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## AN OPAL-HEARTED COUNTRY

guest editorial by Judith Hanna

Here before me I have two books by Samuel R. Delany: Tales Of Neveryon (Bantam, 265pp, \$3.50) and Neveryona (Bantam, 387pp, \$6.95). I enjoyed them, yes; but understand Delany, no! Do you understand what he means them to be about? Because damned if I did. Lots of action and colour, as ever, except when characters stop for several pages at a time to yarn philosophically or didactically or both about stuff that seems fairly irrelevant to what's been going on by way of plot.

Tales Of Neveryon comes first, and includes five tales. 1: Gorgik the slave, picked up from an obsidian mine to be the bored and clever Vizerine's plaything at the Child Empress's court in Kolhari, where he hears of Mad Queen Glin, takes his chance to train as a soldier, and becomes "for the civilisation in which he lived, he was a civilised man". 2: Old Venn, the wisest woman, who invented navigation by the stars and writing signs, teaches the children of the Ulvayn Islands (among them Norema who invents writing words) by telling them, for instance, how a fight with a sea monster turns into a story of a fight with a sea monster (metafiction raises its enigmatic head), and by tell-

ing them how the coming of money changed the even more barbarian culture of Rulvyn; until Old Venn dies, and a red ship manned by women puts into harbour with a cargo of rubber balls. 3: Small Sarg, barbarian prince from the southern desert, is taken as a slave and bought by Gorgik the ex-slave. 4: "Of Potters And Dragons", according to its title, but about a voyage south to buy children's rubber balls from Lord Aldamir — at least, that is the goal for Norema (now secretary to rich Madame Keyne of Kolhari), and for naive Bayne the potter's boy; but for Raven, the woman of the Western Crevasse, the goal is to assassinate Lord Aldamir. They find treachery, and the chapter ends with the invention of four-legged cooking pots, which are more stable than three-legged. 5: Finally, "Of Dragons And Dreamers" begins with a pet dragon and a freeing of slaves, continues with Gorgik and Sarg meeting Norema and Raven, and finishes by putting together the pieces that make up the story of the small rubber balls, and by the caged dragon flying free. The book also includes a quasi-scholarly appendix, "Some Informal Remarks Toward The Modular Calculus, Part 3".

Neveryona, Or The Tale Of Signs And Cities,

subtitled "Some Informal Remarks Toward The Modular Calculus, Part 4", has one story running all the way through, by which characteristic we recognise it as a novel. Fifteen-year-old Pryn, having flown on a dragon away from her aunt who invented spinning and weaving, meets Norema, who tells her the mathematical puzzle tale of Queen Olin, which explains why she went mad. Pryn travels to Kolhari, the city once called Neveryona, where she meets Gorgik the Liberator and rich Madame Keyne, travels south from Kolhari, discovering on the way that she is not pregnant, until with the aid of the "approximating machine" invented by Old Venn she finds Olin's city of Neveryona. Like the first, this volume concludes with a quasi-scholarly appendix on the decipherment of the 900-word "Culhar" or "Kolharē" fragment with its myriad possible translations and discursive loopings in which references to the tales we've just read may be recognised.

Summarising the plots thus does not summarise what the stories are about; as in all Delany's work, how the stories are told is as important as anything that happens within his sub-created worlds.

Another way of finding out what Delany is getting at is to look at what he has said, in interviews and essays, about what he was trying to get across in these books. Interviewed in 1982 by Pat Califia (an interview reprinted in the second issue of Donald G. Keller's Inscape, which contains much other material on Delany, including his essay "Literary Fascism" for the SFWA Forum), Delany tells us how doing an introduction to a library edition of Joanna Russ's Alyx collection forced him to "do some real thinking about the nature of sword-and-sorcery. One of the things I came up with was the notion that sword-and-sorcery tends to take place in a world that seems to be changing from a barter to a money economy", and "it occurred to me that the sword-and-sorcery landscape allowed you to make some observations on both slavery and madness directly that the more traditional literary forms...are not really able to analyse". Earlier in that interview, he said "in a funny way, the only thing that mundane fiction can really talk about is either madness or slavery. Its subjects are limited to those people who adjust to the world and are therefore slaves to it, or those people who are defeated by the world and are therefore mad because they shouldn't have tried in the first place". Turning to The Jewel-Hinged Jaw, a collection of Delany's literary essays, I find one entitled "Alyx" (possibly the introduction mentioned above — no bibliographical history is given), in which Delany expands on his remarks about the barter-money transition and mentions an "abstract calculus" being developed by one G. Spencer Brown in Laws Of Form, which Delany illustrates with two examples: first, an object reflected by two mirrors, reversed in the first image, the second showing not the first image unreversed but the back of the original object. (Anyone who'd had to plait their own long hair will be familiar with the strategy.) The second example he gives is of value as it is reflected by money: "the value of a content is reversed by its image; but to go on to an image of an image gives us a new content to deal with... If I put the t-shirt on and look into a mirror, i.e. at the image, I see the word (printed on the t-shirt) reversed left/right, i.e. with its values reversed. If I take two

mirrors, however, and turn myself so I can see the image in the first mirror reflected in the second, i.e. an image of an image, what I shall be seeing is what it on the back of the t-shirt, i.e. a new content". The mirror trick is simple enough; its extension to ideas like money more complicated. Indeed, whether what you see when a mirror reflection behaves according to the laws of light can be applied to the way ideas behave when humans reflect on them is dubious.

There are some obvious enough correspondences between what Delany has said these books are about and my skeletal plot summaries; equally, even the briefest exploration of how these themes are woven into the plot will suggest how much more has gone to make up the story than comes out in any analysis of that story. Or at least, any story rich enough to rank as literature will contain more implications and interpretations than any one critic is likely to capture; for a mediocre story the analysis may, by playing on the reader's range of expectations and assumptions, impute more implications than the author's text justifies — in this case the analysis is not so much literary as of the sociology of reading.

In reading Tales Of Neveryon and Neveryona, I found the economic theme of barter and money which Delany emphasises in talking about these books far less striking than, for instance, the varied roles given to women, a deliberate anti-sexist strategy evident in all Delany's works. In The Jewel-Hinged Jaw, he said that "there are no sexist decisions to be made: they were all made a long time ago". He does, deliberately, refuse to give in to the conventional expectation that certain roles and behaviours belong to a given sex, others to the other. Because this is a consistent policy, he does not count it as a purpose of these particular books.

The second immediately striking theme is that of slavery, which he seems to me to link up more with sexuality than with madness. However, alerted by Delany's words, quoted above, that madness is, to his mind, part of the slavery idea-complex, we can see that connection made in the tale of Queen Olin who goes mad after killing her loved and trusted slaves in order to survive; by doing so she also wins a fortune... The aristos are, or go, mad; the common people are, or may become, slaves (so even may the aristos). The unequal distribution of power partakes of the same polarity as the S-M polarity in sex — which latter is in these books symbolised by the iron slave-collar. (The parallel with the gold wedding ring is too facile to be entertained.) There are hints that the "madness" of the aristos may lie in the fact that they operate above and outside the laws which they enforce upon the slaves and commoners they rule. The sexual implications of the slave-collar are explored in the tale of Gorgik and Small Sarg; Gorgik goes on to liberate others from the slave-collar he chooses to wear himself — but do the rulers want to be liberated from their madness? Of course not; nor, if it comes to that, do all the slaves desire freedom when offered the choice. One of Delany's strengths is that, in his works, neither the answers nor the questions are ever so simple and clear-cut.

Working out how the transition from barter to money fits into the structure of the story involves following through how the barter/money theme fits in with a couple of other complicated themes: the invention of writing, for one, and

for two, this "modular calculus" double reflection business. Whereas the slavery/sexuality complex was a surface decoration which showed up prominently and could be relatively easily detached from the body of the work for a cursory examination, barter/money is too deeply embedded to be easily isolated for analysis. Because it is so woven into what might loosely be termed the "deep structure" of Neveryon, had not Delany's own remarks called it to our attention it might easily have been overlooked in the search for the structural keys to unlock these tales.

A more prominent theme is the invention of writing. Money and writing, those two kingpins of civilisation, are both systems of symbols which distance us from the more immediate reality of, in the one case, practical exchange value, and in the other, transient speech. There is a deliberate irony in Delany writing a story about the invention of writing, a story in which one character, Old Venn, tells a tale about how tale-telling reduces a real experienced event to the pattern of a tale designed by its teller to direct the responses of its audience. There are two ways to read Delany: either skimming along the surface taking in the action and colour and not worrying too much about what he's trying to say, just hurrying along to find out how it ends (this suffices for a first reading); or trying to decipher him like a whodunit, trying to read the gaps and omissions, to bridge anaphoric and cataphoric references, trying to work out (as it were) the nature of the crime, whose is the body, where it's hidden, and the motive for the crime — certainly no obligingly smartass 'tec is going to step forth to unveil the murderer and knit together all the clues and red herrings at the end. Delany writes puzzle tales, yes, but they don't reduce to just one neat solution. Nor does this review attempt to "solve" these two books.

Try another approach to the money puzzle, this time via modular calculus. Old Venn, as well as inventing an ideographic writing system, invented the "approximating machine" by which Pryn recreates the sunken city of Neveryona: the song of Mad Queen Olin sung by the children of Kolhari as they bounce their rubber balls against cistern walls is one part of that machine; the story of Queen Olin's treasure with its forgotten names which are important "though I can't remember why" is another, as is the astrolobe etched with unknown stars and an unknown shore which Myrgot the Vizerine gave to Gorgik who gives it to Pryn. As Old Venn's "approximating machine" comes together to give Pryn the moment of insight that raises Neveryona, is the story which runs through these two volumes an "approximating machine" which may, for the right

reader, all come together in a flash of insight to yield up treasures of meaning? That's the kind of pretension many find off-putting about Delany (but note that this is only my reading, not any claim he makes); the question is, does Delany have the treasure to deliver? Here, the word "treasure" stands as a symbol for something, I know not what. Is Old Venn's approximating machine an exercise in "modular calculus"; is Delany's story, in which Old Venn's is embedded, the same thing writ larger? I suspect so, but the only payoff for focussing Delany's elaborate machine of a fiction is the intellectual satisfaction of the moment of insight.

Writing about writing, fiction about metafiction, an approximating machine exercise in "modular calculus" — but where does the transition from barter of real goods to money trading come into the above explication? I can talk about how we see Neveryona in the process of inventing itself; there's Old Venn the philosopher finding brilliant systems of ideas for it; Belham the engineer building looms and marvellous fountains; Pryn's aunt inventing spinning and weaving; Norema inventing writing words — before our eyes Neveryona takes its first steps towards the civilisation we know lies at the beginning of our history, and the spread of money (and all that it implies) is part of that civilisation and history. At the same time, we know that Neveryona is not creating itself but is being invented by modern black American Delany as a reworking of sword-and-sorcery tales he has read, history he has learned, and a bricolage of the avant-garde French structuralist ideas he quotes as headnotes to his chapters. In reading Delany's fiction, however, we look not at Delany in the act of writing but at Neveryona as filtered through our expectations of what a fictional world should be: here, then, is another of the double reflections that exemplify the "modular calculus". The obverse is Neveryona as if real, the reverse is Neveryona as fiction; the mirrors are armouries of expectations through which we see both fictional and real worlds. The modular calculus, then, is not just a conceit idly tagged on, but can be found working at more than one level within the text.

But why is it that each time I set out to look for the significance of money in the text, I find myself looking at writing? Is this my obsession, or does it reflect Delany's? Consider the similarities between writing and money — both are symbols standing for real objects. Or, rather, as Delany points out of money, "If we take barter as the initial content of the exchange system, and the resultant power structure as its value, then the introduction of money into the system introduces into society at large an image of the content. The subsequent reversal of values as the money system becomes the absolute mode of exchange results...from the fact that money exists as a complement to material, skill and labour" (The Jewel-Hinged Jaw, p.198). That's one reversal; the double reversal comes with the introduction of credit — which creates a "new content" because "in credit one's assets — one's material and labour — as well as one's money, determine the size of one's active credit" (ibid). This second reversal does not occur within Neveryona; rather, according to Delany, "it is in this new space" of the money-credit transformation of society that "most of the technological advances which are the prime concern of science fiction occur" (ibid). In the



sword-and-sorcery landscape, it would appear, the barter-money transition is given as a simple stable setting for the interplay of other notions; it becomes problematical only when one compares those texts labelled science fiction with those labelled sword-and-sorcery. Of course, one of the problems posed by the barter-money transition is that it may make slavery obsolete: no doubt the working of this connection could be pursued within these two books.

Having (perhaps) reduced money to a non-issue, I'll go back to looking at writing: the relation of writing to the real objects it stands for is far more complicated than the double reflection given for money above. The chain runs real object: spoken word: ideographic sign — three terms which give us one double reflection. We can, following Delany's story, add a fourth term so the chain extends to include Norema's "writing words", and runs real object: spoken word: ideographic sign: written word — which gives us two double reflections. There's a feeling of incongruity about this four term chain coming after so many three term double reflections. It's interesting, therefore, that in the appendix to Tales Of Nevryona, "Some Informal Remarks Toward The Modular Calculus, Part 3", we find on page 260 the suggestion that ideographic writing was "suppressed", dropped as unnecessary; but its ghost remains in the chain of reflections, for the written word reflects the spoken word not the real object to which it refers — but the sign, though no longer in use, still reflects, in its form, that of the object it once meant. This "ghost" language of ideographs looms large in this appendix, in which Delany also talks of an insight by Denise Schmandt-Besserat (if I hadn't read a paper of hers in Scientific American I too would suspect her of being a Delany creation) that cuneiform signs on clay tablets originated as two-dimensional impressions of the shaped tokens originally sealed inside clay envelopes or "bullae" as a count of quantities and objects for which the bullae stood as a last-cum-contract; thus writing originated as a form of accounting, a financial transaction which, like money, was an elaboration of barter. With these elaborations available, barter becomes obsolete.

But these ideographs and tokens were dropped from the writing and financial system, in their turn made obsolete. For the exchange system, too, we can posit a transitional, unstable four

term chain of real object: exchange value: token: money. "Exchange value" appears because it is the term needed to make a symmetrical double reflection: the tokens are reflections of the real object, but what the money reflects is a general exchange value.

The discovery of these "ghost" terms, dropped from what must once have been transitional four term chains of images, is like the "memory of water" as Old Venn demonstrated it to Belham — they are revealed by the irregularities they leave in the three term double reflections that structure Delany's narrative. As a result of having looked at money as though it were like language (and found a genetic relationship), we now find that we've constructed a three term chain for the barter-money transition in place of the uncomplicated object-object barter system. However, the nature of the double reflection now invented, with money the image not of the real object but of its "exchange value" betrays (by the logic of modular calculus) that there must have been a transitional phase when tokens, as images of real objects, were in use; and on page 290 of Nevryona we find that shaped ivory tokens are indeed mentioned. Notice that it always seems that what had previously been the final term in the chain (the solution to the problem posed by the first two terms?) drops out. Following clues planted in Delany's text, here I end up with a deduction that integrates "money" into the modular calculus pattern of these stories, but still it seems to me that the richest theme contained within them is that of meta-writing and meta-fiction: writing about writing and fiction about fiction.

I started writing this review with a fairly superficial reading of Delany's texts behind me and a couple of reference books beside me, and this analysis has been shaped here on paper as it took shape in my mind. I've been writing down an exercise in reading Delany — that is, in thinking about what Delany is trying to do with the structures of written words that make up these two books. At the end of this exercise, I find myself with an understanding (although certainly not the only possible reading) of what he was writing about. To use a metaphor provided by his fiction, I've been able to focus the "approximating machine" of his narrative so that what initially seemed a loose agglomeration of unrelated parts has been crystallised into a coherent whole.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Italo Calvino — TIME AND THE HUNTER (Abacus, 152pp, £2.50)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

Calvino is not apt to repeat himself from book to book; Time And The Hunter is, nevertheless, a sort of sequel to Cosmicomics (reviewed by Nik Morton in issue 44). It's a collection of short narratives — some I hesitate to call stories — linked by a theme of time passing, and death the hunter; and it is, in places, fairly heavy going.

The book is divided into three sections. "More Of Qfwfq" (pronounce that how you will) is comic pseudo-history — or perhaps fable is a better term. An urban, crystalline Earth is polluted by organic life; an ironic change of sympathies for the ecologically-minded reader.

The narrator speaks of "our good things of plastic, of nylon, of chrome-plated steel, duco, synthetic resins, plexiglass, aluminium, vinyl, formica, zinc, asphalt, asbestos, cement, the old things among which we were born and bred", in opposition to "viscous glistening", "pores", "buboes or suckers", and "diseased viscera". There are surreal images — the primordial sea, for example, is equated with the "inner sea" blood of the human circulatory system. "The Origin Of Birds" utilises a cartoon technique, questioning both the nature of narrative and the nature of reality; and raising questions about "monsters" and our relationship to them. In a moment of illumination, the narrator exclaims: "The world is single and what exists can't be explained without..." — what? Without what doesn't exist: mythical monsters, and fables

that turn history inside out. It's no accident that this is the world and evolution seen through an Alice's mirror, where organic becomes synthetic, monster becomes human, story becomes dream.

Style is a focus of attention here. The section entitled "Priscilla" features long sentences — paragraph-long, some of them. And like the stories in "More Of Qfwfq", everything from cellular multiplication to the breakup of the planet is seen in terms of a man-women relationship: the narrator and his (sometimes unattainable, generally unsympathetic) lover. The final section, "T Zero", reduces assassination attempts to their final form of pure mathematical trajectory. Almost no emotions remain. And that too is fitting, in this photo-negative world that Calvino creates.

Time And The Hunter's style is designed, I think, to break down the common narrative conventions of time and space. Reading it is therefore an experience rather like studying an Escher engraving. It is fiction about fiction. It is even (in "The Count Of Monte Cristo") fiction about fiction about fiction...

Borges performs similar inversions of reality, of course, but with a far lighter hand. Such a light touch is necessary — what else is it but absurd to assert, using the word itself, that the word can never accurately reflect the world? One enjoys the absurdity (and it may be true). Calvino's infinitely regressive narratives, though, instead of dazzling, bog down in interminable sentences and clogged prose (but who's to say, after all, that the translation is not to blame?); attempt to use Borges's techniques without that writer's wit or verve. You want your perceptions of literature overturned? Read Borges instead.

Isaac Asimov — THE COMPLETE ROBOT (Granada, 688pp, £2.95), FOUNDATION'S EDGE (Granada, 432pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Nigel Richardson

This is a lot of Asimov we've got here; some old, some new, and all of it less than required reading. Asimov has always been one for padding out his stories and novels with phatic, we'll-get-there-if-it-kills-us conversations and descriptions that do nothing for the narrative or reader but bump the word-count up considerably, and few of his works would suffer from drastic pruning. Take Foundation's Edge; by page 100 all that has happened is that a rocket has taken off in search of the Second Foundation and/or Earth. Most of the verbiage is taken up with people telling each other what they obviously already know, reminding each other how the Mule did this, how Bayta Darrell did that, and so on. There is, in fact, very little direct narrative in either of these books — just talk, talk, talk, with the occasional puffed pipe, unamused smile, or blast into hyperspace.

Nothing much happens in Asimov's works. The universe of events and occurrences is always elsewhere; his characters are packed up in a spaceship or robotics lab — they rarely have first-hand experience of anything beyond their immediate frame. Is Asimov agoraphobic? His fiction certainly is. Foundation's Edge, with a potential canvas the size of the galaxy, has the same feeling of immensity as being locked in a broom cupboard.

In his robot stories a robot usually goes wrong — that is, it seems to disobey one of the Three Laws of Robotics. The story will start with two or three humans discussing what the robot is doing wrong, then going off to watch it doing so, and then talking some more about how they put it right. The robots don't really break the Three Laws, of course — they just tend to get confused, or have difficulties in deciding which law should be given most attention. Once you've read one, you've read them all, and no one but the most thorough reviewer or masochist will plough through the entire 688 pages of The Complete Robot. One chapter from Sladek's Roderick or Rucker's Software will tell you far more about artificial intelligence and robotics than this slab of stodge. The earliest stories may have seemed like exciting extrapolation back in the days when it took a machine the size of a house to work out the square root of nine, but the more recent ones show no familiarity with contemporary developments in the AI and cybernetic fields, and their anthropomorphism and half-assed notions about what computers do and how they work are quite laughable. All Asimov's robots are just simplified people (and, God knows, his people are simple enough), and some want to be people — indeed, the sickly, sentimental "Bicentennial Man" concerns a robot that becomes, bit by bit, a human being. The finale, of course, is his death — only through dying can he become truly human. Why anyone should give a damn about this transformation of tinfoil into cardboard when we're living in a world where people are turning themselves, or being turned, into little more than robots escapes me.

Onto Foundation's Edge, which is a pitiful and tedious thing, a dull short story padded out to inordinate length. There is nothing in it; the characters are delineated in one short paragraph when they first appear ("he was rather below average height, rather above average height, had a bushy moustache", that kind of thing), and thereafter only appear as things to mouth the interminable dialogue afterward. The plot dissolves as it takes place, and the ending...well, there isn't an ending. Trevize, the one man in a universe of a quintillion human beings with The Power To Choose (yawn), saves the universe (yawn). Going for Cosmic Unity — or something — Asimov manages to work in the Three Laws of Robotics and his Eternals before the end, and finishes with a hook for God knows how many sequels by having Trevize, like a multitude of



other square-jawed pulpsters before him, vow to find Earth. It's a shoddy book that diminishes rather than extends its predecessors, and should be avoided like the plague by those who want to keep youthful memories of the Trilogy alive... and by anyone else, for that matter. Whatever you want from fiction, be it entertainment, intellectual stimulation, humour, good writing, or even busty, dominating star maidens, you'll have to look elsewhere for it because Foundation's Edge, promising the universe, delivers a big fat nothing.

Frank Herbert — THE WHITE PLAGUE (New English Library, 629pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

I find it hard to believe that this book was written by a real human being. It reads like the product of a collaboration between word processors, probably those of Frank and James Herbert. Or perhaps somebody in the publisher's office scrawled the wrong first name on a megabuck contract, and (the wrong) Herbert thought it was easier to synthesise a recombinant disaster epic than to hand back his whopping advance. Either way, the answer is a lemon.

The plot: brilliant American scientist John Roe O'Neill, on sabbatical in Ireland, sees his wife and kids blown to bits by an IRA bomb. In revenge, he goes mad and uses his knowledge of DNA recombination techniques to release a plague which kills off 99 percent of the women in the world. I am giving away nothing in revealing that the inevitable eleventh-hour cure is found, opening up brave new vistas of clean genes, cancer cures, eternal life, etc. etc.. Everyone solemnly stands around saying that Things Will Never Be The Same Again, apparently unaware that Heraclitus has beaten them to this profound philosophical insight by about 2500 years.

The flatness of the prose must be read to be believed. For example, the only description of Achill Island, a crucial location in the dissemination of the Plague, has obviously been lifted from a second-hand guidebook; there is no sense of really being there at all. The whole book is littered with silly errors, both linguistic and factual. Since when was planting the hay crop a regular springtime activity in rural Ireland, or anywhere else, come to that? Since when do European blackbirds travel in flocks? Since when could an American convince a British coastal patrol he was Irish by shouting "Limey assholes" at them in a suitably modified accent? Since when have readers been expected to swallow sentences like "His awareness was goal-oriented: ordinary lodging" in English narrative prose?

I've long been resigned to the fact that Americans in particular are given to writing rubbish about The Irish Problem. I'm sorry to see Herbert sink to that level. In this novel, Catholicism is something that makes women say "Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" and refuse to have sex before marriage. (Well, almost.) There is no hint, for example, that an apparently sincere and conscientious Catholic might find cannibalism anything other than tasty. (For contrary evidence, see the Andes plane disaster.) And just as the Irish are either literary intellectuals with a wonderful turn of phrase about them to be sure, or peasants ("Jesus, Mary and Joseph!"), the Irish landscape is a boring, bad-

ly painted, sketchy backdrop. The long wandering through the Plague-depopulated Ireland that forms a major portion of this novel feels like being chained to a treadmill, looking at a picture postcard that's changed every ten thousand paces.

So the background setting is unconvincing; what about the ideas? Scientific disaster stories tend to be written with a lot of authenticating detail these days, the better to evoke the genuine thrill of horror in our burgeoning population of technophobes. Sorry, folks; you'd better re-read The Andromeda Strain. Although recombinant DNA research does provide a number of spine-chilling possibilities for disaster, even to my moderately sluggish imagination, Herbert's Plague isn't one of them. There's no trace of a convincing disease vector, for one thing. For another (several others), DNA recombination doesn't work like he says it does: (bacterio)phages don't work like that, bacteria don't work like that, genes don't work like that, gene receptor/modifiers don't work like that...my Scientific Adviser just got crosser and crosser as he tried to make the technical jargon into any kind of sense. All the novel needs at this point is leprechauns; it's a load of old (Irish) cobblers already.

And that was the good news. Now here's the bad news. The White Plague has one of the most stupid, most sexist premises I have ever, ever read in my entire life. A man sees his family destroyed by (male) bombers. They are working in and against a political situation devised by men, for men. So of course the logical and obvious revenge is to kill off the world's women. O'Neill is not merely mad, he's misogynist. The mighty Plague also kills hermaphrodites and trans-sexuals, we are told; a shame the genes couldn't be spliced to knock off the gays as well, no doubt. At any rate, we are conveniently left with a world full of Real Men to put things right. There seem to be no babies or small children for them to look after (with only Real Men left, they probably all die of neglect) and despite the fact that something over half the UK population has snuffed it, the BBC are still broadcasting, there is still running water, telephones, petrol, etc. sufficient to maintain the outposts of scientific endeavour. There's never any sign that a Real Man might succumb to starvation, rioting, cholera, typhoid or post-disaster shock and depression; no, Men Will Conquer, even the Perils of His Dark, Hidden Psyche!

Next time, Mr Herbert, please stick to writing Dune again.

Joan D. Vinge — EYES OF AMBER (Signet, 248pp, \$2.75)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

One of the more lasting products of the failed counter-cultural movements of the late sixties and early seventies, perhaps as much an attempt to determine why it failed as to explore alternative patterns of behaviour, is what I customarily shorthand (because of its birthplace) as "California crap". By this I mean such loony fringe theories as EST, primal scream therapy, rolfing, group encounter sessions, veganism, and the like, most of which seem intended to force their participants to haul out into the open

every last facet of their personalities, in theory enabling them to learn everything they can about themselves but in practice leaving them with no depth of personality at all — surface appearances not only count for everything but are everything, concealing nothing because there's nothing left to conceal. It's an immensely narcissistic phenomenon, symptomatic of what Tom Wolfe, in 1976, labelled the "me generation", and one so all-pervasive that in 1979 American social historian Christopher Lasch published The Culture Of Narcissism, a study of the forces that he felt had given rise to it. Considering its prominence in contemporary American culture, we should not expect contemporary American SF to be free of it; and so it isn't, with the work of many of the writers who came to prominence in the seventies exhibiting its pre-occupations in abundance. John Varley's stories constitute one example; Vonda McIntyre's are another; and Joan Vinge's Eyes Of Amber is yet a third slice of the sort of dreadful emotional shallowness and pseudo self-insight the phenomenon engenders.

The title story won a Hugo as the best novelette of 1977, and took the cover of the "Special Women's Issue" of Analog in that year. In his introduction to the collection, Ben Bova (the magazine's then-editor) says of it that "if there had been no byline on the story, and no hoopla about the 'Special Women's Issue', I doubt that most readers could have told whether 'Eyes Of Amber' had been written by a man or a woman" (a statement which causes one to wonder what, in that case, was the point of the issue); he then makes the same claim for all her other fiction, saying of it that "she blends believable science with believable characters: no easy task" and that she is primarily concerned with "the verities of human behaviour, no matter where in the universe her characters happen to be". Frankly, the science content of these stories is so negligible as to be completely overlooked, and her characters are believable only if one ignores their stated physical ages and assigns them instead a mental maturity equivalent to that of an adolescent — and to that of the people who indulge in the above-mentioned "me generation" therapies, for her protagonists seem, like them, almost wholly occupied with the exploration of their psyches and the finding of their True Place in the world. Obsessed, like them, with the invented problems of self-confrontation and self-realisation, they wallow perpetually in a slough of emotional turmoil, baring their inmost souls and beating their breasts in lamentation over various imagined sexual, moral and intellectual failings, and have in consequence yet to grow up.

As though Vinge were directly acknowledging this point, we have "The Crystal Ship", a story dealing with the search of Tarawassie, an inhabitant of an artificial satellite orbiting an alien planet, for the reasons why her fellow inhabitants of the satellite spend their time in dreamy drug-induced debauchery and why the planet's native civilisation has suffered such a catastrophic setback. The answers have a lot to do with the post-Vietnam guilt for the plight of the Third World that briefly gripped the USA in the mid-seventies, but the story is otherwise cast as a rite of passage from child to adult in which Tarawassie's learning of the answers, enlarging her perception and understanding of the world, is paralleled by her learning more about

herself and her duties and responsibilities to others. Or, rather, it should be so paralleled, but the truth is that at the end of the story the character, who might have enlarged her personal store of knowledge but has not thereby gained greater wisdom, is manifestly no different a person from what she was at the beginning — in which case, what was the point of it all?

It could be said, in fact, that on the whole Vinge's characters do not learn from their experiences, do not undergo changes in their attitudes and beliefs — but then how can they when, products of their creator's mind as they are, they already know, or think they know, everything about themselves? Take "Tin Soldier", for instance, her first published story, which she says in her afterword was inspired by the rock song "Brandy", about a girl who serves drinks in a waterfront tavern while awaiting the return of her seafaring lover. Predictably, and hence tediously, Vinge reverses the roles, making the girl a crewmember on a sublight starship and the man a long-lived cyborg owner of a bar on a backwater frontier planet. With an imagination of that order at work, it comes as no surprise to find the characters exchanging such banalities as these:

"...Sometimes I think we're very cruel."

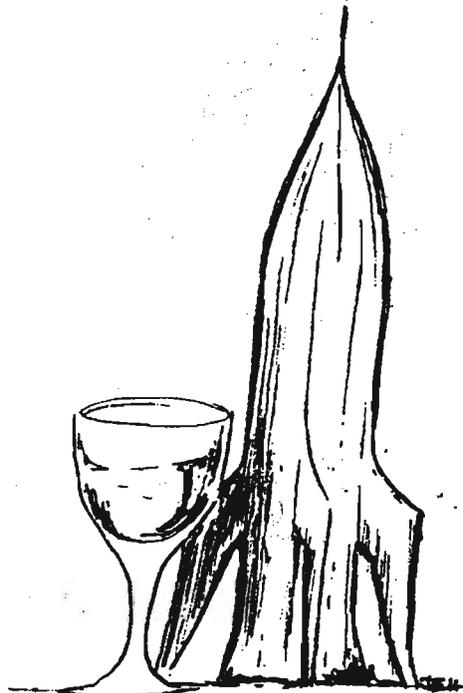
"Very like a god — Silver Lady of the Moon."

"You haven't called me that since — that night...all night." Her hand tightened painfully; he said nothing. "I guess they envy a cyborg for the same things..."

"At least it's easier to rationalise — and harder to imitate." He shrugged. "We leave each other alone, for the most part."

"And so we must wait for each other, we immortals..."

And if they're not exchanging banalities they're body-languaging inarticulately away via a barrage of frowns, uncompleted gestures, caught breaths, unsteady blinks, tremulous smiles... Hardly a paragraph is free of such meaningless detail — meaningless because it tells us nothing of what the characters are supposed to be



thinking and feeling — while the author, failing to penetrate beyond the surface of their relationship (because, of course, it's all on the surface anyway), resorts to describing their moment of supreme passion in such fuzzy prose as this:

"And he realised that fear made her tremble, fear bound to her love in ways he could not fully understand. Blind to the future, he drew her down beside him and stopped her trembling with his joy."

The result of all this is to leave the readers feeling not as though they have been treated to a deep and moving examination of one of the main aspects of human love as cheated by the author's persistent refusal to get to grips with her theme — and possibly angry at the excess of treacly sentimentality that's been ladled over the story instead.

One could perhaps make allowances for this on the grounds that it was her first published story and that such criticisms are thus unfair; but the same superficiality of insight and banality of awareness is present in all the other stories as well. "View From A Height", for example, chronicles in diary form the thoughts of a woman with no natural immunity to disease who is the sole crewmember of probe heading up out of the plane of the ecliptic with no possibility of return; here's a sample of what she says about herself:

"It's all come back to me so strongly. Why me? Why must I be the ultimate victim? In all my life I've never smelled the sea wind, or plucked berries from a bush and eaten them, right there! Or felt my parents' kisses against my skin, or a man's body... Because to me they were all deadly things."

And so on, and so on; the story is not so much an investigation of a particular type of loneliness and the person who has to endure it as a long, irritating whinge that such things could ever be allowed in the first place; and the readers are reduced to wincing away in embarrassment at the sheer immaturity of it all.

The remaining three stories in the collection, thankfully, do offer some occasional moments of respite. For instance, although the human protagonist of the title story does not get on with his parents and in consequence has his standard share of emotional problems, the nature of the plot — involving communication between a group of technicians on Earth and a race of insect-like aliens on Titan — mercifully denies him any opportunity to go maundering on about them. The alien protagonist is in any case far more interesting — at least to begin with, for it swiftly proves to be nothing more than a reincarnation of the nineteenth century notion of the "noble savage", and just as false. Aliens crop up again in "To Bell The Cat", which seems to be striving to say something about vivisection but is scuttled long before the end by the fact that the aliens seem little different from telepathic frogs — never mind the frogs' imitation-Zen conversations which occupy large chunks of the text but are so feeble as to drive one to despair. "Media Man", which has the same background as the novel The Outcasts Of Heaven Belt but which is set (from the slight internal evidence on offer) some years before the events thereof, is the only story in the book to take a stab at a fully adult message via

its tale of a news reporter learning that there is such a thing as moral integrity and that one shouldn't always sell out to the highest bidder; but it fails because it is in essence what James Blish would have called a "smeerp", with the SF elements so intrusively grafted on as to distract us from what Vinge is trying to say. Not to mention the additional distraction of the reporter's finding true love, of the dewy-eyed-lump-in-the-throat variety, on a distant asteroid...which remains unconsummated, although Vinge says in her afterword that she's planning a story showing how they got back together again. If "Tin Soldier" is any guide, the two of them will doubtless spend most of it alternately whispering sweet nothings in each other's ears or crying on each other's shoulders...

It's so bad it's almost funny — or it would be, if people weren't taking it seriously, but I suspect they do so because, to a large extent, they too have been taken in by the "California crap" line of analysis and can no longer tell the difference between the pseud and the profound. The truth is that the "verities of human behaviour" that Vinge's work purports to display are no verities at all, but banalities; observations so common-place that only the most naive would consider writing them down. That such maudlin, superficial, and indeed completely ersatz nonsense can be regarded as evidence of genuine insight and understanding is little short of farcical; that it can win prizes and acclaim from all and sundry is astonishing. If Vinge really is one of the best new writers to have emerged during the seventies, then American SF must be in deep, deep trouble.

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Kim Stanley Robinson — THE WILD SHORE (Ace, 371pp, \$3.50)

Reviewed by Jeremy Crampton

The Second World War deeply affected many lives across the globe. Something like 72 million people were killed, with many more wounded. It is probably true to say that it is the single most significant event of the twentieth century so far, and life has never been the same again. It follows that after a nuclear holocaust people's lives would be even more fundamentally altered.

Such observations are truisms: whilst being true they don't get you very far, and most people know them anyway. One of the few exceptions, it seems, is Kim Stanley Robinson, who believes that people will be just the same after a nuclear holocaust as they are now; will have law and order, will still be fond of weapons and war, and (most remarkably) will still have the same modes of thought and societal values. In my view, this implies a serious lack of imagination on Robinson's part.

Robinson is a new writer; one of the first of the new post-Wolfe era. His novel is set in a near future (2047) USA some sixty-three years after a continent-wide devastation caused by the simultaneous explosion of 2000-5000 neutron bombs by persons unknown. This does not prevent the survivors from imaginatively speculating who it might have been; among the blamed are the Russians (naturally), the French, and the South Africans. Ingeniously, if horrifically, the bombs were not dropped from aircraft or fired as missiles; they were loaded into the back of

Chevrolet vans in city centres across the US and then detonated. There was no warning, and the effect of this was so demoralising that the US was either unwilling or unable to retaliate. So much for SIOP (the Single Integrated Operational Plan that unites every aspect of the US's tactical and strategic nuclear forces and provides its commanders with options for their use). The US is quarantined for its own good by the rest of the world which, unharmed, continues blithely on.

This much we know as we focus on a small community living in a place called Onefre, on the Californian coast. Their life is rural and agricultural; fish and wheat are the main foods. Although there is little spare time for the adolescents of this 60-person-odd "village", they spend what there is in learning (especially about the past) at the feet of the Grand Old Man of the community, Tom Barnaby. He is an inherently interesting character, one of the few in the novel, because he is one of those people alive when the bombs went off, and presumably because of this is greatly loved and respected. He is the novel's deuteragonist; the protagonist is the narrator of the book, Henry — "Hank" — Franklin, a 17-year-old.

So far so straightforward. But because of the almost ineluctable Americanness of this novel, the American Way Of Life soon rears its ugly head, in the form of a "resistance" group, irked at being quarantined and guarded by mere foreigners, kept from their rightful place at the top of the world league. The Onefreans are invited to join it, but when the elder and wiser heads of the community reject the idea as pointless the youngsters, prompted by Henry's friend Steve Nicolin, go into secret collusion with the movement, which operates from San Diego. The result is a disastrous ambush when one of the patrol boats guarding the coast decides to land. Many San Diegan are killed; they pull out to save their own skins, leaving the Onefreans to face the music. Henry, we are obviously meant to infer, has Grown Up, leaving behind his childish naivete when reality inconveniently intervenes.

The Wild Shore offers nothing new in this respect; lost innocence is an old theme. To be sure, it has more to offer; there are injections of philosophy, humour and action. Yet with the exception of Henry and Tom the characters are not fully believable. And although I have sketched the plot and post-holocaust society with more than strictly utilitarian necessity, neither is that society fully believable. Yet, judging from its reception in the USA, and its choice for the new Ace Special SF Series (edited by Terry Carr, who claims for the series "new novels of high quality and imagination...a rigorous insistence on literary quality — lucid and evocative writing, fully rounded characterisation and strong underlying themes (but not Messages)"), this novel is going to make (has already made?) a large impact on the SF world.

I wish to demur, not because it is fashionable to swim against the current, but because this novel presents real difficulties for the reader — especially the politically aware one. Because of the novel's likely reception, I wish to briefly examine its basic rationale and the more obvious implications that arise from it; implications that have nevertheless been ignored by its American reviewers.

We are to believe that at least 2000 neutron

bombs were exploded by an unknown group or country. Quite why Robinson chose the neutron bomb is unclear. The "reason" in real life for NATO having the neutron bomb is to deploy it against Soviet tank formations in Europe, because its radiation can penetrate their armour and so kill the crews by radiation sickness.

A neutron bomb is a fission-fusion weapon, releasing more energy as radiation than blast in comparison with the "atomic" (fission) or "hydrogen" (fusion) bomb. It was initially developed by President Ford, and although production was put off in 1978 President Reagan decided to redevelop it in 1981. As of 1983, however, such weapons had not been deployed. It has been reported that the USSR has not gone ahead with the neutron bomb. Neither, as far as I know, has any other country. Robinson has the bombs exploding in 1984 and therefore — if we are to relate his novel to reality — they can only be the USA's own. This being the case, I am at a loss to understand why no warning was given by the US government to its own people that 2000 of its latest nuclear weapons had been stolen; why these explosions came as such a shock (even to the President); why nobody knew who had done it or where the bombs had come from; or how the bombs had been stolen in the first place (I assume they were fully guarded by the might and main of the modern day US armed forces). I am also at a loss to understand just why US citizens saw fit to explode the bombs in the first place.

But perhaps I am being pedantic. After all, everyone in the novel believes it was a foreign power ("We were murdered", etc.). Perhaps we should not look for too much of a similarity between today's situation and the scope of the novel (although it reduces any relevance — warning — for our society). Ignoring these problems, then, we come to the inescapable physical effects, on whatever society or political situation, of the actual explosion of such quantities of bombs. Apart from a brief and second-hand mention of tornados in the USSR, we get only one mention of the "nuclear winter" that will be the result of using just 1/125 of the world's available nuclear stockpile. Figures produced by Dr Carl Sagan and his peers in both the USA and the USSR at a conference in Washington DC in November 1983 show that even if only 100 megatons were exploded sunlight would be cut to one percent of normal due to the mass of soot, dust and smoke particles that would be injected into the atmosphere. Temperatures would fall to  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$ , freezing drinking water. Crops would fail. The ozone layer would no longer filter UV rays, and cancers become endemic. The conference's final report envisages — even in the southern hemisphere — such a widespread collapse of the world's life-support systems that a majority of plant and animal species would be extinguished. The survivors — if there were any — would be forced to revert to the hunter-gatherer lifestyle of their forebears. Human civilisation as we know it would disappear, perhaps never to return.

There is none of this in Robinson's novel. Impossibly, it suggests that nuclear weapons can be used without the risk of starting a full-scale nuclear war. (Consider, again, the massive American SIOP.) Robinson has a supposedly knowledgeable character remarking at one point: "There's the dust thrown into the stratosphere by the bombs and fires, dropping world temperat-

ures by a couple of degrees". He is ludicrously underestimating; dangerously underestimating. The use of nuclear weapons (which both advocates and detractors of "deterrence" abhor), especially where things are more or less the same afterwards (apart from a few messy deaths, but luckily for the reader they all took place a long time ago, offstage), can never be countenanced.

At best, Kim Stanley Robinson's The Wild Shore is a naive first novel; on this level, I would expect the novel, full of adventures and conflicts as it is, would appeal to what is called the "young adult" market. At worst, it is plain wrong, and sadly unrelated to today's world. For those readers interested in a more entertaining, better written, and realistic account of a post-holocaust world I can do no more than recommend Angela Carter's far superior Heroes And Villains (1969). Perhaps, in view of this, it would have been better if Terry Carr had chosen for his series novels that did have a message — although mathematicians, having worked out that Robinson's original catastrophe, should refrain from cynically arguing (as did a friend) that the novel does have one, namely: "Buy my book, before it is too late!"

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Christopher Lee — THE FINAL DECADE: WILL WE SURVIVE THE 1980s? (Sphere, 311pp, £2.50)

Reviewed by Bill Carlin

The obvious temptation when sitting down to review this book was to make a series of cheap and tasteless jokes about Christopher Lee sinking his fangs into a horrific subject, but unfortunately there were two main problems with such an approach. The first of these is that the author is not the Christopher Lee but merely Christopher Lee, the BBC's Defence and Foreign Affairs correspondent; the second, and by far the greater, is the simple fact that nuclear devastation is not a subject that lends itself to cheap jokes.

So if The Final Decade is not designed to give an insight into horror movies, and it's certainly not intended to rival Punch or Private Eye as a stimulator of belly-laughs, can it live up to its sensational subtitle and answer your questions about the possibility of the human race surviving what's left of the 1980s? The answer, of course, is a definite and resounding "no", but that doesn't mean that the book is a complete failure. Despite its misleading title, which may tempt SF readers to store it away in the vaults of memory somewhere between Chariots Of The Gods and the pamphlets handed out by Hare Krish devotees in busy streets, the author does a reasonable job of reviewing the current preparations for war on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Lee must be given credit for his attempt to maintain a certain neutrality of tone, but a disproportionate amount of space seems to be given to analysis of the Soviet soldier and the "Russian military machine" in general, although I suppose this can be justified by the assumption that a Western readership knows more than enough about NATO and is eager to learn more about the shadowy Soviet capacity for destruction. Less easy to justify, especially in a book which claims to tell the truth about the factors

influencing the arms race, is the author's failure to recognise the importance of CND. Virtually no reference to this important movement is made in the text (there is certainly none in the index), while the facade of "civil defence" is given a complete chapter to itself. In fact, Lee seems to be totally blind to the possibilities of unilateral and multilateral disarmament; the book's final paragraph, giving his ultimate conclusions, confirms his stance:

"In spite of sophisticated campaigns, arms control agreements and widespread recognition of this danger, nuclear weapons are here to stay — at least until the first group of them is used."

Since the book was originally published in 1980 and slightly revised for paperback publication in late 1983, Lee may now have changed his opinions as to CND's importance, but despite the growing strength of those in favour of disarmament his conclusion would probably be even more pessimistic. The Korean jumbo jet incident, the invasion of Grenada, and the initial deployment of cruise missiles in Britain followed by the Soviet Union's withdrawal from the arms limitation talks in Geneva are all events which have overtaken the view of the world put forward in The Final Decade.

Any book which clarifies our view of the crisis now facing us must be regarded as a good thing, but I found that some of the "facts" it quoted rather suspect, mainly because of the rapid changes that have occurred since it was first published. In all fairness to the author, I must say that he has made a valiant attempt to present a highly emotive subject as dispassionately as possible, but perhaps a little passion is what we need to solve our current problems. Those with any interest in the future would do better to spend their time reading up on what is happening now rather than ploughing their way through several sets of cold facts and figures which have been swept away by the tide of recent events.

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Philippe Curval — EN SOUVENIR DU FUTUR (Robert Laffont, 312pp, 79FFr)

Reviewed by Pascal Thomas

Just how European do you Britons feel, anyway? British SF does not take much account of a possible integrated future Europe — but then neither do most of the continental SF writers, perhaps because there seems to be little faith anywhere in the future of Europe, and the European institutions in any case appear boring and technical.

Philippe Curval's journalistic work with EDF (the French power company) has probably given him a better than average knowledge of technical issues, and his depiction of a deathly safe, closed-off "Marcom" (Common Market) in Brave Old World (originally Cette Chère Humanité, Robert Laffont, 1975) won him the coveted Prix Apollo.

He is now returning to the same future history, which is intended to incorporate Le Dormeur s'Eveillera-t-il? (Denoel, 1979) and a fourth volume yet to come into a loose tetralogy named "L'Europe Apres La Pluie" ("Europe After The Rain"). Set earlier, in an alternate universe, Le Dormeur s'Eveillera-t-il? is difficult to connect with anything, and is very strained

in those passages where Curval provides the bridges — as well as in those passages where he paves the way for Cette Chere Humanité, which (in terms of their internal chronology) comes after En Souvenir De Futur.

Similar strains mar this novel, and are probably the only weaknesses in what is otherwise a rich and complex work which spans several times and locales. It is a time-travel story, and one which introduces a new idea into the subgenre: one can only travel to a time where one has sexual ties. The protagonist, Georges Quillan, can only "return" to the times that correspond to the various women he will meet. This makes the future to which he travels look like his past, and one can't escape the parallel with the explorer of the past in Michel Jeury's groundbreaking Chronolysis ("Le Temps Uncertain", Robert Laffont, 1973); there are definite similarities between the two, despite the newness of the idea and the many differences between the two writers.

(It is surprising that, as far as I know, no SF writer has thought of the idea before; isn't it natural that the strongest feelings — those attached to sex — provide the strongest mental link with a given time?)

The novel is built around a series of "flash-forwards" by Quillan as he carries out his missions for the CEGESTE, a research centre which is more of an intelligence operation; the goal here is to manipulate the course of future history to bring about the advent of the Marcom. Things are more complicated than they seem, though, as spies and traitors abound, and Quillan himself has no liking for his bosses who have him go up and down his lifetime; nor has he any sympathy for the "bourgeois Utopia" of the Marcom, which will stress safety at all costs (including the cost of the spice of life...).

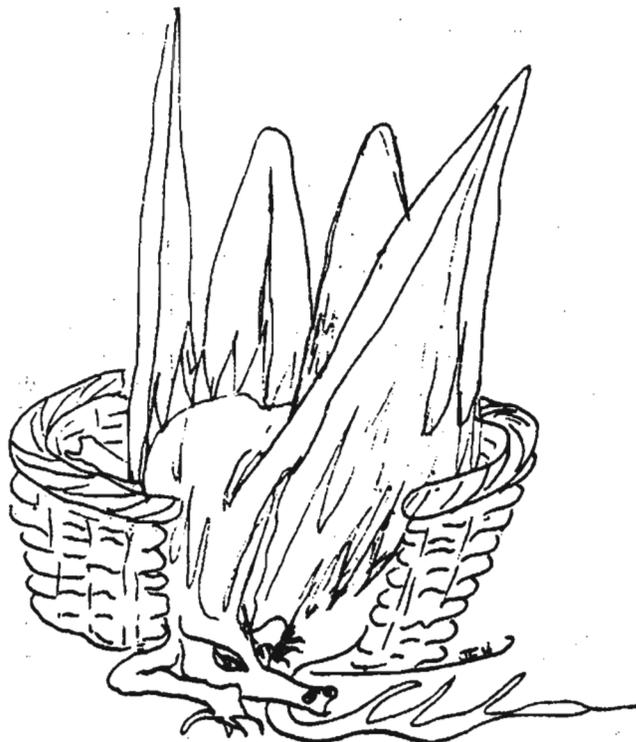
Quillan does not care much, either, for Europe's American, Soviet and Chinese adversaries; in fact, he fights the US alongside Mexican guerillas in Yucatan, and is robbed down to his underwear by Chinese refugees-cum-provocateurs in Yugoslavia. A true anarchist, Quillan is uncommitted, and all he really cares about seems to be his return to the time of his undying love. Curval is delivering a very political novel, but avoids preaching.

Let's not forget Curval's wide-ranging sexuality, with his usual references to wine and fine food this time made only in passing and sex used an integral element of the intricate plot in a way I find much more successful than in the earlier L'Odeur de la Bete (Denoel, 1982) or in Tous vers l'Extase (Lattes, 1981). Curval has begun to get some attention from the French literary media for Ah! Que c'est Beau New York! (Denoel, 1982), a "mainstream" novel which I feel to be several shades below his best SF work; he has now given us what looks like the best SF novel of 1983, in French at least!

ants. Dragonphobes will hate it and dragon-philis will love it, though even they may cavil at the price: £3.95 for a paperback which is slightly larger than the normal format but is otherwise just a paperback is extortionate.

The six previous Pern books fall into three groups. The first two, Dragonflight and Dragonquest are good, with effective plotting and mythology. The next three, Dragonsong, Dragonsinger, and The White Dragon, are all right, but the plotting and characterisation are slighter and seem aimed at a much younger audience. The sixth, Dragondrums, is poor, and reads like a potboiler. I think Moreta, Dragonlady Of Pern falls into the second category. Its story is that of "The Ballad Of Moreta's Ride", which is referred to in many of the other books; it is readable, and manages to be sad, but it doesn't succeed in being tragic, which is what it's aiming at.

This is where I'm going to start picking nits. In the other books Moreta is said to have come from Ruatha, but in this novel she comes from Keroon; in Dragonflight we were told Moreta could talk to any dragon, but in this novel she can't; in Dragonsinger a brief synopsis of Moreta's ride was related, and it differs considerably from the plot of this novel. I don't think that the mythology of Pern is sufficiently complicated that the author could get so much unnecessarily wrong, and this irritated me. There is also the point that the brief plot synopsis given in Dragonsinger has more impact than the plot of this novel. In the outline, Moreta was the only hope of the planet and to save others pushed herself and Orliith, her queen, beyond their limits and on to death. In this novel she is only one of many carrying out an urgent chore and she dies because Holth, the queen she has borrowed, is too old, becomes exhausted, and gets lost "between". Moreta is not a tragic figure because there is no sacrifice made by her — she is merely the victim of an accident. The tragedy inherent in her story is degraded to something which is only sad. McCaffrey should have stayed with her original story idea, because it would have made a better book.



Anne McCaffrey — MORETA, DRAGONLADY OF PERN  
(Gorgi, 410pp, £3.95)

Reviewed by Helen McNabb

There really seems little point in reviewing a new "Dragon" book, because as the seventh in the series it is going out to a pre-existing market, and it makes few concessions to anyone who is not well acquainted with Pern and its inhabit-

It's a pity McCaffrey didn't attempt the tragedy, because she has missed the opportunity to stretch herself as a writer. I get the feeling that she looked up at the mountain, thought that the peaks were too far away and that life might be less comfortable up there, and so decided to stay down in her warm cosy valley. She has at last ventured to mention that blue and green riders have homosexual relations, which has been very carefully skirted around before, but there innovation ceases.

Moreta, Dragonlady Of Pern is undemanding and unadventurous, but enjoyable if you like Anne McCaffrey's novels; I read it happily but I'm glad I didn't have to pay for it. However, it has a wide and ready market waiting, and its expectant audience will doubtless make both publishers and audience a great deal of money.

Larry Niven & Steven Barnes — THE DESCENT OF ANANSI (Orbit,  
278pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

"After all, you're part of this too, aren't you?"

"Silence. Then, 'What do you mean?'"

"Space. 'The Final Frontier'. How much of your life have you invested in it? You must have dreamed the same dreams as Fleming and Stonecypher, and me. You must have watched 2001 and Star Trek and read the books, and listen to the same people sing the same songs. And watched the sky. You had to

This conversation takes place between two ex-NASA space shuttle pilots, the first speaker aboard the crippled shuttle "Anansi", disabled by a bomb whilst delivering a reel of special cable from a laboratory in lunar orbit to Earth, and the second piloting a Brazilian shuttle which has been launched to "salvage" the cargo. In making this appeal to his better nature, Janet de Camp, pilot of the "Anansi", is assuming that there are common values higher than political beliefs or love of The Flag, and that a commitment to the media representations of space travel transcends all other ties.

Before returning to the philosophy behind The Descent Of Anansi, I should give a synopsis of the plot. The novel is set in the near future, early in the next century perhaps, when the Falling Angel space laboratory, in orbit around the Moon, incorporates itself as a private company and declares itself independent of NASA and the US government. To finance its operations, it sells the first project of the lab, one thousand miles of monofilament cable extruded in zero gravity, to a Japanese construction company building a trans-Korea bridge. (The cable sounds and behaves like the shadow square wire that sliced off one of the puppeteer's heads in Ringworld.) The losing corporation, Brasilia Technimetal-Electromotores, has deliberately bid low because it has a plan to get the cable even more cheaply.

The Brazilians hire an Arab terrorist organisation to launch a missile to destroy the "Anansi", which is bringing the cable to Earth, as a political gesture against this capitalist feat, but make sure the missile explodes harmlessly just short of the target while the Arabs announce to the world that the shuttle has been destroyed. At the same time, a bomb planted in

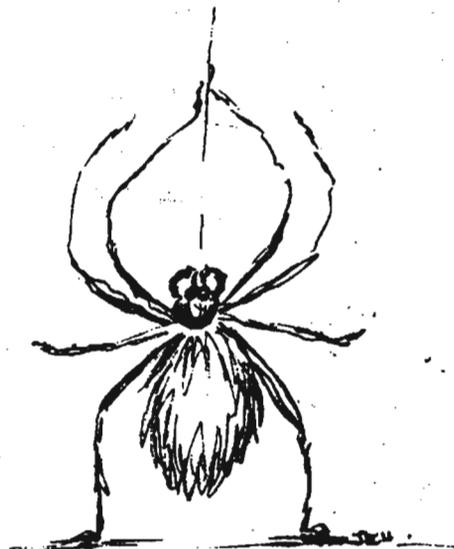


Moon orbit disables the shuttle and its long-range radio, and two ex-NASA shuttles launch secretly from Brazil to "salvage" the cable pod and its cargo. The crew of the crippled "Anansi" are of course expendable because the world (and Falling Angel) believes them to be dead...

The name of the shuttle, "Anansi", is important, and a clue to the plot events. Anansi was a mythical spider from West African folk tales who climbed up a silk line let down from Heaven. After wearing out his welcome there, Anansi talked a dove into bringing him down to Earth again, but at the end of the flight ate the bird. How the shuttle "Anansi" emulates its namesake with the aid of the Ringworld cable is quite ingenious scientifically but a little too coincidental.

I have been a fan of Larry Niven's since I read the Science Fiction Book Club edition of World Of Ptaav in 1969, and have enjoyed his work ever since. However, this novel has more of the flavour of one of those best-selling thrillers from writers like Robert Ludlum or Jeffery Archer than a modern SF novel, and I think that an author like them would have handled this material better, to produce a more satisfactory novel within the limits of the format. Also, there are hints that the manuscript dates from earlier than the 1982 copyright date, despite the odd references to Star Wars. The Brazilian organising the terrorist mission part of the plan travels to Iran on a BOAC jet, and there is a reference to Tehran being a seedy version of a Western city. This implies that the text is pre-Ayatollah, as I cannot imagine a later work not referring to more recent events. Also, the cable itself could be an idea that was lifted from an earlier, unpublished, text to be used to good effect in Ringworld. None of this would matter in itself, except that SF has moved on from the thriller with scientific overtones set in the near future, and The Descent Of Anansi therefore appears rather a throwback.

There is the making of a human interest subplot as an attempt to flesh out the characters,



with "Anansi" pilot Janet de Camp and the tension between the co-pilot, who is her ex-lover, and the ion-drive technician, who is her soon-to-be-ex-husband, but resolution of this personal drama takes a very secondary place to the main action. The back cover blurb makes much of the "crisis on the Moon" and the Moon colonists' bid for independence — e.g., "Not every Moon colonist was bound to Earth and the old ways..." — but this is a distortion of the plot, emphasising events which have a very small part to play in the novel as a whole. This could also be an attempt to give the book a "modern" feel which it doesn't really possess. As noted earlier, the philosophical tone of the novel is essentially shallow, and the desire for "independence" by the Falling Angel staff is based on their allegiance to that dream of commercial space exploration rather than any revolutionary fervour or political aspirations.

To sum up, the novel has a good action-filled plot, but is ultimately unsatisfying. It is an easy read, and its 278 pages or large type would enable you to while away a train journey, but it is a book I would leave in the compartment rather than take home to put on my bookcase to read again.

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James Blish — THE QUINCUNX OF TIME; THE NIGHT SHAPES (Avon, 110pp and 124pp respectively, \$2.50 each).

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Let me confess to finding James Blish a "difficult" writer. Not that I dislike him; Black Easter is definitely one of my "desert island books", and there is much in his philosophical stance that I find congenial. Nevertheless, I find much of his fiction unsatisfying, as fiction, and these two brief works provide good illustrations of my reasons.

The Quincunx Of Time is a still short expansion of that much anthologised short story, "Beep", concerning the instantaneous Dirac communicator, each transmission of which is accompanied by a beep which "is the simultaneous reception of every one of the Dirac messages that has ever been or ever will be sent". This imparts a limited degree of precognition, and is introduced by a delightfully appropriate device in that it is imparted — suitably disguised — to its originators before it has been sent. Little imagination is required to realise that we have been dumped in what Brian Aldiss terms, in his introduction, "deep metaphysical water", quite Blish's favourite location! Just to add to the mental rigour of our exposure to his speculation, he has deprived us of all the customary figleaves of fiction — plot, character, realistic dialogue, all that manner of baggage!

It would be easy to list all the weaknesses in this story, as a work of fiction. The three principal characters are talking heads with names but no personalities — male lead Weinbaum and female lead Lje are to all intents and purposes identical, and when the time comes for all the loose ends of the mystery to be tidied Lje begins to lecture in the precise words and tone previously adopted by the mildly alcoholic scientific cypher, Wald. For a man whose post implies he is one heap big detective wallah, Weinbaum's methodology has nothing whatsoever to do with Occam's Razor, the Holmes Principle, or

even The Copper's Nose, but everything to do with the trifling confection here passing for a "plot". To call it implausible is to pay it an unwarrantedly high compliment, and Wald's scientific detective work is no more impressive. Surely the "beep" would have been exhaustively investigated — and solved — by a man of his ability.

But none of that is really to the point of this story. In his 1970 introduction, Blish wrote that one critic had perspicaciously remarked that the story "was 'not redundant with physical action'" (the world turns, the sun also rises, the moon is made of green cheese), and went on to say that "the drama, for those capable of enjoying it in this form, lies more in the speculations than in the action," the implication being that Blish's intention was to stimulate further discussion rather than present his own musings as having been brought down from Sinai graven on tablets of stone. Further discussion would seem to flow quite naturally from this story. Relating how and why she came to engineer events she knows from the beep will happen, Lje says: "All actions are fixed. What we call motives evidently are rationalisations by the helpless observing consciousness, which is intelligent enough to smell an event coming — and since it cannot avert the event, instead cooks up reasons for wanting it to happen..." Indeed, yet she has also informed us that the beep relates to a tiny number of known and therefore "fixed" future events. To proclaim a deterministic universe on such slight a weight of evidence smacks of that hoary old philosophical strategy, generalising from the particular. What about that almost infinitely greater number of future events not authoritatively predicted? And that is just one of the grosser areas for debate. Many of Blish's notions are undeveloped, merely mentioned to raise the mental eyebrows and then passed by — "world lines" and a protean creature called a "vombis" are but two which spring quickly to mind. There are sufficient ideas in these few pages to support lesser writers for a productive lifetime!

Nevertheless, as a work of fiction The Quincunx Of Time is a failure. It simply does not succeed on any literary level. Much of Blish's expression is trite, banal, clichéd; but this matters not one jot since this is not a work of fiction but a thinly disguised "fireside chat" by a thoughtful man. "Has it ever struck you," he asks, "what would happen if..."; that old taproot of almost all SF, the "what if" speculation. As a piece of mental stimulation, I'd say that The Quincunx Of Time has survived the vicissitudes of 30 years' scientific development remarkably well, largely because of the most pleasant impression it creates that James Blish would have been just as interested in your informed thoughts on the matter as his own. Whatever its literary limitations, this novel transcends them.

But if The Quincunx Of Time is almost totally bereft of "physical action", The Night Shapes goes a long way in the opposite direction. For its size it has too much action. A soup spiced with a touch of Verne, a dash of Haggard, and surprising lashings of cold-eyed 20th century cynicism, it has a degree of plot in its 116 pages of by no means tiny print that would last the likes of Stephen Donaldson for a hefty trilogy; which is its weakness. The story is epic: renegade "white hunter" on the run from American

Justice now a real live king in the Belgian Congo gets himself involved with treachery, politics, colonialist theft, commercial palaeontology, and the final destruction of a "lost valley" of prehistoric creatures after having invoked on his behalf the aid of "certain powers" unsusceptible to modern scientific method; not to mention love, sex, death, and tribal war. But the style is miniaturist and cannot adequately convey the story in such a small novel. Perhaps the reader does not need to be verbiaged to death in the modern manner, but the remorseless pace of the plotting and the density of hard-edged detail (the Blish trademark) does no service to anyone.

That being said, I must own to doubts as to the precise reader Blish felt himself to be addressing. There are moments when the story teeters on the edge of that sub-Conan Doyle cliché-ridden "lost world" juvenile set, as typified by films starring Doug McClure or Ron Ely, yet in the same moment Blish subverts any such audience direction by some description that would set the blue pencil flying at any juvenile publishing house of the early sixties. For instance, he describes his "hero" — the expatriate American so evocatively named Kit Kennedy — in true Quatermain terms, and then slips in this little item: "For twelve years he had prayed at black altars and been given black women for 'matabische'..." Paganism and unhallowed miscegenation in the same sentence! And as if that wouldn't give the average public librarian a severe case of the screaming habdabs, he later presents this nugget of background verisimilitude: "Inside the small drums were making a melody, as though the witch doctor were telling some secret story to the young men on the night before circumcision... The singing drums died; perhaps they had not been singing to the young men but to the girls; if so, now the old man had to leave the skins and go to enlarge the genitals of the maidens with his withered mouth; before the small lips and clitoris went under the knife." It is obvious that Blish did not subscribe to the Walt Disney school of anthropology — so why, then, create a story so redolent of the Walt Disney approach? The intellectual and emotional thrust of this story is almost entirely at odds with its dramatic structure. Blish presents the white colonisers in a light that would give Haggard and his ilk apoplexy — the Belgians are cruelty in human form, the English are stupid — yet the breakneck pace of the action and the ever-present "sensawunder" are whol-

ly juvenile, and this almost completely undermines the success of the story. Even within such a context, Blish's attitude towards the dramatic demands of his story borders on the dismissive — the drumhead battle of Ktendi (as Kennedy is known) and the rival king N'mbono is dispensed with in a hasty 1200 words; the appearance and destruction by Ktendi's "pet" python of the first triceratops is just as brief; the final herding and destruction of the creatures is accomplished in even fewer words. As a plot outline for a film, The Night Shapes is fine, but as piece of literature it can only cause any discerning reader to wonder what Blish had in mind.

This is echoed by a strange temporal game he seems to play. Textual evidence places the action very firmly in 1906, yet one of the younger characters refers to Kennedy as sounding "like one of young Haggard's (sic) characters. Allan Quatermain, perhaps". In 1906 Haggard was 50 years old, and Allan Quatermain had been in the public domain for 19 years. The character is a highly educated young woman, a scion of the English sub-aristocracy. Would she call Haggard "young" in 1906? Shortly afterwards, Kennedy refers to "Lyly's newly published Elements Of Geology" as an external support for the existence of the prehistoric creatures. I stand to be corrected on this, but the only Lyly of any note I can discover is a 16th century English writer, John Lyly. Sir Charles Lyell, however, published a seminal work, The Principles Of Geology, in 1833, together with its supplement, Elements of Geology, in 1838. Newly published in 1906? James Blish was punctilious in his use of historical evidence, and I can only wonder at his motives in introducing these "errors".

I find these two works grossly disappointing as works of literature. While The Quincunx Of Time, especially, is intellectually stimulating, both lack those characteristics found in fully realised works of fiction, "from Pamela to V", to quote Blish's own introduction. This disappointment is only accentuated by those occasions found in both books where Blish allows his talent to flow free for a moment or so.

Avon have reissued these two stories in company with a number of other works by Blish. I have no doubt that The Quincunx Of Time and/or "Beep" deserve to be continually available, but on their own both these novels make very slim volumes — The Quincunx Of Time is 95 pages of fiction, The Night Shapes 116 pages. Both are priced at \$2.50. If more substantial works by



the likes of Stanislaw Lem are being reissued in packages of three by Penguin, need Avon be quite so parsimonious in their (visually incongruous) packaging of by no means new stories? For myself, I believe that the memory of James Blish, and the continuing life of his work, deserves better service than that.

Ardath Mayhar -- GOLDEN DREAM: A FUZZY ODYSSEY (Ace, 269pp, \$2.95)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

"H. Beam Piper is dead! Long live Ardath Mayhar!" And the cry comes back, "Ardath who?" Well, despite the Vargo Statten-ish name, Ardath Mayhar is all too horribly real, being the famed authoress of such other Ace novels as How The Gods Wove In Kyrannon and Khi To Freedom. Now she has been turned loose on the poor, defenceless "fuzzies" of H. Beam Piper's Little Fuzzy and Fuzzy Sapiens, with well-nigh genocidal results.

This kind of "authorised plagiarism" is something of a running sore in today's SF market. Just bring yourselves to think of all those E. E. Smith "sequels" churned out by the likes of Gordon Eklund, Stephen Goldin and David Kyle. There are, to be sure, many precedents for this syndrome outside SF -- Gerald Fairlie with "Bulldog Drummond", Frederick H. Christian with "Sudden", and (more recently) John Gardner with "James Bond" -- and although these particular copycats have occasionally contrived to match or even surpass their predecessors, the same cannot be said of Ardath Mayhar.

In terms of entertainment, the best parts of this shoddy odyssey are the "scholarly" bits which finish it off -- for example, "Appendix II: Some Observations On Gashta Names". Speaking of names, the Fuzzies are saddled with cute Amerindian-type monickers like "Breaks-Twigs",



"Sun-Blossom" and "Bad-Thing-Killer"; savour them, folks, because that's about all the characterisation you're going to get. Among the un-Fuzzy sapiens, only Pappy Jack Holloway, prospector extraordinaire, has any vestige of credibility -- largely on account of the goodwill carried forward from his previous appearances. And the "poetry" which introduces each section of this novel makes the great McGonagall look like Pam Ayres (or vice versa).

According to the foreword, Ardath Mayhar was chosen to execute this book because she is (a) "fast at writing", and (b) "partly alien". I can well believe it.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the idea of writing a novel from the Fuzzies point of view -- if the job had been given to Michael Bishop, say, or perhaps even James Tiptree. But Ardath Mayhar reduces everything to rack and ruin; she treats the highly intelligent Fuzzies as if they were some kind of extraterrestrial Smurfs. The only word which can adequately describe her style is "twee" -- a charge that could not have been levelled at her supposed model, H. Beam Piper.

## ALSO RECEIVED

Poul Anderson -- THE DANCER FROM ATLANTIS (Sphere, 171pp, £1.75): re-print novel of four people accidentally snatched back into the past -- specifically, the Eastern Mediterranean shortly before the eruption of Thera in 1350 BC, which gives Anderson plenty of opportunity for rehashing everything in J. V. Luce's The End Of Atlantis: New Light On An Old Legend, which probably gave him the idea in the first place (it was published in 1969; his novel appeared in 1962) and which you should read in preference to this tedious and very silly story.

Robin W. Bailey -- FROST (Unicorn, 209pp, £2.95): first British edition of a novel reviewed by Sue Thomason in her general look at modern fantasy fiction in issue 44.

Peter Beere -- URBAN PREY and THE CRUCIFIXION SQUAD (Arrow, 196pp & 223pp respectively, £1.75 each): first two novels in a series entitled "Trauma 2020", which the blurb for the first claims "depicts a future so chaotic and grim, you won't want to live long enough to get there". How right it is -- torture, rape, gang warfare, police thuggery...I can't imagine anyone but a psychopath actually enjoy-

ing this stuff.

James Blish -- DOCTOR MIRABILIS (Arrow, 318pp, £1.95): new edition of one of Blish's greatest works (last reviewed here by Sue Thomason, in issue 39), which for some reason Arrow have classified as SF. It isn't, of course, but a straightforward historical novel -- and such a classification will deny it a wider audience.

John Christopher -- THE DEATH OF GRASS (Sphere, 222pp, £1.75): far and away the best of all Christopher's disaster novels, and incidentally one whose scenario the monocultural farming practices introduced by the so-called Green Revolution have rendered extremely plausible -- if such a grass- and crop-destroying virus ever did appear, the world's stock of plant genes has been so depleted that, unable to cope with it or recover from its ravages, we would indeed all starve to death.

David Eddings -- MAGICIAN'S GAMBIT (Corgi, 305pp, £1.75): third book of "The Belgariad" (the first two were Pawn Of Prophecy and Queen Of Sorcery), which I initial-

ly thought was a trilogy but which is now set to run for five volumes (and which will doubtless extend itself further still). The obligatory map at the front is enough to put one off, full of silly and unpronounceable names — Tolnedra, Vo Mimbre, Gar Od Nadrak, Rak Cthol — and the characters are no better — Hettar, Mandorallen, Ce'Nedra, Kheldar... I can't understand how anyone can actually enjoy wading through such gibberish, but presumably someone will write and tell me.

Harry Harrison — INVASION: EARTH (Sphere, 150pp, £1.50): space opera in which two warring alien races establish beach-heads on Earth; but the war is a fake and, with many platitudes about brotherly love and co-operation between the USA and the USSR, Earth unites against them. Well, I suppose it helps pass the time...

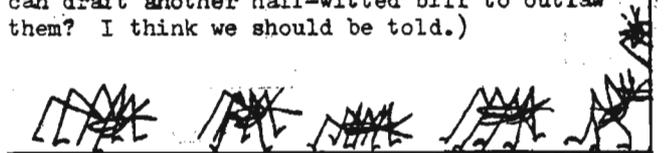
Aldous Huxley — BRAVE NEW WORLD REVISITED (Granada, 189pp, £1.50): not, strictly speaking, a sequel to Brave New World, but a non-fiction survey, first published in 1958, of events in the real world since the first appearance of the novel in 1932, intended to show how far towards his fictional world we have been moving. There's a good deal of truth in what he has to say about "freedom and its enemies", particularly with regard to the increasingly authoritarian — and in some cases downright anti-democratic — tenor of contemporary Western society; but the book's observations and preoccupations are inevitably dated, and the probability of it being taken as a curio rather than as a document of urgent socio-political relevance seems high.

James Kahn — TIME'S DARK LAUGHTER (Granada, 351pp, £1.95): second volume in "The New World" trilogy, set in a world in which genetic engineering has got out of control and just about wiped humanity off the map. Sounds interesting? Yes — but the execution is diabolical.

Gordon McBain — QUEST OF THE DAWNSTAR (Avon, 144pp, \$2.25): the sequel to the same author's earlier The Path Of Exoterra (which Chris Bailey, many issues ago, described as "a sort of debased Star Wars"), complete with a chronology tying the whole thing into the rise and fall of Atlantis. As if this wasn't enough to put the reader off, the novel begins thus: "In a sector of the galaxy very distant from the stars of his home, Prince Orion felt his senses heightened by the echo of two voices speaking millenia before his time. One voice cried out for help. The other demanded the very Aura gift that was Orion's life force." No thank you.

Theodore Roszak — BUGS (Granada, 400pp, £1.95): "The megashock novel of flesh-rending microchip horror" proclaims the cover. Yes. It's all about these silicon bugs, which... What on Earth has happened to the author of The Making Of A Counter-Culture that he can produce such ludicrous rubbish as this?

Brian Stableford — BALANCE OF POWER (Hamlyn, 138pp, £1.75): fifth of the "Daedalus" series, and its appearance so many years after the fourth is something of a mystery considering that there are no plans to reprint the first four or even to publish the sixth and final volume. However, this one is enjoyable enough (probably more enjoyable if you can remember what happened in the first four, which I can't); budding ecologists may even learn something from it. (Even more intriguing, however, is the list of Hamlyn titles at the back of the book, which includes a category entitled "Horror/Occult/Nasty". Nasty, eh? Gosh, I wonder what sort of books they mean by that? Does Mary Whitehouse know? Should they be brought to Mrs Thatcher's attention, so that the government can draft another half-witted bill to outlaw them? I think we should be told.)



## LET A HUNDRED FLOWERS BLOOM — the letter column

A couple of late letters arrived just after I'd finished the previous issue; since they deal with matters that are essentially peripheral to the content of same, and have lost what topicality they then possessed, I've decided not to print them. (To avoid being late in future, you should write as early as you can — deadlines being what they are, each issue has to be prepared for printing some weeks prior to the mailing date.) So I've only one letter to hand for this issue, from MARY GENTLE:

"I liked Chris Bailey's review of F & SF, and generally agree with him — do you think that sometime he might explain, for the ignorant among us, the reference to "Blue Guitar" in Ian Watson's The Book Of The River? Regarding Gene Wolfe's 'A Solar Labyrinth', I think it is both a pleasing conceit and a key to Wolfe's fiction; but not a key in any one-to-one sense. It merely indicates a way of reading, say, The Book Of The New Sun; and tells you what that process will feel like, rather than providing analysed answers. I've a feeling Wolfe prefers the instinctive to the intellectual, but whether this

is because of his Catholicism I wouldn't presume to guess. (I feel there are similarities with R. A. Lafferty, also a Catholic; Fourth Mansions, for example.)

"Sue Thomason makes a good point, in her review of John Crowley's Little, Big (the print of which was of a reasonable size in the trade paperback edition), about literary allusions — for example, I've read that the subtitle refers to an ancient and allegorical Persian poem, which I don't think too many of Crowley's readers will know. If they've tried to read Lewis Carroll's Sylvie And Bruno, then I'm sorry for them; it's unreadable. But the point about Little, Big is that it stands as a self-contained work; it doesn't matter if you've never heard of Lewis Carroll (although then, admittedly, you wouldn't know why Auberger takes photographs of pubescent girls, as indeed the Rev Dodgson did). The allusions are just the icing on the cake, or perhaps the gilding on the lily."

Which provides at least one answer to the plea Sue made at the end of her review...

Write soonest!