistically "connected" to the universe at large than we who labour under the soulless metaphors of horrid rationalists (i.e., things like the law of gravity, or the speed-of-light limitation which Jones finds aesthetically repugnant). Astrology, he suggests, made perfect sense then, because spatial separation hadn't really been invented and Mercury and Mars were as close as one's own kidneys, near-tangible influences. I notice he shies off the logical implication that because reality has become more rationalised, astrology is now (as I am quite convinced) a load of cobblers. And would this postulated mediaeval state of gooey cosmic awareness be immune to the influence of the Church, which provided a world-view as cast-iron and restrictive as anything in physics?

The book is fun, but in the process of overthrowing all established physics seems to overthrow itself, which is no doubt very Zen. Speaking of imperfect mathematical models of nature, Jones complains about the map for not being the territory, as though I were to complain of this book for consisting of marks on paper rather than Jones's original cosmic thoughts. He suggests (misleadingly, I think) that Gödel's theorem negates all mathematics; but undeterred he wanders into a sense-of-wonder trip through infinite number theory; after which he attacks an unnamed physicist for Saganesque lyric descriptions of scientific sense-of-wonder on the grounds that nasty old science is empirical and devoid of aesthetics. He appears here to have forgotten his own thesis that alleged empirical laws are the aesthetic creation of scientists' minds and therefore must be Art.

The low point of Jones's credibility comes in a paean on two great men to whom he owes a great debt, Pauwels and Bergier. Indeed. The masterwork of this pair, The Morning Of The Magicians, was characterised by John Brunner (a non-scientist with no axe to grind) as "the single most wholly dishonest book I have ever had the misfortune to set eyes on", a statement you'll find substantiated in his contribution to Peter Nicholls's Explorations Of The Marvellous (Pontana, 1978). But since to Jones "physical reality is a creation of the mind", I can't deny the possibility that in the minds of Jones and Pauwels and Bergier there's nothing odd about the weird alternate reality of The Morning Of The Magicians, in which plutonium is discovered years before its discovery, old SF stories are quoted as science, penicillin is a phallic mushroom, etc..

Ultimately, Jones is preaching a version of solipsism. So this consensus of minds — if physical reality is anyone's creation it's mine, Dave Langford's, because cogito ergo sum and I can't say the same for the rest of you. Quite amusing, really, to imagine myself at this illusory typewriter reviewing for the spurious Paperback Inferno and its hypothesised editor. How can you figments of my imagination possibly shake this belief of mine? It's no easier to take serious issue with that other Langfordian figment, Dr. Roger Jones.

Serge Brussolo — VUE EN COUPE D'UNE VILLE MALADE (Denoel, "Presence du Futur", 1980), LES SENTINELLES D'ALMOHA (Fernand Nathan, 1981), AUSSEI LOURD QUE LE VENT (Denoel, "PdF", 1981), SOMMEIL DE SANG (Denoel, "PdF", 1982), PORTRAIT DU DIABLE EN CHAPEAU-MELON (Denoel, "PdF", 1982), LE NUISIBLE (Denoel, "Sueurs Froides", 1982), LES MANGEURS DE MURAILLE (Fleuve Noir, "Anticipation", 1982), TRAQUE-LA-MORT (Lattes, "Titres/SF", 1982), A L'IMAGE DU DRAGON (Fleuve Noir, "A", 1982), LE CARNAVAL DE FER (Denoel, "PdF", 1983), LE PUZZLE DE CHAIR (Fleuve Noir, "A", 1983), LE SEMEUR D'ABIMES (Fleuve Noir, "A", 1983)

Reviewed by Pascal Thomas

Why tell us about a new French writer, I hear you mutter, when you presumably know little about the older and better-proven ones... That may be true to some extent, although British readers have had the opportunity to sample the work of Michel Jeury and Philippe Curval at novel length, and can always look them up in Peter Nicholls's Encyclopedia. Brussolo, on the other hand, has made quite an impact in the SF genre in France and, whatever the reason for it, has become quite talked-about. Those who keep up with the news from the French SF front will have heard of him by now; which makes the topic timely, if nothing else.

Brussolo first came to public notice in 1978, mainly with stories in Espace-Temps (a fiction fanzine noted then for its quality) but also in his own Les Oiseaux Des Pierres Sourdes. Then in his thirties, Brussolo had been writing for some time, and his first break came when one of his stories, "Funnyway", was featured in the showcase anthology of hitherto professionally-unpublished writers edited by Philippe Curval, Futurs au Present (in the "Presence du Futur" SF series published by Denoel). "Funnyway" got the "Grand Prix de la Science Fiction Francaise" in the short story category the following year. A couple of professional sales to such places as Futurs (an ephemeral SF magazine) and Liberation (a left-wing daily) followed. His debut story collection was already in the works, and came out in 1980 as Vue En Coupe D'Une Ville Malade ("Cross-section of a sick city"), including many of his unpublished stories, some of them in a new form.

A three novelette collection, Aussi Lourd Que Le Vent ("As heavy as the wind"), followed in 1981, as well as a novel aimed at a more juvenile audience, Les Sentinelles D'Almoha ("The sentinels of Almoha"), in Fernand Nathan's short lived SF series. Having quit his job in a Maison des Jeunes et de la Culture (a sort of cultural community centre), Brussolo took up full-time writing, and really burst onto the scene in 1982 with no less than six novels (see the list above). Two of them were for Denoel's "Presence du Futur" series, one (Le Nuisible — "The noxious (animal)") was for the same publisher's mystery series; and, more significantly, two were for Fleuve Noir's fairly pulp SF series "Anticipation", and one (Traque-La-Mort — "Deathtalker") was for Lattes — and I must say it reads a bit like a Fleuve Noir reject. Brussolo's desire to reach a larger audience (and perhaps his need for money) has converged with Fleuve Noir editor Patrick Siry's desire to upgrade the image of his house to produce a several-book contract which, at the time of

writing, has spawned a further two volumes this year, Le Puzzle De Chair and Le Semeur D'Abimes ("The sower of hell"). Another 1983 novel is Le Carnaval De Fer ("The carnival of iron").

The hullabaloo surrounding Brussolo's ascension has caused some adverse reaction, as well as some hard feelings from other writers who felt either bypassed or that Brussolo's real shortcomings were being ignored, swept aside in the tide of critical acclaim.

Let's take a closer look. I shall not dwell on his writing style: it would be pretty difficult to get my points across in English and, anyway, I confess I'm no expert in the matter of style. Brussolo's hallmark, to me, seems to be an obsessive accumulation of descriptive sentences or paragraphs which become oppressive more often than not. I don't mind, for he strikes home immediately with the uniqueness of his visions.

Jean-Pierre Andreuon once described them in a review as "the fantasies of a sick child, a child who is afraid of the dark and wets his bed", and there is indeed many a child's nightmare in Brussolo's works. The sand dunes which will literally eat you if you set foot on them in Sommeil De Sang, for instance, or the wooden armour which will harden around and eventually kill you if you do not keep it constantly wet in Le Mangeurs De Muraille ("The wall eaters"). And the whole of Portrait Du Diable En Chapeau-Melon...on more than one occasion, strange mutations may occur; let the traveller beware of touching certain minerals, which would turn his hand into their substance while they might turn into human flesh. This is only one of the many inversions between mineral, animal and vegetable realms that occur in Brussolo's work. In the title story of Vue En Coupe D'Une Ville Malade, people incorporate more and more mechanical aids into their bodies while their armchairs and lampshades are made of human skin and their underground apartments start living lives of their own, sprouting new rooms to which their tenants must adapt. In Les Sentinelles D'Almoha, the rain can kill you like a hail of bullets, thus giving substance to the old fear of the Gauls: that the sky would fall on their heads. In Le Carnaval De Fer, the city living through an endless carnival is in fact the seat of a merciless war, concealed by the disguises and fireworks (which of course are actually meant to kill); there's a dagger under every domino — which, come to think of it, is pretty much the way it must have been during some periods of the Italian Renaissance. You can see that there's an element of cruelty and fear in all those ideas, and the ever-present threat of bodily injuries and mutilation; in general, a rejection of the material world, which is touched on only with disgust.

Brussolo's opus, then, owes more to fantasy than to straight SF, even though he usually presents it as SF, very often setting the action on some faraway planet almost invariably called Almoha. I would even say that several of his stories are partially spoiled by tedious pseudo-scientific explanations at the end; for instance, "La Mouche et l'Araignee" ("The fly and the spider") in Vue En Coupe D'Une Ville Malade, or Sommeil De Sang, where a totally amazing ecological construct (more of which later) is explained away as a world-building experiment which, left to its own devices, went haywire. A similar explanatory lump mars the ending to Le

Carnaval De Fer, after such feats of invention as — besides the already-mentioned bloody carnival — a sea whose water has been replaced by a thick crowd of dwarves, and an old man housing beehives in his body.



Much time is spent describing these surreal surroundings, or the feelings and reminiscences of the protagonists who encounter or wallow in them. There appears to be some feedback between those protagonists' states of mind and the shapes that evolve around them; as in one of the stories in Aussi Lourd Que Le Vent, where the main character buries himself in a museum of Borgesian proportions and infiniteness. Those obsessive contemplations, and reflections between inner and outer spaces, remind one of J. G. Ballard, seen from a distance — the only comparison, by the way, that "Presence du Futur" editor Elisabeth Gille has ever managed to tentatively pin down on a writer she staunchly supports.

Such preoccupations are marked departures from the once-fashionable school known as "Nouvelle Science Fiction Française", which was usually characterised by a heavy dose of politicising, usually to the detriment of the quality of the writing. Brussolo was hailed from some corners as a prime exponent of the "neo-formalist" school, supposedly eschewing emotional and political content to make way for narrative "form". But much in the way of plot is not to be found in many of Brussolo's stories — see in particular some of those in Vie In Coupe D'Une Ville Malade and all of those in Aussi Lourd Que Le Vent, which is probably the most "brussolien" of his books, the one where he went furthest along his own direction. Switching to novels for commercial and populist purposes meant he had to have some action and some plot, and to look at Traque-La-Mort or Les Mangeurs De Muraille one gets the feeling that in both cases he has lifted the same clichéd plot from...Nouvelle Science Fiction Française. This rather dashes the analyses of those short-sighted reviewers who attempted to portray Brussolo as an antithesis to so-called "political" SF.

The plot in question feels rather like a skeleton on which lumps of description would have been hung: a young male character, faithful servant of an oppressive system, sees the light through his encounter with a rebellious young female he should have killed but falls in love with instead. They then go off and away, trying

to escape from the hands of power and discovering plenty of strange and interesting things en route. This last sounds a bit like ERB, except that the things Brussolo comes up with are much stranger and more interesting and poignant than anything that ever lived on the face of Barsboom, of course. Les Mangeurs De Muraille, for instance, though sloppy in execution, has at least one memorable scene: it is set in one of the underground alveoles where everyone has come to live, forbidden to travel to other boxes. Robot police are there to put down occasional unrest, and when one box becomes too rebellious there is always the expedient of lowering the "sky", flattening the houses and people. One of the doomed, in the last minutes of such a genocide,



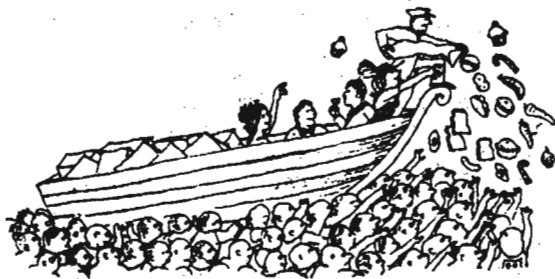
gets to the top of a fine engine ladder and writes on the sky his name and the date of his impending death — for the alveole's next inhabitants to remember the crime that cleared the place. The whole concept of those caves, with the inhabitants' distrust (fuelled by the authorities) of anything that comes from beyond their walls, is obviously a reflection of the paranoia induced by large housing developments.

Earlier in 1982, Sourcil De Sang had appeared, with another political allegory (and one that to my mind could have done with less explaining). Alchka (again!) is divided into two castes, or rather races: the nomad "autonomes", who live without eating, using their hair for photosynthesis (baldness means death for them!); and the butchers, who live in fortified cities and hunt down the walking mountains, in fact huge animals whose flesh has to be literally quarried away to feed (and clothe!) the city-dwellers. It is of course a parable on the disparities between the West and the Third World, aggravated (it would seem) by our high meat diet and the resulting high fodder consumption. The plot again deals with a young couple running away...its chief defect here being the brutal change that occurs thirty pages before the end of the novel. The final section is set in a city where firemen burn houses, and despite some formal connection it feels tacked-on.

One may also ponder the political implications of a passage in Carnaval De Fer which Brussolo has mercifully left free of lecturing: how boats cross the sea of dwarves supported on the palms of the dwarves' hands, throwing dwarf food overboard and heating their hulls to searing temperatures when the dwarves get unruly and actually ask for more...

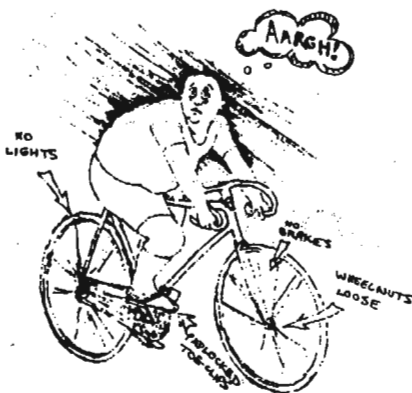
All of this should not be taken to mean that Brussolo is incapable of coming up with a satisfying, non-static plot. Some of his early stories, "Off" and "Les Liens Du Sang" ("Blood





ties"), both in Vue En Coupe D'Une Ville Malade, had one. Le Nuisible, his mystery novel, was already a surprise in that it gave us the unusual opportunity to see Brussolo writing about realistic settings, and he maintains tension and suspense throughout the book; but I alone was disappointed by the ordinariness of the final unravelling (of culprits and motives), when for much of the book the atmosphere was eerie, overlapping into the fantastic, especially in the manuscript of one of the characters, "quoted" at length in the book. "He thought he had to do a Boileau-Narcejac," explained his editor, Elisabeth Gille — the aforementioned pair being a team of successful French traditional mystery writers.

Le Nuisible is also a much more coherent unit than all of Brussolo's other novels: Carnaval De Fer, Les Mangeurs De Muraille and to some extent Sommeil De Sang read like fix-ups of unborn short stories. Portrait Du Diable En Chapeau-Melon is in a different category; even though there is a switch in viewpoint midway through the novel, it is more of an integrated whole, centred on the incongruous prison named Funnyway. In the original Funnyway, that of the award-winning short story of that title, people were tortured through bicycle-riding under frightening conditions. In the new one, adults



are forced to behave like children by drugs mixed into their food and drink. And the inevitable evil robot wardens are twenty-foot-high nannies. Great idea, but as usual there is much more than that in the book, my personal favourite amongst his work. I would not say, though, that Brussolo has yet produced his perfect novel, and I'd much rather see him write again some of the perfect short stories he has done in the past.

Unfortunately, it seems that Brussolo's move to full-time writing and a wider audience has led to an acceleration in the pace of his writing and a subsequent deterioration in its quality. A certain sloppiness has set in — Jean-Daniel Breque has spotted a page in one of his

1982 novels where the name of the hero is changed to that of another of his books' hero... But more to the point, now the writing style sometimes leaves something to be desired, the creatures are not as thought-out as they ought to be (it's a fine thing to give in to one's obsessions, but it requires work to avoid repeating oneself after a while). I remember some instances of alien objects being described by means of comparison with a very ordinary implement, rather shattering the alien atmosphere...

Do sample Brussolo's imagination if you have the opportunity and feel up to it; but you'd do best sticking to his collections and Portrait Du Diable En Chapeau-Melon. The rest will only be needed when you have been bitten by the bug, and some of it (A L'Image Du Dragon, Traque-La-Mort) is only a testament to what frantic overproduction can do to an extremely talented writer.

Harlan Ellison — SHATTERDAY (Granada, 313pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Chris Bailey

A new Harlan Ellison story collection and time to weed out the truth from the hype, for Ellison rides the crest of a wave that is powered by a formidable talent, an enviable facility, a well-cemented reputation and the instant approbation of a mafia of fans for his every word. And, of course, a monstrous self-confidence. In the introduction to this collection — almost a parody of all the Harlan Ellison introductions you've ever read — he roars, "I'm a troublemaker, malcontent, pain in the ass, desperado... I want to hear the sound of your soul". In truth, he echoes that sound in only four out of the sixteen stories gathered here. He dedicates the book to James Blish, and writes: "he taught me how badly I could write when I wasn't paying attention, and how I could be the king of the world when I did the work with love and courage". But the attention wanders frequently in Shatterday. There is a sense in which this is unfair criticism, as this is no "Best Of" collection but a straightforward harvesting of his 1975-1980 productions, down to the sexual comedies for Playboy and other occasional pieces, and there are also at least four stinkers, written when the attention was far away. All sixteen stories are readable, though, and Shatterday might scrape by as a worthwhile collection — from a less talented writer.

On the credit side, there's "Jeffy Is Five". Double award-winner notwithstanding, this story can also be read as nothing more than an exercise in weepy nostalgia, harking back wistfully to the time when a Clark Bar was as thick as your arm and Captain Midnight was on the radio. However, this is to misinterpret the story's purpose, which is to be an indirect reworking of Ellison's previous frontal assaults on the regimentation and soullessness of twentieth century city life. He gets away with the nostalgia because he controls it well — apart from one too-knowing nod to the SF pulps — and because it acts as a cruel counterpoint to the nightmare existence of Jeffy's parents, one of Ellison's most subtle evocations of horror to date. Subtlety again in "Count The Clock That Tells The Time", and Ellison walks a delicate line between sentiment and sentimentality in this



story of two lovers in limbo. The title to "The Executioner Of The Malformed Children" suggests a reversion to shock-horror type, but the story is nothing half so crude, developing into a telling and surprising little fable on the tenacity of the common man. And then there's the title story, showing Ellison redirecting his old fascination with death into a more rewarding territory of uncertainties and questioning; as in "Count The Clock That Tells The Time", the moral purpose of life itself.

But if these stories linger in the memory, then so too do others, less pleasurably. "In The Fourth Year Of The War" is Ellison at his most obvious, with a gruesome little story that makes homicide and worse seem somehow banal. Banality shades into laughability with "Flop Sweat", which asks us to believe in a chic lady radio announcer as the propheticess of Armageddon, but even this daftness is preferable to "All The Lies That Are My Life", a sixty-page novella which has been heralded with loud clarions as giving the inside dope on a writer's soul but which arrives steeped in such a lugubrious volume of self-pity as to be beyond tiresomeness. If you originally read this piece in P & SF, then be grateful; that was the edited version.

The judgement of what constitutes tastelessness is necessarily a subjective exercise, and I for one have never been unduly offended when Ellison starts flinging offal around — in fact, his lack of coyness is sometimes to be welcomed — but two of these stories did succeed in getting my goat. I offer this as being interesting only because the stories do not seem intended to annoy; for such a skillful writer, Ellison's judgement of reader reaction is still suspect. "Django" is a gratuitous squib of a fantasy on the great guitarist's conduct during the Second World War, the point being that there was little to reproach anyway and even if there were then Ellison's fanciful excuses would do little to clarify the issue. The story reads not as an ornament to Reinhardt's reputation but as a slur upon it. The faults of "Shoppe Keeper" are more aesthetic. Ellison establishes a magnificent aeon-spanning panorama of humans at the end of time desperately raiding the energies of the past in order to fend off the inevitable triumph of entropy...and then he blows it with a cheap punchline about Charles Manson. It is not the

Manson element that is tasteless so much as the regardless mutilation of a strong story. Ellison continually demonstrates that too ready a facility can result in a fatal blindness.

Why be so severe towards a book which is still admitted to be "worthwhile"? Through frustration; the sort of frustration one feels on listening to Beethoven's ghastly folk-song arrangements, the frustration of witnessing an immense talent frittering its time away.

## ALSO RECEIVED

Brian Aldiss — REPORT ON PROBABILITY A (Sphere, 156pp, £1.50): Reprint of Aldiss's attempt at the French anti-novel, which he's said he drafted as an ordinary work of fiction and then went through deleting all the adverbs and adjectives. As a stylistic exercise, I admire it greatly, but it is otherwise so cold and remote ("the reader," he's said, "must put the emotion in himself") that I can't say I really like it.

Alfred Bester — THE DECEIVERS (Pan, 255pp, £1.95): How are the mighty fallen — what was once exciting and innovative now, 30 years later, seems flat, tedious and almost unreadable. I refer, of course, to Bester's style, the pyrotechnic flair that gave The Demolished Man and Tiger! Tiger! their pace and impact; but now it does not so much flair as fizzle, and in fizzling reveal what it's been trying to conceal: the stupefyingly space operatic banality of the plot, so shallow and implausible as to arouse the reader to no emotion but contempt. The Deceivers may not be as bad as Golem 100 (that would take some doing), but even so it's a book to avoid.

Philip Jose Farmer — LORD OF THE TREES (Sphere, 149pp, £1.50): Another boring and badly written Tarzan extravaganza by the ever-productive (to put it mildly) Philip Jose Farmer, commencing with the eponymous protagonist being blown out of his airplane by a jet fighter at 1200 feet and then surviving the fall into the sea. What a pity the 269 people aboard KAL 007 hadn't been taught the same trick.

## LET A HUNDRED FLOWERS BLOOM — the letter column

Slightly fewer letters than last time (this isn't an exclusive club; write in, dammit!), and most were inspired by the letter column rather than the reviews (did no one notice, for example, Sue Thomason's excellent theoretical exposition of what makes good fantasy?). \*Sigh\* First, however, a late comment by GREG BENFORD on my editorial in number 43 (August 1983), about Kingsley Amis's The Golden Age Of Science Fiction:

"I don't agree with Amis or you. I don't think SF has declined. Oscillated, maybe, with a recent trough in the mid-1970s, yes. But I saw a trough in 1962 to 1966 or so, after the peak of, say, A Canticle For Leibowitz and The Man In The High Castle.

"It's hard to separate your own personal immersion in the field from the time evolution of it; we all change, but assume otherwise. And though short stories are a significant

current in the field, perhaps you can best assess progress or its opposite by listing the A and maybe B+ novels that appeared in each year. Plot this number and see if it declines from the early 1970s, or — as I believe — oscillates.

"Another way to judge matters is to only list the A level works, and see which years have more than one. By either test, I submit that the last few years have been fine — an era of booming lit'ry success, with major works from a host of writers."

Yes and no — I quite agree that your personal experience of SF (when you first encountered it, how long you've been reading it, and so on) will colour your overall perceptions of it, but at the same time I think that there is now a great deal more rubbish around than there was, so that — regardless of the number of really good novels

that have appeared in the past few years — the SF field as a whole is in a pretty dreadful state. (And the gap between the good stuff and everything else now seems larger than it was, to the extent that we no longer perceive, say, Helliconia Spring as belonging to the same literary sphere as Swords Of The Thargoids (or whatever this week's Del Rey fantasy title might be) — which is probably no bad thing...) Then again, if the situation does oscillate with time, it will be interesting to see how long it takes for things to start getting better...

On, then, to the more recent letters; here's JEREMY CRAMPTON, responding to a response to that same editorial:

"I see that Andy Swayer quotes Amis as saying that SF is a form of writing interested in the future. Andy disagrees with this, saying 'not now it isn't', but I would say: 'Was it ever?'

"In 1952, slap-bang in Amis's 'golden age', there appeared a novel that was full of cybernetic technology, was set in 1990, was post-holocaust, etc.. The novel was Limbo 90, and it remains markedly underrated and unknown, although Ballard has called it the greatest American SF novel. The point is that its author, Bernard Wolfe, did not consider that it had anything to do with prediction or the future. Here, in his afterword, is what he does believe it is:

"Anybody who 'paints a picture' of some coming year is kidding -- he's only fancying up something in the present or past, not blueprinting the future. All such writing is essentially satiric (today-centred), not utopic (tomorrow-centred). This book, then, is a rather bilious rib on 1950 -- on what 1950 might have been like if it had been allowed to fulfill itself, if it had gone on being 1950, only more and more so, for four more decades. But no year ever fulfills itself: the cowpath of history is littered with the corpses of years, their silly throats cut from ear to ear with the improbable. I am writing about the overtone and undertow of now -- in the guise of 1990 because it would take decades for a year like 1950 to be milked of its implications. What 1990 will look like I haven't the slightest idea. Nobody can train his mind to think effectively, without vertigo, in terms of accelerations and accelerated accelerations... on the spurious map of the future presented herein on the far side of the pin-point of now, I have tried to inscribe, as did the mediaeval cartographers over all the terrifying areas outside their ken: HERE LIVE LIONS. They could, of course, be unicorns, or hippogryphs, or even giraffes. I don't even know if there's going to be a 1990."

"This, I think, is an admirable expose of the myth that SF is about the future, or even that it would be best if it were, which is another myth. (I would suggest that it is best when it follows the lines that Wolfe and Priest have taken up.) How Amis got the idea in the first place that SF and the future went hand in hand beats me, especially when the truth, as quoted above, was there all the time."

No comment -- after all, I've never been able to find a copy of Limbo 90, never mind read it. But, speaking of one Wolfe (ah, see the clever links!), here's a letter about another, from NIGEL RICHARDSON:

"It's relieving to see someone having a go at the cult of Gene Wolfe. I disagree with all that Philip Collins says, but it's about time that someone said something against the Master otherwise, I fear, we'll have a repeat of what happened in the late sixties with Delany and Zelazny, who were both practically deified -- and look what happened to them. Wolfe is a far better writer than either, but mindless adulation is not the way to reward his talents. (Proof that he isn't infallible can be found in the June 1983 issue of F & SF -- "From The Desk Of Gilmer C. Merton" could have been written by the duffest Asimov's hack.

"Philip is wrong when he assumes that all trilogies, tetralogies and series are innately bad. Most are, but this is only because the form is easily misused by those who want to produce the maximum wordage for the minimum thought. A pedant could say that practically all the novels of the 18th and 19th centuries were either trilogies or tetralogies because they tended to appear in three or four volumes. More recently -- and more accurately described as trilogies -- we have Anthony Burgess's Enderby and The Long Day Wanes, Robertson Davies's superb Deptford Trilogy, and Mervyn Peake's Titus books to show that in the right hands the trilogy can add up to more than just three novels about the same thing. As for series, there are such writers as C. P. Snow, Anthony Powell, John Updike, Proust, and Thomas Berger to show that even the open-ended series isn't necessarily a bane upon mankind and trees. Within the SF and fantasy field, well...

"As for your suggestion that the novel is a 'far more important' form than the short story -- come on, you're just trying to provoke a sackful of mail, aren't you? There are so many writers who are at their best at short story or novella length -- Tiptree, Ellison, Keith Roberts, Kit Reed, David I. Masson, Avram Davidson, Ballard, Disch, Bradbury, Barrington Bayley, Spinrad... You were being deliberately polemical, eh?"

It's true that there are a number of writers who are better at the shorter lengths than they are at novels, but such an objection doesn't really answer my point -- I was talking about the form, not its practitioners. Even so, I'd certainly welcome some more mail on the subject, polemical or not...

Carrying on where he left off last time, however, here's MARTYN TAYLOR:

"I think it's reasonable to say that a substantial number of Third World leaders were educated in the North -- in the schools (the Chicago Boys who've masterminded Chile's economy), the jails (Jomo Kenyatta and Robert Mugabe, to pluck but two of many names from the air), the bars (the other kind -- Ghandi), the kitchens (Ho Chi Minh) -- and I would suggest that as a result of that contact with our order they place too high a value on it, whether in admiration or reaction. Certainly, from our point of view we see too much of our society reflected in theirs (although this may be due to the means by which we observe those societies presenting us with images more readily comprehensible to us -- i.e., familiarity), which seems to militate against the creation of a new analysis of a post-imperialist free world. In other words, too many Third

World countries seem intent on joining in our game rather than coming up with a better one.

"No blame attaches as a result of that. We do, after all, impose heavy pressures upon Third World countries to join the dance. But the fact remains that our system (as you hinted in your review of the Brandt Commission's Common Crisis) is designed to keep the Third World and its peoples in positions of subservience. I don't think it a coincidence that the two major power blocs invest a great deal of money and effort in maintaining regimes devoted to keeping their people in an attitude acceptable to whichever of the blocs pays the piper.

"The 'debt crisis' is an illustration. 1973 saw a small number of Arab states suddenly flush with a staggering amount of cash, which they promptly returned to the one agency capable of absorbing such an amount -- the Western banking system. Even so, that system had to invent new ways of dealing with the cash, and the way they found was to lend mind-boggling amounts to Third World countries, which pleased the Arabs because they got the interest.

"As the Good Lord Keynes told us, borrowing for capital is good if you expend that capital to create economic growth, which ought to become self-financing. For Third World countries, debt-financed growth was absolutely essential because in its absence they couldn't service the debt. Such growth could only be in manufactured goods, the principal markets for which are in the West, and our manufacturing industries would thus be at the mercy of Third World manufacturers because of the latter's lower unit costs; and we couldn't have that, could we? So we sold the Third World just what they didn't need: weapons. Almost 40 percent of post-1973 Third World debt was spent on weapons, and just for good measure we invented a nice new monetary dogma that put our interest rates through the roof. It didn't do us much good, but look what it did to the Third World.

"I'd like to think that it was all a conspiracy to screw the Arabs, but despite their successful screwing I have to say that it was not a conspiracy, just a chapter of accidents during which the rich got richer. But what do the Arabs do when faced with the knowledge that they have been screwed? Invent Islamic banking, that's what, and try to join the dance!"

Does anyone disagree?

Back to the writer with whom we begun -- GREG BENFORD, with a later letter responding to last issue's editorial:

"Your review of Rhinehart's Long Voyage Back gets up on a moral high horse. Horrors! How dare he say nuclear war might be limited! Yet all kinds of limited scenarios exist. CJI war -- interception of the communications, control and command, plus intelligence-gathering capability (via satellites) -- is certainly possible. Indeed, the USA is far more vulnerable to it than the USSR.

"The notion that all nuclear wars might be unlimited is an extremely dangerous idea. Consider the leader confronted with an accidental launch or a genuinely limited attack. If he believes as you do, he will launch everything, reasoning that he should at least try to get

the jump on his opponent.

"I understand your European concern that a limited war will be fought in Europe, but as a critic that should not blind you to Rhinehart's announced limitation on his scenario, when it is quite reasonable and certainly not immoral. Perhaps you've forgotten that the studies Jonathan Schell used in his over-written The Fate Of The Earth decided that even an all-out exchange would probably leave survivors; a fact he neglected to mention.

"What disturbs me is that you are so sanctimonious without really thinking. You quibble over whether Norfolk, Virginia would be hit at first and pronounce that it would, of course -- not allowing that maybe the missiles targeted there were destroyed on the ground, or in space, and that the USSR won't know that for days. You are simply rigid."

To begin with, Rhinehart's novel did in fact concern a global nuclear war, so there wasn't much point discussing it in terms of anything else -- apart from which, my main interest in the book, as I hope my discussion of it made clear, was the extraordinarily sanitised picture it presented of the consequence of such a war. I accept that there would indeed be survivors, albeit very few, but what state would they be in? The general assumption (which Rhinehart's novel reinforces) seems to be that they'd be robust, capable and reasonably well-equipped -- but the likelihood is that they'd be so emotionally and psychologically traumatised by the catastrophe that they'd simply sit around listlessly until they starved to death. (Indeed, they'd have a choice between starving to death in a few weeks or so or dying lingeringly and horribly after a few years as the radioactivity taken up in the food they consumed accumulated in their bodies.)

Leaving all this aside, I have to say that I simply do not believe in the idea of a limited nuclear war, no matter what clever theories may be advanced in its favour, because they assume that the enemy will behave exactly in accordance with the scenarios' rules. This is hardly likely, particularly when one remembers that Soviet nuclear doctrine just doesn't recognise the concept of limited nuclear war, and in any European tactical nuclear exchange -- in which, as I understand it, the USA would hope to engage with the express purpose of destroying or severely damaging the USSR without cost to itself -- the first nuclear detonation in European Russia will be answered by a massive strategic strike on the continental USA. And even leaving aside all this, and assuming that the rules do hold, a limited nuclear war would still have disastrous environmental consequences -- as a recent atmospheric study (reported in the 3 November 1983 issue of New Scientist) pointed out, the detonation of a mere 100 megatons, less than 1 percent of the world's total nuclear arsenal, would throw so much dust and pulverised rock into the air that the northern hemisphere would experience "cold and dark" for months afterwards. Jacking the figure up to 5000 megatons, a standard-figure used elsewhere, results in the reduction of land temperatures (bar narrow coastal strips) to  $-25^{\circ}\text{C}$  and the collapse of plant photosynthesis.

Sod surviving a nuclear war -- we ought to be making sure one never starts in the first place.

I think that's a suitably optimistic note on which to end; besides, I've run out of room. WAHP: Andy Hobbs and Chris Priest. And let's hear from more of you next time, eh?