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BLOOD ON THE RACKS — magazine reviews by Chris Bailey

Before I started reading SF magazines I had the notion, gleaned from who knows what erroneous source, that every issue would be packed with serials, ripping yarns of space and time that would leave me stranded with some suspenseful crisis at the end of each month, in an agony of anticipation for the next instalment. Reading The Magazine Of Fantasy & Science Fiction soon disabused me of this expectation, firstly because what it carries are not serials designed to be published as such, with carefully contrived climaxes placed at the end of each section, but novels conceived as novels and cut off each month at reasonably convenient points. Secondly, F & SF features serials but seldom, and that spanning the November 1983 to February 1984 issues is the first to appear since On Wings Of Song and Lord Valentine's Castle, both in 1979. I still look forward to a good serial, though, in that it appeals to that most basic of the reader's desires, the story and what happens next, and those in F & SF do have the virtue of being some sort of an event, besides giving one a sneak preview of forthcoming hardbacks.

The new serial in question is Ian Watson's The Book Of The River and bless me if Watson hasn't come up with an adventure yarn. A complicated yarn, of course, but a yarn for all that. "My story flowed easily enough," the heroine reflects in her afterword. "My reading of all those Ajelobo romances came in handy at long last!" For this is high romance in the

true meaning of the word. Ajelobo, Guineamoy, Pecawar, Verrino: ports of call along a monstrous river that splits the known world in two, and when Majipoor meets Riverworld an infinite variety of climate, custom and character await the wanderer.

However, this is still Ian Watson, so there is a backdrop of other concerns behind the pastiche. The river is divided down its middle by a "black current" that also divides East from West and -- although not absolutely literally -- men from women. This black current is revealed to be the worm of the world, the spine and spirit-store of existence on the planet, in harmony with the forces of "Flow" (women, the East) and antagonistic towards those of "Thrust" (men, the West), but these are themes which are not brought into the open until towards the end, and it is in the fourth instalment that Watson gets into a tangle as he tries to finish off his novel of character as a novel of ideas.

Because a novel of character it is, and a lively one too. The heroine, Yaleen, is Watson's most cheerful and gossipy protagonist to date. (Also, let's hear it for one of the least sexist of our male SF writers!) Watson writes her using his own voice, the voice you read in his articles and reviews, not the didactic voice of some of his previous novels, where often it seemed that a character merely gave a name to a vessel of ideas. This isn't a complaint, in that such is how those earlier

characters were meant to function, but it's good to see a writer expanding the range of his talents, and it is because the "new" Watsonian novel of character wins out here that he hits problems near the end, for his good-humoured heroine can't keep a straight face: "Kindly consider the absurd horror and lunacy of this moment. Outside, the world was in chaos. A giant tadpole wanted to make love to me, or something. And the roof was falling on my head. In such a moment, what could save a girl but a sense of humour?" Yaeleen has ventured inside the "Worm" to learn its secrets, and perhaps the writer saw everything that he had made and felt that it was a little daft. Do you remember the sea-dragon of Majipoor? "So here he was, camped on the floor of the dragon's maw, in this cathedral of an alimentary canal... It was high comedy, Valentine thought." There seems to be something inherently funny about being eaten by a fish. After this, Watson seems to lack the impetus to resolve the serious issues he has outlined -- men and women, aggression and compatibility, West and East -- and instead finishes his story in high spirits, with Yaeleen chatting to the Worm as she rides it downriver, having invaded its spirit-store in order to bend its motives to her own ends. There may be a good literary joke there too, in that Yaeleen has recently crewed a boat called "Blue Guitar": "That I may reduce the monster to myself and then may be myself", indeed! In sum, I did not admire The Book Of The River, but I enjoyed it hugely, which reverses my usual reaction to Watson's work. Look out for the reassembled instalments coming out shortly from Gollancz, and also for more of Yaeleen, with part two of her tale (The Book Of The Stars) already sold.

Adventure trilogies from Ian Watson -- whatever next? Well, there's his one-time collaborator Michael Bishop also trying something different in the February issue but winning fewer bonus points in the process. "With A Little Help From Her Friends" concerns Eleanor, victim of an appalling atrocity and now resident at a torture victim rehabilitation centre, for whose benefit a reunion of the (now 70-year-old) Beatles is engineered, complete with holographic Lennon recreation. It is a dreadful, dreadful story, the author's own ineptly realised wish-fulfillment fantasy serving to make cosy the serious and ghastly business of the torture (never mind, dear, come and see your lovely surprise) and devaluing the important work already being done in such centres. Further detail on the story is unnecessary, other than to note that it ends in a flood of mawkishness and that what little dignity it possesses is nobbled for once and for all by the writer's atrocious attempts at rendering 1960s' Liverpudlian wit. Still, Bishop at least senses that he's living dangerously, in that he tries to justify his fantasy with Eleanor's recollections of "those shamelessly corny video concoctions of her distant girlhood, programmes that delighted in wringing pathos, warmth and high ratings from artfully engineered, otherwise inconceivable reunions. Touché. Everybody has their off days, but is this really the writer who brought us No Enemy But Time and Transfigurations?"

A reputable writer who does deliver the goods is Keith Roberts with "Sphairistike" (February), although not without a few alarms along the way. On the face of it, this is a story about an arrogant scientific genius, the development of

the perfect android, and a future Wimbledon tennis tournament. You sit there reading about robots playing tennis and you take it because it's Keith Roberts writing, and you are also still being nagged by a few sad autobiographical paragraphs that the first-person narrator inserted some pages back. The android tennis player is accounted for with a routine teaser ("Was she a Synthetic, come years before her time? Or just some stray goddess of the courts?") and the narrator apologetically introduces a personal coda, and it is only then that you realise what a poignant story this has been, not about sporting androids at all but about a lonely middle-aged man and his search for love. This is a fine story, if a close run thing at times.

That's just about all of note from the big names. There's an inconsequential piece from Gene Wolfe and a predictable, if gritty, fantasy from Phyllis Eisenstein (both February), and a story from Richard Cowper ("A Scent Of Silverdill", January) which I haven't discussed more fully as it is essentially a slight piece for Cowper, a five-finger exercise, but it is enjoyable in its simplicity and directness; and in this respect it is noticeable how often Cowper has been using children as narrators in his recent F & SF contributions.

In fact, F & SF does not publish all that much by the big names, nor an exceptional amount from first-timers, although enough to escape censure. Its virtue lies in having formed a large stable of "small name" writers, sticking by them, and giving them room to develop their talents. This time round, the only one amongst these writers who I felt let himself down was Richard Mueller, who has previously produced some good material. He crops up twice, with "The Mossernan Trace" (February), a rather lame comedy, and "A Song For Justin" (November), which is not too bad a story in parts but which is ruined at the end by a scene of uncalled-for sentimentality. I was reminded of the Bishop story by this and also by the fact that this story too is about music; some writers seem to fall flat on their faces when they tackle the subject. Mueller also has stylistic problems in attempting to render the voice of an ex-academic turned hobo, but no such uncertainties hamper old pro Russell Kirk in "The Invasion Of The Church Of The Holy Ghost" (December), of which the title is the only cumbersome part. The narrator is an educated Jamaican, parish priest to an American inner-city slum where gang rule holds sway, and stylistically Kirk had me convinced that this is how such a character would write, the prose being formal, simple and peppered with grave witticisms and incongruous slang. The plot is the old confrontation between good and evil through the agency of demonic possession, but I swallowed it because of the calm narration and the breathing characters, who are both alive and larger than life. This is deliberate, for each character also serves an emblematic function in the age-old struggle -- "You're a Middle Ages person", the minister is told. Only at the end, where the emblems are stripped bare and devils walk the earth did Kirk lose me, but this could have been avoided in that he takes his climax at an unnecessary gallop. The rest of the story I found compelling.

January's issue brought "Ridge Running" by Kim Stanley Robinson, who in several F & SF appearances has never been afraid to try something

different each time. "Ridge Running" is a consciously understated story about three men on a mountain hike, in which nothing happens and yet the details remained with me for days. Robinson is attempting something pretty difficult, subliminal symbolism, the rocks echoing the long friendship of the three hikers, the ridges and precarious slopes suggesting the knife-edge of sanity which one of them walks. It sounds daft, but I found that the story worked, much after the manner of one of Hemingway's shorts, which I felt it imitated rather well. (Far better, incidentally, than "Afternoon Under Glass" by "O. Niemand" in the November issue, which must rank as the feeblest Hemingway parody of all time. And the pseudonymous writer was trying.) "Unlike Cortez" by Gregg Keizer is, oddly enough, another mountaineering story in the January issue, wherein a silly plot and the tired trappings of a First Contact situation are redeemed by some exciting climbing episodes and a lyrical and thoughtful conclusion.

Another writer who saves the situation at the last moment is Pat Cadigan with "Another One Hits The Road" (January), about a mass jogging crusade, a story which comes perilously close to the edge of risibility and which is far too long-winded and predictable, but which almost gets away with it at the end in its powerful suggestion of the frightening single-mindedness of mass hysteria. I say "long-winded" and by that I mean that Cadigan spends a lot of time on character and detail that is not strictly necessary to the story or to the weight of her conclusion. The characterisation and the background may be admirable in themselves, but in the reader's perception the balance of the story is awry. This question of balance is appropriate to Stephen Gallagher's "Nightmare, With Angel" (November), where we are offered a wealth of (admittedly fine) details about the heroine's family, job and friends which does not seem altogether relevant to the smack-across-the-face ending. Where Gallagher does leave out just the right amount, however, is in his portrayal of an Americanised Yorkshire Ripper, a psychopath of

the "it's God's work" variety. The cliché is true: the flesh can crawl.

The only other story from this band of "small name" writers I want to mention is Gregory Frost's "Rubbish" (February) in which, conversely, a weak mystery ending is tacked on to the end of some brisk and convincing characterisation and succinct scene-setting. The ~~easy~~ flow of Frost's writing suggests that here is an author who, in the rather patronising phrase of the critics, is "one to watch".

The last time this column appeared, Andrew Weiner reproved me for not giving F & SF's editor Ed Ferman due credit for his regular showcasing of British writers. This seems to me to be missing the point slightly, as I did not raise the question of nationality other than indirectly, with a gentle puff for Interzone. My concern was with the quality of the material being published and I would happily see the entire magazine written by Paraguayans if they were producing the best stories. I was expressing some anxiety at the volume of F & SF which is given over to drab comedies and inexpertly Moulined folk-tales. Andrew is right, though, in that the editor should be given credit for his occasional purchases of "oddball stuff", and my theme this time has been to take note of those writers who, like Robinson and Frost, take advantage of Ferman's catholicism and develop their ranges.

Finally, I'm going to do something which always annoys me intensely, and that is to take some space to tell you that I don't have enough. F & SF publishes about 900,000 words of fiction a year, and I can only tackle some of it and that briefly. I have to attach significance to deliberately not mentioning a lot of the stories; for example, last time I neglected to discuss Gene Wolfe's "A Solar Labyrinth" (April 1983). Was it, as I felt, merely a pleasing conceit, or was it the magic key that unlocks Wolfe's fiction? Do tell; if you would like to discuss anything that I've either included or excluded, then letters to the Paperback Inferno address would be welcomed.

BOOK REVIEWS

Arkadi & Boris Strugatsky — PRISONERS OF POWER
(Penguin, 316pp,
£1.95)

Reviewed by Bill Carlin

Brian Aldiss recently made the mind-boggling claim that 90 percent of all the SF authors who have ever lived are still alive and kicking today, a claim made even more startling by being approximately 100 percent true. Of that 90 percent, a similar proportion are heavily influenced by the Anglo-American tradition, including the alarmingly large number of writers who have apparently sworn eternal fealty to Ronald Reagan, mom's apple pie, and mindless cruelty. This massive cultural influence goes a long way towards explaining why the same hoary old chestnuts ("free enterprise among the stars", "the individual versus the state", and so on) turn up as central themes in so much of the bad science fiction currently being published. A few talented authors have the ability to breathe a semblance of new life into them; but pleasing results can also be obtained by transplanting

them to foreign soil, as in the Strugatsky brothers' Prisoners Of Power.

Maxim, the novel's protagonist, is a genetically perfect explorer from Earth who is unfortunate enough to find himself marooned on an alien world. The planet itself is ugly, radiation-scarred and thoroughly unpleasant, while its inhabitants are kept in a state of constant war by the mental domination of a mysterious, ruling clique. In the best traditions of decadent pulp fiction, Maxim sets out to smash this conspiracy and free the psychically-enslaved natives. Any suspicion that some miracle of parallel evolution has transformed the Strugatsky brothers into Soviet equivalents of A. E. Van Vogt is dispelled, however, when Maxim discovers that his biggest enemies are not the hidden mind-controllers but the native civilisation's mammoth bureaucracy and the inhabitants' natural apathy. In contrast to our expectations of a superman, Maxim is always naive, sometimes incredibly stupid, and finds no great advantage in his mental and physical superiority. (We learn early on in the novel, in fact, that space exploration

is a field which tends to attract only the most immature and shiftless Earthmen.) Eventually, he realises that his only hope of success lies in organising and co-operating with the people he wishes to set free, though the moral of the story, a neat inversion of what usually occurs in "capitalist" SF dealing with the same theme, is only fully revealed in the last few pages.

As with the author's earlier Roadside Picnic, the characters are much more important than their environment, a fact that devotees of "hard" SF may find irritating. But why should there be this glaringly apparent lack of detail when Boris Strugatsky is a working scientist who would almost certainly be capable of adding an abundance of technological frills if he thought them necessary? The answer lies in the Leninist philosophy that is at the heart of their fiction. In theory, if not in actual practice, Leninism insists that all Communists should "learn" politics by observing Communism at work and by being ready to point out the faults in any system which fails to live up to the Party's ideals. The Strugatsky brothers, realising the wonderful potential of the genre, have chosen to make their criticisms in the form of a science fiction novel, and in so doing they follow a tradition which has more in common with Swift's Gulliver's Travels than with Campbell's Astounding.

Prisoners Of Power is essentially a Leninist fable, intended for a Russian readership (who for "sinister mind-controller" will read "sinister, revisionist bureaucrat"), but this does not mean that it is without interest to Western readers, no matter what political philosophy they adhere to. It is an important book simply because it gives us an idea of how the SF genre might have developed without the influence of such editors as Gernsback and Campbell (whose names are probably somewhat less than famous within the Soviet Union), but it also provides a valuable insight into the "liberal" Russian mind. Some may be shocked to discover that the Strugatsky brothers, despite their obvious political commitment, seem to be less authoritarian in their judgements than many of the authors on our own side of the Iron Curtain who set themselves up as staunch, humourless defenders of "democracy", but others will find their pre-eminent sanity a source of some comfort in these troubled times.

Politics aside, Prisoners Of Power is both entertaining and engagingly different from the science fiction we have come to know and love. Those readers who have started to despair over the current sorry state of SF may find themselves welcoming it as a breath of fresh air blowing in from an unlikely direction.

Arthur C. Clarke — 2010: ODYSSEY TWO (Grenada, 297pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

I have an aversion to reading best-sellers. Instinct says that the overstated claims of the average best-seller blurb cannot be anything other than irrelevant, blatant lies, and I dislike lying. If the book is really that good, I think to myself, there would be no need to make such a fuss about it just to get it to sell. Empty vessels (or in this case monoliths) make most noise. Furthermore, once a book has suf-

fered the vulgar indignities of best-seller promotion, it becomes almost impossible to ignore the fuss and respond to the book as a book, on its own merits. Of course, a best-seller can't measure up to the hysterical adulation of the average blurb-writer, and it's silly to expect it to. But that is no reason to dismiss it unread as trash for the masses. So, thrusting prejudice aside, I sat down to read 2010: Odyssey Two, a book whose cover art (a montage of evocative images from 2001: The Movie and possibly 2010: The Movie too) and cover blurbs ("the century's greatest story continues") seemed custom-made to put me off for life.

I was pleasantly surprised. While the novel doesn't and can't provide the same numinous intimations of archetypal resonance as 2001: The Movie, it is a quite decently written sequel to 2001: The Novel. Both the prose and the plot of 2010 are competent and serviceable, obviously the work of a real professional who is incapable of delivering goods which fail to meet certain minimum standards of interest-holding and readability. (If you think this is a virtue not worth praising, try to read Foundation's Edge.) Many of the characters are somewhat two-dimensional and stereotyped, but in the settings the story explores I would expect to meet a fair number of two-dimensional people. 2010 is an adventure story, not a novel of character; Clarke should not be criticised too harshly for failing to achieve something he never set out to attempt.

It seems impossible to discuss the plot without giving away the novel's main attractions; however, it involves all the key elements of the 2001 we know and love — monoliths, a journey to Jupiter (to rescue the derelict Discovery), problems with computers, and a couple of good old-fashioned surprises. Anyone hoping for an explanation of monoliths and monolith-builders will be disappointed: there is one, but it isn't really an explanation, and that's as it should be; glib rationalisations of central plot enigmas are apt to leave the story as tension-filled and as buoyant as a punctured balloon. There are several irrelevancies and misdirections which serve to complicate the plot unnecessarily, but they are easily set aside in a work which does at least have a strong feeling of shape and direction about it.

Naturally, one of the strong points of the story is its accurate(ish) scientific background. The close-up descriptions of Jupiter and its four major moons are lifted straight from the Voyager trip reports, and the computer bits, which I don't have the background to check, seem equally plausible. Clarke is obviously writing for the sort of people who regularly read Scientific American, or at least New Scientist, for fun and profit; those who, while by no means "scientists", grind their teeth and mutter when asked to swallow neat doses of the "reverse the polarity of the neutron flow"-type jargon. Unfortunately, this dedication to scientific realism produces some fine examples of what Vonda McIntyre calls "narrative chunks". (In its lowest form, this is what happens when Our Hero's question — "Captain, tell me one more time why we can't repair the Quongo Ray transmitter" — halfway down page 2 is followed by a seven-page extract from the Boy's Own Manual of Do-It-Yourself Spaceship Repairs, delivered as a patronising lecture to all those dummy readers hiding behind Our Hero's

point of view.) The narrative chunk is one of popular SF's most characteristic faults, because it is an easy way of dealing with popular SF's most basic problem: getting a lot of background information about a completely unfamiliar situation over to the reader in as small a space of time as possible so that we can get on with the rest of the story.

The other really striking and curious thing about 2010 is the amount of time and effort Clarke has put into making us like it. There is a whole string of casual references guaranteed to raise a nice warm glow in the hearts of most contemporary SF readers, though I wonder how many of them will still be current usage in the year 2010. There is a mention of Star Trek, a mention of The Lord Of The Rings, and for the culture-conscious there are Kipling and Moby Dick. But the LOTR reference struck me struck me as one of the most insensitive pieces of writing in the whole novel. The surface of Io is described as being like Mordor, but Io is not like Mordor: one is an object of scientific curiosity and the other is a paysage moralisé; they do not exist in the same universe of discourse.

But we are meant to like the novel, and I do, despite all the faults and failings in it, despite my conviction that it isn't the sort of novel I ought to like. In 2001: The Movie, Clarke and Kubrick were trying to make the "proverbial good science fiction film". I think that in 2010: Odyssey Two Clarke has written the proverbial middle-of-the-road, popular-but-not-great science fiction novel. If I was going to choose one book to put in a time capsule to represent the current state of science fiction, this would be it. Apart from the fact that it contains references to almost every piece of written SF in the popular canon (and film; Alien is in there with the crew of Discovery 2), it is so typical of all that is good and bad of novels of its type that I can see it being used as an O Level set text in years to come. I don't know whether that leaves me happy or disappointed, but if you don't read 2010 you'll miss an interesting phenomenon. Whether you'll be satisfied by it is another matter.

Ted Mooney — EASY TRAVEL TO OTHER PLANETS
(Arena, 278pp, £2.95)

Reviewed by Nigel Richardson

This is rather a deceptive novel: the title, the blurb, even the Interzone ad on the back page give the impression that Easy Travel To Other Planets is SF, but to be blunt you have to extend the umbrella definition of SF quite considerably to be able to include this novel within the genre. That said, it is (SF or not) one of the most satisfyingly different novels that I read in 1983. It feels like SF in places — that is, if your definition of SF includes stuff like Thomas Disch's 334 and Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death Of The Universe". If Easy Travel To Other Planets had come out a decade or so ago it would have been the perfect post-New Worlds novel, as it achieves many of Mccrcock's aims with ease: it is cool and ironic, detached and technophobic, but fully aware of what is going on the world.

At one level, the novel is about the relationship between a woman and a dolphin, although

this is like saying that Remembrance Of Things Past is about the relationship between a man and a madeleine biscuit. The woman and the dolphin part company on page 13, and the story follows them both as they try to adjust to their own separate worlds. To use a cliché from romantic fiction, neither is the same after their brief moment of illicit love. The woman returns to California, where few people can be called "adjusted", and tries to get back into the swing with her friends, lovers, mother; the dolphin, trapped in its aquarium, has only the legends and sagas of its species in which to find refuge. Both pine for their impossible relationship, and both are destroyed by it.

The people the woman returns to are reminiscent of The Whole Sick Crew in Thomas Pynchon's V, in that they are all bright young people getting drunk, talking, being obsessed, sleeping around, and generally trying to get something, meaningful or not, out of the modern world. They have problems of their own, ranging from the insanely trivial to the fatal. They play video-games in airport lounges, watch re-runs of bad films on TV, tell each other about their dreams, and argue over the impending global war that looms at the periphery of the book. For large chunks of the narrative, nothing much happens (at least in terms of plot): people buy cars and grow tomatoes, practise for parachute jumps and listen to elevator muzak...such things may not be the staple material of fiction, but Mooney writes of them in an elliptical, taut style that makes the novel read like a slightly surreal clinical report on some strange alien race. At times, the writing is vertiginously vivid; too odd to be real, too real to be odd. It's spiky, addictive writing, poetic and contemporary, and — for the first time in a long while, in respect of any author — I was left wanting more of it.



Gregory Benford & Gordon Eklund — FIND THE CHANGELING
(Sphere, 249pp, £1.75)

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

There are some books executed with such ineptitude that they set you to scratching your head, gazing at the author's name on the cover hoping you've misread it, and wondering why the publisher ever took the manuscript off the slush pile. Find The Changeling is such a novel.

Seeing as both authors are well established and one, Benford, was responsible for the excellent Timescape, the disappointment is the more profound. Not that Sphere can be accused of greedily cashing in on the success of Timescape, for nowhere on their subdued cover is that book given any prominence. But the fact remains that even by the low standards of contemporary SF this book is a bummer; not even amusingly dreadful, just dire. What makes the failure all the more severe is the fact that not only have both authors done much, much better but also that there are clearly visible traces of an interesting story strewn through the wreckage.

The plot is simple. A "changeling" -- a protean creature whose philosophy holds that chaos and destruction are good for the soul -- has been chased by two Earthmen to the planet Alvea. Life there is hard, and getting harder, and the gene-changed colonists are none too keen on Earthmen. Nevertheless, Fain and Skallon must track down and destroy the Changeling. Fair enough as far as it goes, which isn't very far. Fain and Skallon arrive on Alvea firing off nuclear weapons and acting like Bodie and Doyle in their super-duper combat suits. As a parody of Starship Troopers, this might be amusing, were the authors evidently not in deadly earnest about it all... And from this inauspicious opening it is downhill all the way, with every conceivable wrong turning in the plot being eagerly taken. At no stage do Benford and Eklund even begin to convince. Their twist in the tail ending is telegraphed a good hundred pages before it is delivered, and in the meantime they have contradicted their earlier premises several times over. In truth, the story-telling isn't even competent.

Despite powered flight, motor vehicles, railways, and other modern toys, not to mention an awareness of life on other planets, Alveans have made for themselves a society instantly recognisable as 16th century middle Europe, brimful of guilds, serfdom, ignorance and superstition. Why oh why do writers so readily assume that the first attribute of space travelling human beings to land on the scrap heap when difficulties loom will be that knowledge and ingenuity that got them to the stars in the first place? And why, with all the societal models our world presents, do they seemingly inevitably choose the post-feudal one? I realise this is a hobbyhorse of mine, but I assert that in almost every example the combination of space technology and feudal societies is a soft option, a cop-out ("almost", not every case; cf. Mary Gentle's Golden Witchbreed), and the reader has the right to expect better work, especially from a writer of Benford's stature. The reader also has the right to expect better writing than he will find here. I'm not asking for Graham Greene or Gore Vidal, but this stuff would be greeted with shuffling embarrassment in the most forgiving of Ladies' Tuesday Afternoon Writing Circles. Here is a sentence, chosen from the first page to fall open -- page 101 -- "From inside the sculpted 'Ganjanaten' Hall came a thumping boom, a chorus of voices equally high and low, a plink plink of thin-stringed instruments". The entire novel is equally lacking in grace, facility, and meaning.

I understand that Benford and Eklund suffered some difficulty in writing this novel -- supposedly, the original manuscript was lost or destroyed and what we see was a hasty reconstruct-

ion with a deadline looming. But this is a reason, not an excuse. Surely it is the job of publishers and editors to sort out with authors the kind of verbal and plot infelicities that abound in this novel before they see print. Are Dell (the original US publisher) and Sphere so careless of their authors' reputations -- which this novel can only damage -- that they are content to publish such junk? Are Benford and Eklund so unmindful of the good opinion they have earned among those of us who will pay good money to read this insultingly badly written novel? I have read that Benford regards this as a second-rate work. Well, it is the artist's privilege to over-value his own work, but does he hold his readers in such contempt that he is willing -- for any reason whatsoever -- to give them less than his very best?

The failure of Find The Changeling is made the more painful by there being contained in it a number of almost entirely undeveloped ideas and speculations which do catch the interest -- the actual processes of colonising and exploiting an alien planet, conflict between humans and entities who don't see creation the way we do, the possibility of reincarnation, and several others. Benford, at least, has made a practice of returning to ideas and reworking them. Were he to approach any of the ideas thrown away in this novel with the skill he brought to Timescape I would be intrigued to read the results. As it stands, though, Find The Changeling merits nothing more than instant oblivion.

Brian Aldiss -- NEW ARRIVALS, OLD ENCOUNTERS
(Granada, 240pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

The three traditionally forbidden topics of conversation in polite society used to be Religion, Sex and Politics, under which headings a majority of life's interesting subjects can be filed. But literature has nothing to do with being polite, so what about New Arrivals, Old Encounters? Lots of religion, less about sex, plenty of politics. What's left off the above list? Humour, perhaps, and human relationships other than the sexual. This collection is stronger on the first than the second; better on satire and puns than on belly-laughs, better on non-communication than communication. The traditional way of approaching books is as "felt life" experiences; this one is more rewarding if approached in the tradition of literature as intellectual exercises, but it is not to be less (or more) valued than that.

Short story collections are difficult to comment on -- is it better to briefly summarise all? Concentrate on one? Or analyse a "representative" sample (which may, after all, represent only what the critic wants to have represented)? Perhaps it's better to look at the assumptions and themes that underlie these twelve stories, which are presented as a unity if only because the reader finds them between the same set of covers.

Some aspects of New Arrivals, Old Encounters present an anti-religious stance, and some an anti-science one, and anti-socialist, come to that, and anti-liberal. Many of the stories dramatise the popular but not necessarily valid idea that there is a deep and irrevocable split

between Man's mind and Man's emotions. (I don't phrase that carelessly, by the way; there's much of Man in New Arrivals, Old Encounters, but almost nothing of Woman.)

Science fiction should be (though it often isn't) aware of some basic areas: politics, philosophy and religion, science and space exploration. If these stories present them from shifting viewpoints, that isn't to say that the assumptions behind them are wholly negative. To present life in a distorting mirror is a valid satirical technique. Some of the satire here, however, seems heavy-footed, as in the title story; some — as with the invention of SPEEC, and the Displaced Tourist in Greenland — is entirely successful. Come to that, New Arrivals, Old Encounters is in places a very funny book. "A Spot Of Konfrontation" has "rules and thatchers"; "everything's okay" becomes "everything's dockstrike". It is, like the humour favoured by the ambiguous entity of "The Small Stones Of Tu Fu", a humour of word-play, puns and neologisms. And sometimes absurdist, as in "The Impossible Puppet Show", which is the intellectual's Monty Python plus a fair rendition of The Goon Show and the New Wave taken to ludicrous excess.

"A Spot Of Konfrontation" and "Three Ways" both have an emphasis on political satire. In the latter, a starship crew returned to Earth have the choice of living under three regimes: feminist/socialist, capitalist/corporatist, and agricultural/anarchic, all three of which are equally unpleasant. "Ideology... It's a virus. The world is dying of it." The knowledge the expedition has brought back — that consciousness is essential to the universe — is entirely irrelevant.

If there is a common theme to the stories in this collection, it's the question of what the place of life is in the universe; and, more specifically, what is Man's place, and what is Man. "The Soft Predicament" again promotes the materialist/mystic dichotomy, here between West-civ and Third World, and in the narrator's dreams of externalised hatred in the Collective Unconscious project. What's the answer? Here it would appear to be the soft liberal solution — "only connect". Are cold human relationships a product of a social system, or of a divided mind? "Song Of The Silencer" again stresses the importance on the unrational subconscious: when a computer becomes god, its rationality leaves man deaf to the cosmos, incapable of any kind of thought.

Religion in these stories often goes hand-in-hand with technology. "New Arrivals, Old Encounters" is sub-Bradbury: the pollution of telepathic Martian minds by religious images in the minds of visiting Earth people; "Amen And Out" is centred on computers as god (and vice versa), and the ways in which men elude their gods. "Indifference" (set on a world reminiscent of Helioconia) concerns clones who colonise the universe in the name of religion, but face at the end an uncaring cosmos. The archetypal new arrival and old encounter here is God; god in mechanical form, perhaps *deus ex machina*. In "Non-Isotropic" the symbiosis of science and religion produces "Priest-Captains", "prayer-shields", and the idea of consciousness being, along with hydrogen, the basic building-block of the universe. Man is thus "the consciousness of God in a phase of transition". The final discovery in the story is that they have come "Too

late — as usual'... Over most of the universe God was spread in fossil radiation, too old, too thin". And "One Blink Of The Moon" has a vision of Man progressing through the machine age, abandoning it at last to become reconciled with enchantment and the animal kingdom — but a moon-inspired narrator may not be entirely trustworthy.

New Arrivals, Old Encounters raises questions about assumptions; for example, that reason can only take us so far, and that the unrational parts of the mind are essential to Man. As it's been said, reason is a horse that takes us where the heart wishes to go; but loss of rationality is blind ignorance or superstition — or are they also rational, within their own frame of reference? The universe being neither wholly rational nor wholly chaotic, a para-rational theory is needed to account for why reason and emotion are basically the same thing.

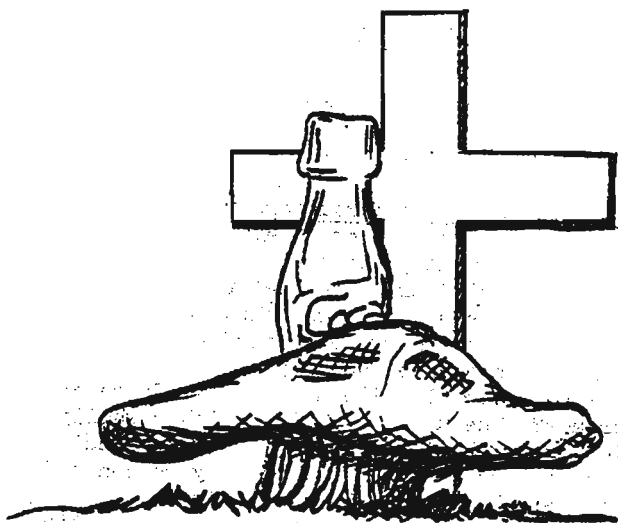
New Arrivals, Old Encounters is not negative, but it's more liable to raise questions than provide answers. "Space For Reflection" is perhaps the paradigm for the reader's experience of the collection. In a materialistic galaxy, a five-year-old boy wins a "Renaissance competition" with his statement that "the universe has a dark corner, the human soul, which is its reflection". Later, as an adult, he travels the universe, is exposed to all the multiplex and contradictory philosophies of Man, and ends very much where he began — believing only that Man is a vital, not a random, manifestation of the universe. Everything else is problematical.

Philip K. Dick — THE TRANSMIGRATION OF TIMOTHY ARCHER (Granada, 252pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Kevin Busby

This, Dick's last novel, is not science fiction, but it does continue the religious theme of his two previous novels, Valis and The Divine Invasion. This time, however, the directly religious element of the plot — the discovery of a manuscript which indicates that Jesus's teachings came from those of a far older sect — is deliberately underplayed, the emphasis being placed instead on the effect of the find on the unorthodox Californian bishop Timothy Archer and, in turn, his effect on the people who knew him. These people will not be complete strangers to those who have read Dick's later novels, as the characters in them have been formed from practically the same elements present in his personal memories. Consequently, we are once again presented with the themes of drug abuse, vindictive suicide, incurable illness, and a weakening grasp on day-to-day "reality". Yet these elements are never mixed in exactly the same way, so that the characters are thoroughly believable without being totally familiar.

Timothy Archer is the least familiar personage, as he is based not upon someone drawn from the author's own personal experience but upon the late Episcopalian Bishop of California, James Pike. If Timothy Archer is a reasonably accurate representation, I can't say that Bishop Pike is someone I'd have liked to know well. Although good-natured and well-intentioned, Archer is at times exasperatingly bombastic, never expressing himself in his own words when he can dig out a quote from Virgil or the Bible. (A pseudo-intellectual game we can all play —



"Exodus twenty thirteen" on page 48 should read "Exodus twenty fourteen".)

Hopelessly other-worldly, Archer is one of the chief devices used by Dick to present one of the central themes of this novel: how compatible is the world of books and philosophy with that of everyday life? Preoccupied with his learned thoughts, Bishop Archer doesn't even notice knocking over a petrol pump; after discussing Goethe, Archer's daughter-in-law Angel finds she is the proud owner of a parking ticket; profits from an eerie seance help fund the IRA. But Dick does suggest that there may be some connections between the two worlds; for instance, it is at the seance that Archer's death is predicted. (Interestingly, Archer's favourite quote from Virgil talks of the Sibyl of Cumae, who predicted the murder of Bishop Pike — at least according to the appendix to *Valis*!)

But it is from Archer's daughter-in-law Angel's perspective that we view the events in *The Transmigration Of Timothy Archer*, her first-person narration encouraging greater involvement on the reader's part. I presume that the informal, occasionally almost rambling, style used is for the most part a deliberate attempt to reflect Angel's character, but there are nevertheless certain passages whose long-windedness seems to suggest a possible lack of direction in Dick's thoughts. Although his characterisation and scene-setting are at their best here, the plot and the central ideas seem rather light-weight compared to those in his best novels. There's certainly nothing seriously wrong with the novel; overall, it's an enjoyable, well-written one. It's simply a little disappointing that Philip K. Dick's last work is not among the most major of his variations.

Ray Bradbury — THE STORIES OF RAY BRADBURY,
VOLS 1 & 2 (Granada, 715pp and
685pp respectively, £2.95 each)

Reviewed by Ray Owen

"Oh dear," said Grandma. "How I do hate philosophical discussions and excursions into aesthetics. Let me put it this way. Men throw huge shadows on the lawn, don't they? Then, all their lives, they try to run to fit the shadow. But these shadows are always longer. Only at noon can a man fit his own shoes, his own best suit, for a few brief minutes. But now we're in a new age where we can think up

a Big Idea and run it around in a machine. That makes the machine more than a machine, doesn't it?"

It is quite rare to find a passage like the above (taken from "I Sing The Body Electric") which constitutes so clear a statement of the author's ideas and style, unwitting as it may be. Yet it could be argued that Bradbury's writing, more than any other's, conceals no tricks of style up its sleeves and reveals all of its workings to even the most cursory inspection. One hundred times, in these two volumes of short stories, we have the opportunity to judge to what extent Bradbury, who undoubtedly casts one of the longest shadows in SF, fits his own shoes. Moreover, can this most golden of the old New Age writers avoid letting his ever-identifiable Bradbury touch taint his ideas be they big or small; in other words, make his own machine more than a machine? These are matters worth examining in connection with this collection, for the books themselves are a fairly competently selected cross-section of Bradbury's work in the short story field, and thus worthy of little comment in themselves.

The only unpublished piece in this collection appears at the beginning of each volume as an introduction, being a chatty little "why I write the way I do" note. As honest and modest as you could wish, it reveals little new information, though it does furnish ample tidbits of views and reminiscences; just the sort of piece you'd expect to have found in *Hell's Cartographers* had Bradbury been included. He explains the origins of the obsessions that were later to work themselves out in such sequences as the dinosaur tales and *The Martian Chronicles* and, along with the mechanics of how he writes stories, there are some neat statements of policy:

"By the time many people are fourteen or fifteen, they have been divested of their loves, their ancient and intuitive tastes, one by one, until when they reach maturity there is no fun left, no zest, no gusto, no flavour. Others have criticised, and they have criticised themselves, into embarrassment. When the circus pulls in at five of a cold dark summer morn, and the calliope sounds, they do not rise and run, they turn in their sleep, and life passes by...I did rise and run. I learned that I was right and everyone else was wrong when I was nine."

For one so preoccupied with youth, early recollections are, I suppose, both inevitable and desirable...but unlike many other such autobiographical snippets, Bradbury genuinely communicates some of his own attitudes and enthusiasms.

But what do we learn of Bradbury's art from this mammoth collection?

Perhaps the most obvious facet of his work is the overriding importance of atmosphere. As difficult as this concept may be to define, again and again stories are given ideal settings, not by exhaustive description of physical surroundings or historical background but by very particular analysis of some almost irrelevant factor — the smell of the flowers, the shape of the clouds — which nonetheless enables the reader to identify with the scene far better than descriptions of unfamiliar locations. This skill in including the reader's own experiences in a scene is one of the basic ingredients of Bradbury's magic, and also explains why so many

of his stories are related to small-town USA, for he is able to use his formidable memory to evoke scenes from his past in sufficient detail to strike a chord with the reader. When we are on less familiar territory, whether it's Mars or Mexico, the important information is always human. For example, the lack of effect on the Martians of the disastrous end to the Second Expedition in "The Earth Men" is not expressed in terms of a Martian lifestyle (which would mean little to us) but with the simple, understandable last lines: "That night it rained all night. The next day was fair and warm".

Indeed, atmosphere is of great importance to most fiction, for that is how we remember most things: by broad, impressionistic strokes, some parts in great detail but others barely at all; and many "classics" are notable mainly for their atmosphere. (Who'd remember Brief Encounter if it wasn't for the atmospheric setting?) In "Fox And Forest", an ordinary, almost uninspired tale of time-travelling fugitives is rendered memorable solely by being set against a Mexican carnival — the plot is simple, the logical necessities of time-travel skirted around, the characters are sketchy; yet with such opening lines as: "There were fireworks the very first night, things that you should be afraid of perhaps, for they might remind you of more horrible things, but these were beautiful, rockets that ascended into the ancient soft air of Mexico and shook the stars apart in blue and white fragments", the story seems bound to hold a certain amount of promise. The rockets have little relevance to the plot, other than the broad hint about horrible things, yet contribute more to the story than the more traditional factors of characterisation, and so forth.

Perhaps it is here that we find the reason why Bradbury is so much a short story writer. Admittedly, as he tends to have some excellent Little Ideas rather than Big ones, the short story is ideal for examining these where they might not fill anything longer; but, more importantly, he can constantly provide us with new settings, news casts, new atmospheres. The loose series system he uses (the Martian, Mexican, Irish and dinosaur stories, for example) further reduces the amount of boring factual business he has to bother us with — the history of Martian colonisation can be gradually built up over the course of several stories rather than dished out in unappetising chunks, with each story remaining an autonomous unit with no necessary links in terms of theme or plot.

As seen above, much of Bradbury's success stems from his ability to inject a personal element into the narratorial stance. Subjectivity plays such an important part in his work that it almost outranks the objective. In "The Wonderful Ice-Cream Suit", the question of whether or not the suit itself is truly magic becomes unimportant; what we are interested in (with Bradbury's guidance) is human effect. It is here that he leaves himself open to accusations of excessive nostalgia by those who have failed to understand his underlying attitude; he seems not to believe that there can be a truly inaccurate subjective memory, for the "distortions" of such create a more useful picture of reality at a personal level (which is all that matters to him) than the more traditional attempts at objectivity. Perhaps the most ambitious sequence in this collection concerns a family of urban

vampires, for here Bradbury attempts to get us to accept a viewpoint fundamentally alien to our own. Whether or not he succeeds is another question. I feel that he doesn't, but there are those who argue that he does — and, as subjectivity is all, perhaps no definitive conclusions are possible.

Nowadays, the term has attracted all the wrong connotations, but Bradbury really can evoke a "sense of wonder", a sense of the mysterious. Perhaps, for him, that is unavoidable, for his very human stories must involve "the difference between a live man and a corpse. There was a spark in one, and not in the other — an aura, a mysterious element". To us, it may take the huge, the unworldly or the shocking to provoke wonder, but to a child true Wonder lurks in the unexplained and the imperfectly understood around him. There can be no more fervent a disciple of the view that the Golden Age of SF is 14 than Bradbury, for he says that he writes in tandem with the child in his head: "His is the skin through which, by osmosis, all the stuffs pass and put themselves on paper. I have trusted his passions, his fears and his joys. He has, as a result, rarely failed me".

Also part of Bradbury's ideas on the bizarre are his feelings on the alien, in which he has very little interest per se and sees rather more as a means to an end; not so much to throw humanity into relief as to put pressure on us and see what we come up with. The Mars stories are not really about Mars, but rather about what this fairly neutral but nonetheless alien environment does to the settlers; when the Martians do put in an appearance they serve, though they are enigmatic, mainly as a foil to the human actions. This is best shown in "The Off Season", where the Martians' actions are there principally to show the absurdity of the ideas and actions of Sam Parkhill, settler and hot-dog seller. (Here it was that the TV production showed its most serious flaw — it was far too interested in Mars itself.)

Just as Bradbury uses the alien and the mysterious as a means to an end, so he does with his SF content as a whole. The SF content of his stories — or the supernatural content, come to that — is vital to the plot, but only to provoke reactions that against a more mundane setting might seem contrived. For example, "Dark They Were And Golden Eyed" deals with the changes that Mars effects upon Earth settlers; and while physical changes derived from atmospheric conditions is an SF idea, the true heart of the story is man's reactions to them. In the same story, there is a passage dealing with man's attempt to realise that, following an atomic war on Earth, he is stranded on Mars:

"As long as the rockets had spun a silver web across space, he had been able to accept Mars. For he had always told himself: tomorrow, if I want, I can buy a ticket and go back to Earth. But now the web was gone, the rockets lying in jigsaw heaps of molten girder and unsnaked wire. Earth people left to the strangeness of Mars, the cinnamon dusts and wine airs, to be baked like gingerbread shapes in Martian summers, put into harvested storage by Martian winters. What would happen to him, the others? This is the moment Mars had waited for. Now it would eat them."

Notice how, in the course of this brief passage, the initial emphasis upon technology and reason

fades until, after describing Mars in purely human terms, the perils of the planet are reduced to the most basic, child-like fear: that Mars will eat you. The means is certainly within the bounds of SF, but the end is well-expressed insight — in other words, good writing. Bradbury is far too much of a writer to consider SF a worthy end in itself.

Out of a hundred stories and nearly forty years, there are bound to be some failures. The Irish tales fall into the direst excesses of "whimsy" with "The Terrible Conflagration Up At The Place", and such "gadget" stories as "The Coffin" and "The City", though clever, lack any warmth and thus fall rather flat through failure to incorporate Bradbury's strengths (and showing his weakness when outside the realm of humanity). The only exception to this is "And There Will Come Soft Rains", where the death of an automated house after a nuclear war is made interesting by its being both a reflection and a remaining imprint of its deceased occupants.

This is not a collection you should try to read from cover to cover; rather, keep it on your shelf and dip into it at will. As Bradbury says:

"When it is a long damp November in my soul, and I think too much and perceive too little, I know it is high time to get back to that boy with the tennis shoes, the high fevers, the multitudinous joys, and the terrible nightmares."

Two forms of the same conclusion should perhaps be given, then: for the adult in the reader, Bradbury is probably the finest sensuous writer in science fiction; and for the child, he spins the finest candy floss in the world. Whether that constitutes praise or condemnation is, I'm afraid, entirely subjective.

Robert Silverberg — NIGHTWINGS (Avon, 190pp, \$2.50)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

There would seem to be little enough to say about Nightwings that has not already been said, many times over. The original novella, published in Galaxy, September 1968, garnered a Hugo award for its author in 1969. Silverberg soon combined it — skillfully — with two subsequent stories, "Perris Way" (Galaxy, November 1968) and "To Jorsalem" (Galaxy, February 1969) for book publication by Avon in September 1969.

So much for the bibliographic details. The novel itself is a pensive jeu d'esprit along roughly the same lines as John Brunner's Catch A Falling Star or Avram Davidson's Rogue Dragon. A moribund, Guild-dominated Earth has suffered military defeat and widespread destruction at the hands of invaders from Out There. The Watcher, whose job it had been to scan space for the advent of alien enemies, understandably finds himself redundant; he therefore embarks on a voyage of discovery — or, rather, rediscovery — in the company of a young female Flier named Avluela. The novel's theme can in fact be summed up in one word: redemption.

And that's it, save for a few words of praise for the simple, straightforward style Silverberg has employed to tell his simple, straightforward story. (Its very first sentence is a sneaky little attention-grabber: "Roum is a city built on seven hills".) It is to his credit that he

did not turn Nightwings into a torpid trilogy of the kind that a lesser writer might have produced if given the same material with which to work.

Frederick Dunstan — HABITATION ONE (Fontana, 256pp, £1.75)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

I want, here and now, to make abject and public apology to every writer I have ever accused of creating cardboard characters. The worst of them is as Tolstoy compared to Frederick Dunstan.

First novels often consist of a string of errors and faults that will embarrass the author throughout his career, but I have never before come across one that is such a textbook catalogue of what a writer should not do. Frederick Dunstan has apparently gone on record as saying that he wanted to do a science fiction novel before moving on to more serious writing. I think he should be reminded that even science fiction has certain minimal standards — and if he cannot reach these then what hope has he in any form of literary endeavour.

Habitation One actually starts quite well. The opening paragraph or so is far and away the best writing in the novel, a spare and precise description of a blighted Earth that looks as if it was put together by someone with more than a modicum of understanding of how to make effective use of the English language. However, this encouraging start is soon frittered away. The description goes on and on...and on. It is the first evidence of one of the novel's major faults: the way that everything else stops to allow Dunstan to deliver himself of great, ponderous chunks of boring and not always relevant description.

Dunstan obviously had what he thought was a great idea for the setting of a story. (It is original, if at all, only in its details, not the overall concept, which is one I'd have thought was played out twenty years ago. Still, we'll let that pass.) The trouble was that he then had to find a story to fit into this setting, and some characters to play out the drama. After his seemingly endless and lovingly detailed description, he finally introduces the first of his characters halfway down page 17. Unfortunately, he treats these characters as if they were no more than another feature of the landscape. He spends a lot of time detailing their outward characteristics — making great play of the ludicrous and totally impossible moustache worn by one of the principal actors — and pays no regard to their internal make-up.

I don't think I have ever come across a set of characters who are put through more ridiculous and unlikely paces. Without warning, without any suggestion that such action might (or might not) be in their personalities, they are required to perform acts of the grossest violence upon the most minimal provocation. For instance, one character, previously presented as a rather amiable old duffer with a penchant for smoking a pipe and playing with a yo-yo, is suddenly required to attempt to rape the daughter of one of his close friends. For his pains, he receives a quite justified knee in the balls; in response to this he plots a booby-trap designed to destroy both of the girl's legs. My God, if

everyone acted like that this society of ours would be a hell of a lot worse than it actually is.

Practically every character Dunstan introduces is required at one time or another to perform acts of the most outrageous and unlikely violence. Not only that, they are made to go mad at the drop of a hat, and are then miraculously cured. At one point, a character is supposed to make love to the body of his dead wife without waking or realising that anything is wrong.

Throughout the novel's 256 pages, I did not believe in a single action by a single character.

But perhaps we should forgive Dunstan for not knowing how human beings behave, for he has clearly never heard anyone speak either. His characters mouth the most preposterous, pedantic, lifeless prose it is possible to imagine, and on those frequent occasions where he fails to identify the speaker, it is impossible to work out from what is said and the way it is said who it is supposed to be. Perhaps even more damning, there are occasions where it is possible to work out who is speaking; only, when you perform this calculation, the speaker appears to have switched, by the end of the dialogue, to views diametrically opposed to those he started by espousing.

The drama that the novel is supposed to be relating develops as a result of the actions of its characters. That is straightforward enough. So if the characters behave by no reasonable criterion, if they are clearly being manipulated by the author rather than behaving as one would expect them to or as internal logic dictates, then all the excitement that the story is supposed to generate is lost. If you don't believe in the people, you don't care about the things that happen to them.

What else does Habitation One offer? Bad style — the writing, after the fleeting promise of the opening paragraph, gets progressively worse. The book is littered with long and unusual words, a fair number of which had me reaching for my dictionary. Yet in the vast majority of cases they are not used with any obvious purpose, or because they are the most precise way of saying what Dunstan wants to say. On the contrary: they often turn up in sentences that are convoluted or simply irrelevant. Often the statement could be rephrased in a simpler and more accurate manner. One is forced to the conclusion that the obscure words are there simply to display the author's vocabulary.

The author himself is something of a menace in the novel. He intrudes into it on many occasions, presenting anachronistic knowledge that detracts from any internal consistency he has managed to introduce to his world. For example, a character invents a device that is obviously a yo-yo, though the character himself, and all others around him, call it a "bouncer"; it is, therefore, wrong for the author to consistently call it a yo-yo whenever it reappears. For another example, when the characters discover a gun — a thing they know nothing about — Dunstan intrudes his own knowledge of the weapon, and this knowledge gradually slips over into the way the characters discuss the gun.

As I have already indicated, Habitation One is not exactly the most original. From the moment you start reading you know exactly what is going to happen. This sort of thing —

blighted Earth, pocket of survivors, degenerate civilisation, rigid hierarchy, etc. — has been done too many times before — usually badly, although not often this badly. One could have wished that if Frederick Dunstan was going to "do" a science fiction novel before moving on to more serious literature, he might at least have had the sense to read a little science fiction and perhaps learn from the mistakes of the past rather than compounding them.

Everything you've ever found wrong with a novel is here. Do read it. It's a classic textbook on how not to write a science fiction novel.

Bob Shaw — THE CERES SOLUTION (Granada, 237pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Bill Gaxlin

Many authors currently writing "hard" SF seem content to imitate the Ancient Egyptian art of pyramid-building: by sacrificing all in their search for some "sense of wonder" they only succeed in burying lifeless characters beneath huge mounds of technology. The excellent Bob Shaw has never fallen into that trap, and in The Ceres Solution he combines his flair for fine characterisation with a fast-moving plot, the whole providing proof that intelligent life can exist in space opera.

Denny Hargate, the novel's protagonist, is a chronic invalid who wheels along the borderline between irascibility and unpleasantness until he becomes involved, through a chain of unlikely coincidences, in the schemes of the superhuman Mollanians, a god-like race of extraterrestrials who have been using Earth as an experimental testing ground for many centuries. Not only are the Mollanians extremely long-lived, their life-spans being measured in centuries, but they all have the ability to "skord", or teleport, between nodes of space separated by vast distances. Naturally enough, this has a certain appeal for a man confined to an invalid chair and whose own life is certain to be cut short by a slowly progressing disease. Hargate becomes committed to helping Lorrest, a Mollanian rebel who wishes to overthrow Vekrynn, the chief scientist of his home world. Along the way, he falls in love with Gretana, a Mollanian agent who finds it difficult to choose between her allegiance to tradition and her sympathy for the pitifully handicapped humans amongst whom she has lived for many years. The rebel plan to allow Earth humans to realise their full potential involves the destruction of the Moon, which has inhibited their ability to "skord" between star systems. A whirlwind chase through the galaxy comes to a dramatic conclusion when Hargate and Lorrest confront the villainous Vekrynn with evidence proving his responsibility for the majority of mankind's age-old problems. As an anti-gravity device planted by Lorrest on the asteroid Ceres sends it hurtling on a collision course towards the Moon, Hargate and Vekrynn meet in a final, unequal battle of wits on the lunar surface...

The novel rattles along at a pace that would do credit to the finest thriller writer, but Shaw's acute eye for characterisation renders it more satisfying than any mere string of tenuously connected "thud and blunder" episodes. Despite the space-operative undertone of a galaxy-wide conspiracy, the characters are never overshadowed by momentous events or technological

gimmickry simply because Shaw obviously cares for them; and this concern is communicated to the reader, adding to the reader's involvement and subsequent enjoyment. Denny Hargate is a protagonist whose attempts to overcome his handicaps win our sympathy, and at his eventual triumph the reader can sit back with a feeling of satisfaction — something rare in "hard" SF, where humanism appears to be distinctly out of fashion.

Quite apart from this humanist quality, the novel stands out from the current crop of space operas because of its conciseness. In only 237 pages, Shaw sketches in a detailed background which depicts the Earth of the early 21st century as a thoroughly unpleasant planet. Vandalism and urban decay have continued to plague the major population centres, food shortages have become so severe that worms are being bred as a source of protein, the threat of global nuclear war still looms large, and even a progressive space programme is doing little to solve down-to-Earth problems. Where virtually any prominent American author would have included a series of quirky political lectures (a trend which is fast becoming mandatory in best-selling SF of the right-wing persuasion) or lengthy discourses on Space Research as the road to salvation, Shaw wisely gets on with the business of telling his story. This avoidance of the lecture-room technique does not mean, however, that he is devoid of ideas; it merely shows that he respects his readership's intelligence. If The Gates Solution has any message, it revolves around the concept of respect for other people, for their individual abilities and beliefs.

Those readers who have come to expect solid, entertaining novels from Bob Shaw will not be disappointed with this one; and those who have never read any of his previous work will be delighted to discover that some paperbacks are still a bargain buy despite inflation.

John Crowley — LITTLE, BIG (Methuen, 538pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Once upon a time, when I was very small, I stood in my bedroom on a green summer holiday morning and looked into the long mirror on the inside of the wardrobe door. It contained a reflected me, paler and more interesting than in real life, standing watching myself looking glassy-cool, translucent and wavy at the edges. Further within the mirror was a second glass, the bedroom window, leaking light. And further in than the window, the long, neglected and unfamiliar garden — we hadn't long moved in — with a hidden orchard fenced by a river, and foot-high oak and thorn seedlings sprouting in the formal lawn. Without any change in the light or the wind, without the slightest movement of my younger self, the mirror-garden suddenly looked different, I couldn't tell how. I was terrified, because I knew I was seeing the Other Country — Fairyland.

Little, Big Or, The Pairies' Parliament (to give the novel its full title) is very much like that mirror, or that garden, or that feeling. It shows something of that Other Country, almost immediately recognisable as our own, but with some indefinite and indefinable difference, which I suspect to analyse is to destroy. It is almost an allegory, in that I'm sure everything

in the novel stands in a one-to-one correspondence with Something Else, but the Something is (very carefully) never named; They are notoriously jealous of Their names. Perhaps the most obvious resemblance of Little, Big is to dreams: not the jumbled Freudian mishapes we have been taught to produce, but the dreams of poetry or painting; beautifully structured, beautifully mannered, and all happening at a bright, courteous distance.

It is a long novel, and it will not be hurried. It refuses to accommodate itself to the brisk pace of normal everyday life, but restructures time around itself, suspending the pressure to get on, to find out what happens, to finish. It needs a long holiday in which to be read, and if it does not get one it will create one in the quiet pick-up, put-down intervals of ordinary time. It is a book that keeps well even when opened, a rare quality these days, but in doing so it is only mirroring the timelessness of that with which it deals. The gentle, leisured prose cadences are strangers to much modern writing, and near kin to the work of William Morris and George MacDonald. But whereas they both looked back towards a pre-industrial Earthly Paradise, Crowley casts forward into the soft-focus reaches of the distinctly post-industrial future, and his Paradise is unnervingly unearthly.

The plot is a maze, whose charm consists in displaying a patterned wandering to the obedient reader. I would not be so churlish as to explain it, but to whet some appetites I can reveal that within Little, Big you will meet the oracular Grandfather Trout, the mysterious Lesser Trumps, the Aporer Frederick Barbarossa, electric power generated by orrery, an urban farm, photographs of fairies, love, despair, madness and fireworks. I have never before met a novel set in America that felt so English, and — as the title probably gives away — there is more in it than can easily be talked about. It could be translated as "microcosm is macrocosm". Crowley's head contains more than the entire outside world, and after reading Little, Big so will yours.

But the novel does leave me with a criticism and a query to tack onto the end of the review proper. The criticism is of the eye-strainingly small size of the print, and a desire on the part of this reader that a different typeface might have been chosen for the paperback. The query is more serious: how far and in what circumstances is an author justified in using secondary sources — referring obliquely to oth-



er works of literature, say — as background material to give added detail and resonance to his own subcreation? For example, Little, Big contains a couple of characters called Sylvie and Bruno. Now I know that Lewis Carroll wrote a book called Sylvie And Bruno, but I've never read it. How much more might I understand about Crowley's Sylvie and Bruno if I had? Anything? Everything? Or was the vague echo of Carroll all that was intended? This is an important question for me: I know how much of what lives in my head has been obtained secondhand from books rather than by direct personal observation of reality. I know how important some things are to me that, as far as I know, only live in books and in people's heads. But too much obscure literary referencing leads to (justifiable) charges of academic elitism, plagiarism and clique-inoest. It makes readers feel ignorant, unhappy, and inferior, and it is often unnecessary, serving only to conceal the barrenness of the author's own imagination. For me, Little, Big is a borderline case; I enjoy the associations of the allusions I do recognise, and there are few enough of the ones I know I don't know not to make me feel too frustrated. I wonder how many I've missed altogether? Does it matter? Should it matter? Please tell me, because I really want to know...

Michel Jeury — LE MONDE DU LIGNUS (Presses Pocket, 213pp, 14FFr)

Reviewed by Pascal Thomas

This is not the first relatively lightweight adventure novel Jeury has produced, but it was one of the first to appear under his own name (instead of the Albert Higon alias) when it was first published in 1978 in Robert Laffont's juvenile SF series "L'Age des Etoiles", edited by Gerard Klein. This edition warrants review because Jeury has revised the story, providing a new ending to tie in with the framing scenes at the start of the novel.

And those scenes are space opera in the purest Van Vogtian tradition: a huge ship is frozen in space by the power of the advanced aliens that the Earthmen have come to meet. Soon afterwards, the youthful protagonist is transported to a relatively primitive planet where slavery is still in force despite (?) a 19th century level of technology and where he will have to prove his worth by coping with these oppressive circumstances.

Once on the planet, the novel's atmosphere shifts away from space opera towards a rough approximation of Jack Vance; explicit homage is in fact paid to him, since the name of one of the planet's races is "vance". The action is uncomplicated and fast-moving, but the novel does not really have a juvenile feel to it; our hero even has a sex-life.

The real value of the novel, however, lies in Jeury's touch for landscapes, alien names, and social relationships; a colourful palette to which he has given free rein in subsequent years in his books for Fleuve Noir and other houses. In many ways, the real hero of the novel is the Lignus, the unique tree which covers the whole planet and provides food and shelter to its inhabitants. It is the real science fictional element in the background of an otherwise escapist entertainment.

Maxim Jakubowski & Malcolm Edwards — THE COMPLETE BOOK OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY LISTS (Granada, 350pp, £2.95)

Reviewed by Brian Cox

Books of lists are usually pretty awful, so I suppose I should have known better — but as it was an SF book of lists and was graced by the names of Maxim Jakubowski and Malcolm Edwards on its cover... After all, it's quite handy to have things like lists of Hugo and Nebula winners readily accessible, and since the catalogue entry on the back cover did say "Reference/Science Fiction" it would doubtless be easy to check out the contents page or index to find just what I needed in the book's 350 pages.

Well, there are some interesting items in this book but, alas, no contents page or index to help one find them. Unfortunately, The Complete Book Of Science Fiction And Fantasy Lists betrays every evidence of being thrown together in the most hasty manner until the appropriate number of pages had been filled, and then dashed off to the printer. I'll not quibble with "Great Aliens of Science Fiction" as a starter, and Brian Aldiss's "15 Useful Pieces of Alien Vocabulary" on pages 10 and 11 was for me the high point of the book, promising much for the remainder. But by page 15 we're into lists of Tarzan books, and by page 29 we have the famous Heinlein story "By His Footsteps" (sic) as a brain-twisting time paradox story. (It isn't the only misquoted title, either — page 66 gives us John Varley's The Ophiuchi Canal.) and quite what Brian Aldiss's ten favourite cities (pages 31/32) have to do with science fiction I don't know.

We then have about 100 pages of Hugo and Nebula award winners (and nominees, which I found interesting, especially for the earlier Hugo years), interlarded with page upon page of contents listings from "Best Of" anthologies. By this time I was thoroughly fed up with the book, and if I could find the page again I'm sure I could confirm that the list of "Ten Famous First Lines" does not include "On and on Coeurl prowled" from A. E. Van Vogt's "Dark Destroyer"; surely it should have been there? (Then again, I think I might have seen it somewhere in the book, but of course there's no ready way of checking.)

As I said, some parts of the book are more interesting than this, but I should have looked more closely first. Don't encourage a sequel; put your £2.95 towards the next edition of Peter Nicholls's Encyclopedia instead.

Peter Straub — FLOATING DRAGON (Fontana, 623pp, £2.50)

Reviewed by Alan Dorey

Frank Richards, the author of those dreadful Billy Bunter stories between the wars, wrote more than a million words before he died. Since he was paid by the word, it was essential to use as many of them as possible, resulting in such tortured sequences as: "Bunter was astounded. He was absolutely astounded. He had never been so astounded in all his life". Straub doesn't quite plumb these depths, but Floating Dragon is too wordy by far. For much of its course he overextends himself, robbing his narrative of

its impact: he is clinical rather than passionate, antiseptic rather than grimly realistic and, worst of all, reduces potential moments of terror to mere matter-of-factness.

Like many second-rate horror writers, Straub sets the action in some unexciting, workaday New England suburb. Just as vampires come from Transylvania, chow mein comes from China, and as night follows day, Supernatural Happenings come from the North East Districts of the USA. Though Straub hails from Connecticut, I detect more than a hint of Salem in the novel's "historical" background, and instantly discard its remaining pretensions to originality. As a result, we have only the framework of a novel -- a mass of twisted chicken wire with no sculpted surface, a shell without a yolk. Just words -- page upon page of them.

The story itself is simplistic. The descendants of the four original founding fathers of the suburb of Hampstead and Newhaven find that, for the first time in two centuries, they are living in the same area. Every thirty years, dating from the days of the first settlement, unexplained disasters occur in the area -- but now, with some mystical bond linking the four individuals, the potential threat is greater than ever. And so off we go on a helter-skelter of pedestrian murders, pools of blood, hordes of "Leakers" (victims of an industrial gas accident -- the gas breaks the skin down to a sticky white liquid, requiring them to swathe themselves from head to foot in mummy-like bandages, through which the liquid skin "leaks"), and reams of unnecessary padding. After only a few pages of this, we learn that there was a fifth family which the other four wiped out; but it takes more than 500 pages for the "revenge" of this fifth family to take its course. The denouement, when it comes, is anticlimactic, but plunk plink fizz, oh what a relief it is.

Somewhere in Floating Dragon is a good story trying to escape but which Straub does his best to smother. He can be quite poetic at times, but he must learn verbal discipline. Once he's mastered that, he'll save himself a couple of carbon ribbons -- and us, chronic myopia.

Pauline Gedge -- STARGATE (Penguin, 341pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Nigel Richardson

"Green and blue birds followed him, singing wantonly around his head, swooping recklessly to brush his shoulders. Once in a while he sang with them absently, his eyes on his feet."

Ignore that bizarre piece of xenobiology at the end of the last sentence, and tell me if you like adverbs. If so, then you'll just love Stargate. None of Pauline Gedge's characters can do anything without doing it eagerly, grimly, ruefully, suddenly, warily, or determinedly, which builds the prose up into repetitive, otiose, poe-faced monoliths of page-long paragraphs of convoluted but ultimately ineffectual descriptions. The further I got into the book, the more I felt that I was boldly going where no one but the author had been before. I must admit that I was unable to make it to the last page of Stargate; I'm not normally a quitter, but this novel had me beaten hands down.

As you'll have gathered, Stargate is not my particular cup of Earl Gray, and it would be en-

ough for me to end my review of it at the end of the last paragraph were it not for the fact that this book is published by Penguin. Once upon a time, Penguin published some of the best SF in print, yet it seems that they have now cleared their list of Ballard, Bester, Dick and Vonnegut to make way for such dull, plodding nonsense as this and Jack Chalker's "Well World" saga. What is happening at Penguin? Do they know something I don't? Could it be that people really do enjoy ploughing through over three hundred pages of such arduous and humourless stodge as (here's a representative sample) this?

"Heart pounding, Ixelson walked unsteadily into the room, where his chair invited him to slump onto it. Very well, he thought. Very well. I think I knew that it would come to this, from the time Falia thrust the haeli wood box into my innocent hands. Mine. Not Ghakazian's, or Sholia's. It came to me. Jealousy needled him, a stab of sudden hate in his mind. I will open it and I will learn, and then I will fight."

Or is it that someone at Penguin has decided that this is the best we genre fans deserve? I think we should be told...

Bob Shaw -- A BETTER MANTRAP (Granada, 236pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Bob Shaw is an ideas man. This means that every Bob Shaw story contains at least one whole idea. Several of the nine short stories in this collection have more than one idea in them -- and that is not meant to damn with faint praise in a world where those who aspire to tell entertaining tales of the rattling good yarn kind often spin out many thousands of words without (apparently) one elementary particle of inspiration leaving its vapour trail across the cloud chamber between their ears.

The stories in A Better Mantrap are beautiful examples of the distinction between "literary" and "literate" writing. At its best, Shaw's narrative style is a plain, clear prose that doesn't get in the way of the story; at its worst, it's still a plain, clear style. He doesn't use two words where one word (the right one) will do. Thus although the stories in this collection are uneven in quality, none of them are bad. It's just that the really good stories, the ones where everything is properly tuned and running sweetly, rather show up those others that work well enough but produce varying amounts of distracting engine noise because not all the cylinders are firing.

In my opinion, the best stories here are the bittersweet ones, where the feelings of the people involved are developed to equal the force of the idea behind the story: "Frost Animals" and the loneliness of the long-distance spaceman, "Dream Fighter" and the familiarity of the Universal Soldier in his avatar of Roman legionary, "Amphitheatre" and the callous beauty of any good wildlife documentary's photography. Then there are the jokes, and the stories that are merely good, like the horses who also ran.

Only four of these nine stories have their first publication in this collection. Only one of those is a really good story. Nevertheless, this is a good bread-and-butter book and cheap at the price; I commend it to your attention.

ALSO RECEIVED

Piers Anthony — A SPELL FOR CHAMELEON (Orbit, 344pp, £2.50), THE SOURCE OF MAGIC (Orbit, 326pp, £2.50): first British editions of the first two books in the "Xanth" series, which when I read them some years ago struck me as the product of some sort of mental juvenile. The level of imagination these books display is so low as to be insulting; their jokes are puerile beyond belief; their prose style would be bettered by a primary school-child's essay on what they did on their holidays ... This stuff stinks, and no purpose is served by pretending otherwise.

Piers Anthony — HEO OF A SPACE TYRANT, VOL 1: REFUGEE (Avon, 312pp, \$1.95): first volume of a projected five-book series concerning the life and times of (God help us) Hope Hubris (the same sort of "joke" name, incidentally, that's littered throughout the "Xanth" series). This is space opera written as though the author really means it, as though he thinks he's grappling with the age-old philosophical questions of human existence, as though we're supposed to learn something from it. I laughed, I cried, I threw the book aside and read something else.

Jack Chalker — THE RETURN OF NATHAN BRAZIL (Penguin, 289pp, £1.95): the

fourth volume in the "Well World" series, and — well, I glanced at the last page and there was this character saying to himself that "it was a crook of shit all along". No comment, absolutely no comment!

David Eddings — PAWN OF PROPHECY (Corgi, 259pp, £1.75): first volume of a fantasy trilogy — "fantasy" meaning in this case the imitative genre nonsense published by (say) Del Rey rather than anything remotely original.

Philip Jose Farmer — KEEPERS OF THE SECRETS (Sphere, 152pp, £1.50): companion volume to Lord Of The Trees (dismissed in the "Also Received" column in issue 45), this time starring someone called Doc Caliban.

Philip Jose Farmer — DARK IS THE SUN (Granada, 400pp, £1.95): second printing (although not recorded as such) of a novel denounced at some length in issue 39. I quote from my own review: "pale, lifeless, ill-conceived and downright unimaginative...nor is the plot of any real consequence, consisting as it does of a series of incidents arranged in roughly chronological order and connected only by the presence of the protagonists...sheer leaden awfulness of the writing..." I see no reason to change my mind.

LET A HUNDRED FLOWERS BLOOM — the letter column

Most of the letters this time were written not in response to the previous issue but the one before. Let's hear first from GEORGE R. R. MARTIN:

"Strange as it may seem, I enjoyed reading Brian Smith's comment on Sandkings. I'm sorry that he did not like the collection better than he did, and didn't feel he could recommend it; for all that, however, the review was as intelligent and perceptive as most any I've received, which made all the good things he had to say about my work worth a great deal more to me. I'll take intelligent criticism over empty-headed praise any day (although I'm human enough to prefer empty-headed praise to empty-headed venom).

"Smith's examination of the 'fossil record' of my writing and the ways my work has changed over the years is an interesting and perfectly valid exercise, and he makes some good points. But his conclusions do go wrong in a few spots. It's not his insight that's at fault here, rather a lack of familiarity with the realities of publishing.

"Discussing the comparative cynicism of 'Fast-Friend' and 'Starlady', for example, Smith concludes correctly that they were written during a very traumatic period in my life, basing this assumption on the introduction to my 1977 collection, Songs Of Stars And Shadows. But then he goes on to say that '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 truth is rather less dramatic, and a good deal simpler. When you sell a story to a

magazine, it is available for reuse the moment the magazine goes off sale. Most magazines ask for only first publication rights; since they last on the stands barely a month, they don't care what happens to any story after they've run it. Anthologies are a different proposition. Virtually all of the famous original anthologies of the 60s and 70s — Universe, Orbit, New Dimensions, Whathaveyou — included in their contracts some kind of exclusivity clause. A common wording demanded exclusive use of the story for a period of up to three years after hardcover publication or one year after paperback publication, whichever came first. Until that period had run, the writer could not have the story in question anthologised elsewhere, not even in one of his own collections, without the written permission of the anthology editor.

"Another point to keep in mind is that anthologies are assembled and published in a good deal more leisurely fashion than are the monthly magazines. That was certainly true for the two stories mentioned. 'Fast-Friend' and 'Starlady' were both written in 1973. 'Fast-Friend' was sold in 1973, 'Starlady' in 1974, but neither was published until 1976, in (respectively) the original anthologies Faster Than Light and Science Fiction Discoveries. When I was putting together Songs Of Stars And Shadows in late 1976 I omitted these two stories not because I was 'suppressing their collection' but because both of them were still tied up by exclusivity clauses, and therefore not available for reuse. I liked both stories, still like them, and used them as soon as they were free in my very next collection, Sandkings.

"Smith's speculations on the 'two years of

the doldrums' that I supposedly went through in 1975-76 are also off-base, because he fails to take into account (1) novels, and (2) uncollected stories. He says that no story from 1976 has ever been collected, and that from 1975 there is only 'In The House Of The Worm', and that's true as far as it goes, but it doesn't go very far. I wrote two stories in 1975. One was 'In The House Of The Worm', the other a short piece called 'A Beast For Norm' that eventually appeared in Peter Weston's anthology Andromeda. The latter story has never been collected because I subsequently wrote several additional stories about its protagonist, Haviland Tuf, and I'm saving them all until I have enough for a Haviland Tuf collection. The second half of 1975 and all of 1976 saw no new stories from me, but only because I spent all that time writing my first novel, Dying Of The Light. Far from being a period of the 'doldrums', it was the most productive period of my writing career up to that time.

"Relatively, of course, these points are quibbles, grounded at least partly in information that Smith had no access to. Overall, he did a solid and interesting job of discussing the stories themselves. I do think that Sandkings is the strongest of my three paperback collections, as Smith does not, but I respect his views on the matter. We agree about the cover."

BRIAN SMITH replies:

"Guilty on several counts, I must admit. Even without the drawing of erroneous conclusions from insufficient data, what I don't know about marketplace practices would indeed fill a fairly thick volume; my last Loans subscription expired years ago. I'm prepared to forgive myself for overlooking uncollected stories, as I don't follow the magazines (or as many of the anthologies as I should), but the corresponding point about novels is so blindingly obvious (once pointed out) as to be irritating beyond belief, particularly so as I bought Dying Of The Light in paperback...

"What concerns me more is that, under deadline pressure and being temporarily unable to see the wood for the analytically dissected trees, I should have delivered so negative a verdict. Considering that I thought two of the stories excellent, two very good, two at least adequate and only one sub-standard, my conclusion seems to have been largely a spleen-laden over-reaction to Orbit's truly diabolical packaging (especially the price, which I thought about 30 percent above average). It's by no means a poor collection (although personally I still prefer Songs Of Stars And Shadows), and my 'caveat emptor' remarks were really grossly unfair to Sandkings as an abstract entity rather than marketed artefact, so much so that I'd like to take this opportunity to retract them."

On another subject altogether, IAN MCKEER suggests (subsequent to my plaint in issue 45) that perhaps one reason why Sue Thomason's article on fantasy drew no response was because it was "complete and self-contained". He continues:

"I'd question Gregory Benford's assertion about personal immersion in the field colouring one's perceptions of the way the SF genre has evolved and whether the quality has improved or not on different grounds to you. Surely most people considering this question would have developed

critical criteria that would allow them to account for their prejudices, to some degree, thereby ameliorating this problem to some extent. For example, when I first began to read SF in large volume I very much enjoyed some of Heinlein's and John Wyndham's books (to give two instances). However, having now read not only a lot more SF but a good deal of SF criticism as well, I can see the limitations of these author's works quite clearly. That doesn't mean that I don't enjoy re-reading some of their stuff, but it does mean that I don't rate them in the same way I would have ten years ago. Is this unusual?

"In your reply to his first letter, you remark on the increasing disparity between what's regarded as quality work and what isn't. I think it's especially worrying if there's a great deal more rubbish around than there used to be. Back in 1978-79, there was that big publishing boom when anything and everything seemed to be recycled into print to catch the trend, and the volume of rubbish on the shelves increased dramatically. Since then, the recession has bitten, and you'd have hoped that more rubbish than quality work would have disappeared from the publishers' lists; instead, the opposite appears to be the case. I'd hazard a guess that it will be a very long time before the cycle swings back towards quality, the reading public having become acclimatised to poorer, less demanding work."

Which swing may or may not depend on the progress of this semi-mythical "economic recovery" that Certain Politicians have been trying to convince us for some time now is really under way (honest, guv). As I remarked in my editorial in the previous issue, rubbish, particularly escapist rubbish, probably sells better than the quality material because it is less demanding — in respect of which, NICK SHEARS has this to say:

"I enjoyed (and agreed with) your editorial in issue 46, although as a review I don't think it matches up to the editorial in issue 44. That, I thought, was exactly the sort of review PI should be doing. Fair enough, the overview of what's being published via numerous shorter reviews is very useful, and I've bought and enjoyed books as a result that I might not otherwise have sought out. But your sensible trashing in a politically sound context of Long Voyage Back and The Fall Of The Russian Empire was the sort of thing I'd like to read a damn sight more often than seems possible at present."

I wish I could run such pieces more often, too, but they do rather depend on having the material available — the only book I've come across since that looks as though it's suitable for coverage in these pages is Kenneth Goddard's Balefire (Corgi, 337pp 1ge format, £3.95), a near-future thriller first published in 1982 and set around...the Los Angeles Olympic Games of 1984. So if I don't review it soon there won't be any point... Politics aside, however, I do have ideas in mind for future editorials (on anthropomorphic "talking animals" books; on hard SF and dehumanisation), but I make no promises as to when they will appear. The next issue's editorial is supposed to be by Judith Hanna, pressure of her new job permitting; but I'd hope I'd thus get time to develop these ideas further than I have so far.

WAHF: Andy Sawyer.