

PAPERBACK INFERNO

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BLOOD ON THE RACKS

Magazine reviews by Chris Bailey

What do the Americans think of Interzone? An idle thought which stems from contemplating the fact that the leading US magazines are so different in style and content from our solitary standard-bearer. The only substantial reaction I happen to have seen comes from Darrell Schweitzer, writing in Science Fiction Review 52 to explain why he didn't like Interzone 8. Possibly he is not representative of general US opinion, but I agree with all he says:

"What has gone wrong? I think avant-gardism has set in... In the quest for originality, an editor will put more and more emphasis on things which are not stories: odd prose constructs, fragments, assorted gimmick pieces. In a sense, 'experimental writing' means an attempt to fill a page with prose without telling a story (which would be, alas, hopelessly conventional)... It sets a bad example to newcomers. Writers who haven't yet learned to tell a story make a virtue out of their lack of technique. The problem is that most readers prefer stories; coherent narratives of fiction events, with characters, ideas, plots. The experienced writers, the big names, often contribute their best work to such publications (since such editors

usually do take genuinely innovative work along with routine avant-gardism)... The moral: a minimum standard of readability for every story is just as important as having one or two brilliant pieces in the issue."

A touch reactionary, but close enough to the truth of Interzone 8 and expressing enough worthwhile generalisations to merit the lengthy quotation. I wish Schweitzer had explored a little further the motives of editors in taking this sort of tack in the first place. It seems suspiciously easy to maintain a high profile, to claim to be pushing back the frontiers of literary sensibility (as is implied by the very name of Interzone) -- and this ideal may indeed be valid regarding many editors -- yet might there not be also a little fear there, or embarrassment at being associated with a nonderthal-browed readership and their simple delight in a simple story?

Schweitzer goes on to introduce the vexed "big name/unknown" issue and is, I feel, spot on in his observation that "writers who haven't yet learned to tell a story make a virtue out of their lack of technique". This has been substantiated by much of Interzone's material from new writers. It also appeals to the puritan in me. There is something warming in the thought of a writer grafting away and learning his trade. However galling this apprenticeship may be for that writer at the time, one feels that the eventual success is the more complete as he cruises past the burnt-out wreck of the fast lane Flash Harry.

Reversionary? Not really. Persistence with and practice of the yeoman virtues prepares the ground for a richer harvest in the future. Where now are so many of the exciting new talents who dazzled in New Worlds? Schweitzer's final point incidentally illuminates the principal difference between the two regular topics of this column, Interzone and The Magazine Of Fantasy & Science Fiction. Nothing ventured, nothing gained at Interzone, and the consequent credits and debits are an auditor's nightmare. At F & SF the story comes first. Turgid and ineptly realised a piece may be, but always there is a yarn struggling to get out, and you can feel that the writer is on a potentially more rewarding course. Otherwise, if you've shot your bolt and blown your mind with your first prose poem, is there anything left to achieve?

This is by way of a lengthy prologue to introducing the fact that Interzone 9 is a fail-safe issue. Written entirely by established, reliable big names, it is quite the best issue of the magazine to date, containing boring stories. Boringly and predictably, I liked them.

As if to tease and test Schweitzer's main argument, included is an early (1977) story from a writer not too well known in Britain but presently accumulating a considerable reputation in the USA, William Gibson, with "Fragments Of A Hologram Rose". Here we see a new writer forsaking the traditional, straight-line narrative in favour of a fragmented, inexact approach. There is a writerly intelligence at work, though, precisely because this story is about the unstable and kaleidoscopic nature of memory. If we are made of our memories, then of which fragments? -- fragments which catch the light differently as perspective alters. A neat evocation and a welcome harbinger.

Rather better known in Britain are Thomas M.

Disch and Brian Aldiss. Disch's "Canned Goods" is a slight and at times jokey piece, with some enjoyable digs at the art world, yet carrying a barely perceptible undercurrent of a more serious nature. What, after all, is the "value" of a work of art? And I admired the manner in which Disch deftly detailed the grim urban environment of the 21st century without ever evoking it directly. "The Gods In Flight" is not Brian Aldiss at quite his authoritative best, but it is interesting in that it demonstrates his recent well-publicised concern with nuclear disarmament. The story is intelligently oblique in its approach in that it not merely -- merely! -- reminds us of the threat, but places the arms race in the overall and timeless context of man's relationship to the natural world; if you like, his duty to the planet. On a lesser scale, even the natives who despoil the scenery for the benefit of the tourists' comfort are as behoven to this duty as the most godlike Chiefs of Staff.

The knottiest and in some ways the most interesting story in Interzone 9 is "The Luck In The Head", M. John Harrison's tale of how Viriconium got its name. Analeptics are out and a sour, rank atmosphere hangs over the world; the people sing a song that is both a primal and a dying cry. The story raises the corpse of an ancient debate -- should a story Mean or can it simply Be? "The Luck In The Head" assuredly is. It Means, too, although meaning seeps reluctantly from the page. My own (shaky) interpretation is Freudian, even if this is given only modest encouragement: "Clearly -- in that city and at that age of the world -- it would have been safer for Crome to look inside himself for the source of the dream". Crome ventures inside the dream and it takes a voodoo benediction to release him. This is a dark and disturbing, but not gratuitously offensive, story. Story, mark you, with a narrative that goes from A to Z, whatever the tricky patches.

The two best pieces, in my judgement, come from J. G. Ballard and Garry Kilworth. Ballard's "The Object Of The Attack" continues the theme of his recent "News From The Sun"/"Myths Of The Near Future"/"Memories Of The Space Age" triptych, manned spaceflight's infection of the space-time fabric. The almost-mythic landscapes of those previous stories are here replaced by the familiar social context of 1980s' Britain, and the obsessions of their protagonists, which sometimes felt distant to the reader, by the messianic delusions of Matthew Young, "The Boy", whose brand of home-grown delinquency is curiously understandable. The moral issue raised at the end adds a further richness, and then, with the Ames Room, Ballard finds the perfect analogy for the cosmological realities and illusions he explores. "The Object Of The Attack" is as fine a story as any from the earlier threesome, which makes it very good indeed.

With "Spiral Winds", Garry Kilworth also revisits old ground, the Middle Eastern desert which was the setting for his previous Interzone story, "The Dissemblers". In the present case, the desert is not only an exotic setting, its nature is integral to the story's intentions, which makes "Spiral Winds" rather the more successful of the two. In the narrator's endless crossing and circling of the desert in pursuit of an elusive goal, Kilworth represents marvelously the perpetuum mobile of human endeavour,

the relentless chase after an intangible something that is always one step ahead.

All of the stories in this issue are about people. "About" as in about and not as in "appearing as extras". I welcome Interzone 9. (If you still don't like it, feel the width, anyway — fifty-two pages constitute excellent value.) The departments have been sorted out, too. There are some sensible book reviews and some sensible replies to the forthright criticisms of an honest letter column, although I do take issue with Colin Greenland when he writes that it is "easy to assume (the magazine) represents, in every detail, the intentions of the editors rather than the product of circumstances". Point taken, but don't assume that the punter will nod understandingly, saying "Never mind, it wasn't really what they wanted to print", and rush off to renew his subscription.

As usual, few fireworks have been let off at The Magazine Of Fantasy & Science Fiction. In the four issues July 1984 to October 1984 inclusive the constant emphasis is, typically, on telling a story, using for that purpose the most functional prose:

"Sarah was discovered by the cook the next morning, huddled on the steps in the kitchen, the hem of her robe still damp, ruined with dirt and dew. She was so deeply asleep that the cook was afraid and sent for Dr Pratt, seeing to it that Miss Eamons was wrapped in blankets and settled in a chair before the fire. When Sarah woke, surrounded by the ruddy concerned faces of the cook and the maids, she began to cry, huge gasping sobs that echoed hoarsely in the kitchen."

A little finicky care — the heroine is "Sarah" to us and "Miss Eamons" to the domestics — but otherwise an unexceptional piece of writing, a patch of prose that will not bear lengthy analysis. Which is the point, really. Its first purpose is to move the narrative on a step and in that it is entirely representative of the bulk of the writing in F & SF. The average F & SF writer is concerned with getting the character up the stairs, through the door, into the room and putting the kettle on (or whatever), and this is a skill — surely absolutely fundamental to any subsequent development — that is prized above wit. For better or worse, story comes before style. (The above extract, by the way, is from Madelein E. Robins's "Cuckoo" (September), a nicely presented story about a boy called Joseph who grows up to be an angel. Hmm.)

Schweitzer's analysis continues to bear up. If a magazine like Interzone attracts the most innovative pieces from the star writers, then there is a tendency for their journeyman writing to appear in a magazine like F & SF, where the finest pieces are as likely to come from an emerging as an established writer (that minimum standard of readability is a great leveller). There is Frederik Pohl, for example, with two novellas (July and September) directed towards an intended "fix-up" future history of New York City. The two stories are very similar — too similar, both treating of gigantic civil engineering projects and innocents caught up in the union and mob corruption and violence that is consequent upon large amounts of public money being spent. Both pieces are adequately readable, but the forecast is that Pohl is not writing another 334. I was disappointed. While

Pohl is a better writer than often given credit for, the veteran's laziness or complacency that has afflicted many of the American old guard seems to have caught up with him at last.

Two stories also from Edward Bryant, who has — improved? matured? — from being the darling of Again, Dangerous Visions to being a reliable merchant of narrative. "Armageddon Between Sets" (September) is a brave attempt to beef up a pact-with-the-devil story, and if it fails it is because Bryant considers his two central character to be more interesting than they actually are. Neither did I experience the tingle of evil that the story requires. I preferred "The Man Of The Future" (October), the most amusing of those stories in this batch that aspire to humour.

Stephen Donaldson provides only one story (August) — about a human-alien encounter in deep space — and it is the most complete and utter tosh. "What Makes Us Human" it is tautologically called. What makes us human? Our capacity for love? understanding? lateral thinking? general complexity of response? No, it is a similar brand of technological trickiness to that the wicked aliens are using in their attempt to vapourise our heroes. But look out — here are the two spaceships approaching each other, each doing near light-speed (which, as I understand it, should make their combined approach speed c): "He got a picture in time to see the other ship go by in a blur of metal too fast for the eye to track". Some blur. And "to see" too fast for the eye? Still, it has been so long since I read about spaceships exchanging laser broadsides that I secretly enjoyed some of this story in an incredulous sort of way.

Another little secret; if there is a Lisa Tuttle story in an issue, that gets read first. Tuttle's sheer professionalism is the guarantee of reliability. "Redcap" (September) is as correctly presented as ever yet, as with the Bryant story mentioned above, it somehow lacks that final touch of nastiness that makes top-grade horror fiction linger with the reader. While I am not skilled enough in the ways of horror fiction to define exactly what it is that produces the frisson, it seemed to me that Ian Watson's "The Flesh Of Her Hair" (October) had it, and a moral besides. This is a totally bizarre story, featuring a German tramp steamer captained by a Dr Fischer figure, a contingent of British passengers pluckily summoning the spirit of Colditz, and a wig made from the hair of an Asian refugee. All narrated by a Sicilian, and not forgetting a garden gnome as a malign familiar. Alas that the story did not quite come off. The Second Officer's daughter, stupid, vain and chocolate-boxy though she is, does not deserve the ghastly fate Watson metes her.

F & SF has improved over the last couple of years and this is not due to an importation of top writers writing at their very best. There merely seems to be less room for makeweight dross. A few issues back I spoke of "small name" writers and I think they are making the difference. Some of them are delivering the goods — Bruce Sterling, for example, of whom portentous things have been spoken. On the evidence of stories such as "Swarm", "Spook" and "Life In The Mechanist-Shaper Era", I have not been able to see what the fuss is about. With "Telliamed" (September), I sat up and took notice. I was initially interested by the story's eighteenth century setting. Some recent novels

— The Anubis Gates, Fire In The Abyss, Lord Of Darkness — suggest that there may be a trend afoot for setting fiction in the broad period 1550-1850. And if there is not a trend, then why not? A period which comes after the stratifications of the Middle Ages yet before the Industrial Age's full burden of knowledge, which provides opportunities for romantic treatment and which offers the character of the savant-adventurer, would seem suited to the natural inclinations of the SF writer. "Telliamed" offers idea perceived through character. Who are you the more likely to believe — an impossible Brobdignagian sea-god or a learned fathead? M. de Maillet is applying a lifetime of experience, reading and reasoning to the substantiation of his System:

"Herodotus writes of iron mooring-rings found far up the slopes of the mountains of Mokatan, near Memphis. How else can we account for these vestiges, than to assume that the sea was once deep enough to drown these mountains?"

By such rigorous logic is he proving that the sea is shrinking. The ancient spirits of the world rise from the vasty deep to protest about this application of Reason — their reign is over, a new age, the Enlightenment, is approaching. They are quite right but they are telling entirely the wrong person and for entirely the wrong reasons. Of course, the whole episode — "this Day of Days, when a Great Tide of Change sweeps across the World" — may simply be a complacent vision induced by overindulgence in hallucinogenic snuff. Or even the dream of one sleeping off a troublesome attack of indigestion... "Telliamed" is a precariously brilliant story.

I am growing fond of the work of Lucius Shepard. "The Night Of White Rhairab" (October) fails to explain the human condition — nevertheless, it is a rattling good story. Take a mansion in colourful Katmandu, populate it with a Nepalese household spirit and a couple of head-case American travellers, import a vengeful ghost from nineteenth century New England, and let the story roll, timing the climax to coin-

cide with the mayhem of a local religious festival. Tail of gently into a soggy happily-ever-after ending and then twist suddenly and stab the reader in his vitals. A splendid yarn.

Finally, I want to make room for an oddball, Hal Hill's "Quicksilver Day" (July). This starts off something rotten — "the muted chain saw of an alarm clock grated him awake" — and neither is the subject-matter (a day in the life of an amnesiac) that promising. Yet as the story progresses it achieves a genuine sense of a different sense of the mundane, life experienced as random points rather than a straight line. "It wasn't his lot to weigh and measure reality; only to experience it, sometimes wonder at it, then let it go." The story occasionally gave me that curious sensation of privilege experienced when a writer takes a reader inside a stranger's head.

Finally, this is the season when the pundits pronounce on the events of the year. I do not see why Paperback Inferno should be denied this fun and so, with the BSFA Award nominations in mind, and compiled in no significant order, here is the "Blood On The Racks" Top Ten of 1984:

From Interzone: Ryman's "The Unconquered Country" (issue 7); Bradfield's "Unmistakeably The Finest" (issue 8); and Ballard's "The Object Of The Attack" and Kilworth's "Spiral Winds" (both issue 9). From F & SF: Robinson's "Ridge Running" and Cowper's "A Scent Of Silverdill" (both January); Roberts's "Sphairistike" (February); Shepard's "Salvador" and "The Night Of White Rhairab" (April and October); and Sterling's "Telliamed" (September).

It was agony doing that — it's not been a bad year. Don't forget the November and December issues of F & SF and issue 10 of Interzone, which should appear in time to qualify. And, of course, all those other magazines... I don't know why I'm bothering, as we all know which story from which magazine is going to win, but can we try harder this year? In theory, the BSFA could be of some consequence in the real world if it sponsored an SF award that carried authority. For that to happen, the award must have plenty of muscle behind it.

REVIEWS

Jack Vance — THE NARROW LAND (Coronet, 176pp, £1.75)

Reviewed by Nik Morton

Notwithstanding that the blurb reveals "Here under one cover for the first time are eight scarce and long unavailable stories by (Vance)", there are in fact only seven... "Scarce and long unavailable" do not seem the best terms to sell under; however, they are of some interest.

"The World Thinker", from 1945, Vance's first published story, written whilst he was in the Merchant Navy during the Second World War, mentions a computer, which must be quite remarkable. Here, too, we can glimpse Vance's mind beginning to dwell on fantasy, the sub-genre in which he has made his name:

"They passed through the outlaw-ridden belt of dark stars, and into a region of space unknown but for tales let slip by drunken Cantalan renegades — reports of planets covered with mighty ruins, legends of an asteroid littered with a thousand wrecked space-

ships... A dragon who tore spaceships open in its jaws purportedly wandered through this region, and it was said that alone on a desolate planet a godlike being created worlds at his pleasure."

And such is the case: the hero, in pursuit of a female renegade, enters a mind-created world. It is not a particularly remarkable tale, but it still possesses that sensawunda and innocence. The depiction of the thought-world's destruction is colourful and suitably bizarre, almost nightmarish in its realisation. Fast-paced and elegant in a minor way, the story is worth reading.

Indeed, none of the stories are bad; but they are dated. The longest, "Chateau D'If", from 1950, is typical of the fifties, with the hero, Mario, plunged into an unfamiliar body, trying to restore himself to his own, and solve the secret of space travel as well. And it has some nice touches:

"One at a time they were admirable, their beauty seemed natural. Together, the beauty cloyed, as if it were something owned and

valued highly. It seemed self-conscious and vulgar."

The hero's lone crusade against the Chateau d'If organisation runs too smoothly, reminding me of Gladiator-At-Law in theme: little people up against big organisations, and winning. The ending is contrived, a frigid woman taking revenge for her lost brother... The most interesting aspects, of Mario attempting to repair the emotional and other damage caused by his body's original owner, are barely investigated. The psychological novel may have been invented by Henry James in the 1890s, but clearly SF was not ready for it in the 1950s.

"The Ten Books" presents an interesting though not novel theme: the discovery of a civilisation built on the ideals and altruism of old Earth, without the rancour, evil and selfishness. The predicament: to bring it back into the fold of rough, coarse, self-seeking humanity, or to abandon them. The answer offers a comment on the "achievements" of all discoverers -- perhaps those discovered would prefer to make the decision themselves.

"Green Magic" is essentially about boredom; far better, it says, to have unfulfilled wants, otherwise creeping ennui results. "Where Hesperus Falls", from 1956, suffers from a gigantic flaw: an exceedingly long-lived man yearns for death and seeks in vain for suicide; with access to all knowledge, he is able to determine the landing of an old space satellite, but is incapable of taking into account the Earth's rotation... Really? Readers then may have been less sophisticated, I suppose. "Masquerade On Dicantropus" introduces tension between characters, but they are not handled very well -- the potential is there, but it was the twist which created the story and it was written to serve that end.

Don't rush out to buy this one unless you're a completist; still, it's probably better than the stuff foisted onto the public by David Drake...

Donald Kingsbury -- GETA (Granada, 511pp, £2.50)

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

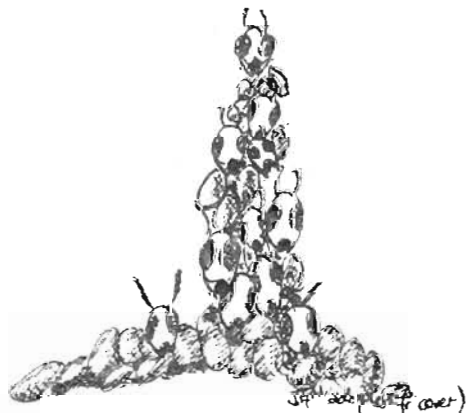
As a genre, SF is not overly endowed with writers of wit, grace and elegance. No one would look to SF to find what Norman Spinrad so derisively calls "high style". Nevertheless, there comes a point when a critic reads a work which so debases our language -- this precious, infinitely precise yet hugely flexible instrument with which we communicate with each other -- that he must cry "havoc". Geta is such a work. For the sake of the students attending the University of Montreal, I hope Donald Kingsbury has a stronger grip on the elements of calculus than he appears to have on English syntax. Put simply, this novel is appalling.

The story is basically that old standby of the lost tribes of Earth discovering their true identity in a brave new world. Geta is that world, and a pretty unpleasant place, inimical to human beings. Getans are divided into politically competitive clans, so much so that the whole operation smacks of an experiment in Social Darwinism, while worshipping a harsh God of the Sky (which will doubtless prove to be an Earth satellite in one of the sequels Kingsbury threatens to write). Anyone who can hear echoes

of Heliiconia or Arrakis in this description can go to the top of the class, although Kingsbury isn't in the same class of writers as Brian Aldiss and Frank Herbert. Frankly, he isn't even in the same school. Inconsistencies are rife. Given that they live on a poison planet it's hardly surprising that the Getans take an interest in microbiology, describing themselves modestly as "fine biochemists", which may be a good description seeing as they can clone human beings and graft human genes onto indigenous Getan insects. With all that ability, you'd think they would have got around to developing an insecticide, wouldn't you. Similarly, you'd think that a society which has liquid nitrogen sperm banks and microwave transmitters might have gone a little way beyond inventing the bicycle. The list could go on for quite some time, but I'll spare you (and me) save for a look at their food chain. The environment is so hostile that desperate famines are commonplace (which doesn't prevent them keeping back sufficient of their precious grain to whip up some whisky, never the most cost-effective of hoochies. Don't ask how barley manages to grow on Geta; I don't know), and when the famines come they eat each other. Now I've got nothing against cannibalism -- history has plenty of examples of cannibalism in circumstances of extremity or ritual requirement -- but the fact is that long pig makes a piss-poor cash crop. I simply cannot believe that the Getans would have allowed a situation necessitating repeated cannibalism to continue. This, like their masochistic delight in having designs carved in their flesh, strikes me as being something that Kingsbury thought of as a real attention-grabber without going to the bother of creating a society in which it would be credible.

Human beings are rational. They act for reasons which appear to them to be very compelling at the time. Getans appear to act because Kingsbury thinks that pain is a fun thing. There is a name for this sort of junk. Pornography.

Not that Kingsbury sets out to be a pornographer. He isn't that clever. To be honest, I wonder whether he has actually read anything of what he's writing about. On page 117 he has one of his heroines, Teenae, standing "naked, ankles manacled, wrists manacled in brass chain, holding her head high, guarded by two erect seamen". Let's forget that manacles are manacles, not chains, and have a look at that description. Were it by Michael Moorcock I might think that it is meant to mean what it means but I think Kingsbury means that the seamen were standing upright... Mind you, he doesn't seem to use the same lexicon as you and I -- on page 61 he tells



us that Teenae "had learned her sexuality as a temple courtesan". Yes; very chic, very Robert Graves, but my dictionary has sexuality being the state or quality of being sexual, which isn't quite what Kingsbury means. Not that he is ever willing to let meaning get in the way of coining a stark phrase. Consider these examples: "Hag eyes glowed like bone heaps in the cremation fire of a poisoned man" (p. 237) and "He had all the grace of a blacksmith in full swing" (p. 140). Pretty good, eh? But what do they mean? And even when he manages to choose words that are not nonsense, Kingsbury doesn't always choose words that mean what he thinks they mean. On page 296 he refers to a "barbarian druid princess"; perhaps I'm being pedantic, but druids were an exclusively male order of priests: you cannot have druid priestesses, let alone druid princesses. Then on page 316 he has Teenae thinking about "the road she remembered trodding with Josai". Trodding? To all this garbage you can add a woman who manages to keep herself in a permanent state of lactation without having been pregnant for many years and a feudal society which knows right away that it will have to invent lasers to be able to read a crystal which they believe is the frozen word of God.

You may have guessed that I'm not impressed with this novel. Apart from the infelicities already mentioned, Kingsbury writes in sentences of a length which seem to indicate he thinks his carriage return bell is a sign to end them, which is tedious. His characters do not enlist any sympathy. When Teenae was crucified upside down I was on the side of those doing the crucifying. His societal organisation is plain incredible, and his use of Earth history is tendentious. The crystal I mentioned earlier turns out to be a potted political history of Earth from which Kingsbury has the Getans draw parallels to their own situation. As might be expected, Lenin comes off pretty badly (after all, he only had the aftermath of a disastrous war, a multifaceted civil war and an invasion to cope with); far be it for me to defend post-revolutionary Bolshevism, but I would suggest that given the Getan society as described then the example of Robespierre and the French Revolution is considerably more apposite. Still, perhaps it isn't the safe thing to knock the French Revolution in Montreal of Le Quebec Libre.

I may have read worse novels than this, but thankfully they have faded from my memory. In its 511 pages of large print are to be found no ideas of novelty or interest. The storyline is confused, boring and sententious. Kingsbury displays all the literary skill of a Sun sub-editor. The cover blurb, while hyping Geta into the Dune class, has A. E. Van Vogt hold that it sets "a new level of classic writing". Well, I suppose he's a change from Larry Niven or Jerry Pournelle saying something equally absurd...

Geta isn't B-movie bad, funny bad, "how on Earth" bad. It is just bad. I earnestly advise you to avoid it at all costs. Read R. L. Fanthorpe if you must, but not this.

trilogy, this novel concerns a mutant named Knot who possesses the unique psi gift of causing anyone who meets him to forget about him completely within a short time of his leaving them. This is obviously an extremely useful attribute for a secret agent, so Knot is recruited to the service of CCC, the Central Co-ordination Computer which runs the universe, by a beautiful and normal agent called Finesse. The team which sets out to uncover and thwart a plot to destroy the entire human galaxy also includes Hermione, who is a telepathic weasel, and Mit, a telepathic hermit crab with powers of precognition. They travel to the planet Macho where they discover Piebald, a renegade who is lobotomising all persons of psi ability who fall into his power and who is planning to take over the galaxy with his "lobo" army. In their struggle they are aided by a mermaid, a baby with psi-scrambling ability, telepathic rats, bees and cockroaches and, on the planet Chicken Itza, by a group of telepathic fighting cocks called the Clucks Clan. All this sounds whimsical enough to have been written by Clifford Simak, and it might be hilariously funny if it did not contain several very nasty killings and one or two scenes that would earn it a prudish asterisk (denoting "scenes or dialogue which might be offensive to some") in the US Science Fiction Book Club's advert.

I finally settled on regarding the novel as a contemporary space opera, and decided that the silly names and characters are just peripheral to the main action, sometimes raising a smile and sometimes a wince. Anthony does put some effort into some of his passages, and he does make the reasonable if not original serious point that if normal humans do stop discriminating against each other they'll always find someone else to discriminate against, in this case mutants, chickens, cockroaches... One of the novel's main faults is that its pace is, for an experienced writer like Anthony, uneven -- the middle section, on the planet Macho, seems to go on for ever, while the final section, in which our heroes battle with the lobos for control of CCC is rather rushed.

Despite this, Mute is a reasonable galactic adventure which contains some interesting ideas, although it never lives up to the cover's promise of an "Awesome Galactic Epic Of Humanity's Desperate Struggle To Save The Future". Some readers who know Anthony's previous work may find the humorous content compatible with the novel as a whole, but I think it needed to have been handled far more expertly to have properly fitted in.

Novels like Catch-22 and Slaughterhouse-5 have successfully combined humour and violence and made us think at the same time, but Mute is nothing like as well executed and does not succeed in the way they do. Better shaped, it could have been good, but it ended up as just another read.

John Brunner -- THE CRUCIBLE OF TIME (Arrow, 474pp, £2.25)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason.

Fiers Anthony -- MUTE (New English Library, 448pp, £2.50)

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Set against the same background as the "Cluster"

One of the harder and more rewarding challenges that the writing of mainstream science fiction presents is that of creating and describing an alien culture: a culture with depth, richness, flavour, charm and strangeness. There are two

main approaches to this problem. The easier, and more usual, method is to introduce a character who shares many of our assumptions about the way things are. This Envoy or Planetary Observer or Stranded Traveller or whatever can wander around boggling at the wonder of it all, investigating the culture's peculiarities, asking for detailed explanations of anything the reader might not understand, and generally employing a number of similarly useful techniques to let the reader know what things look like and what's going on.

The Crucible Of Time is an ambitious novel: it takes the second and much more difficult approach. This involves describing the alien culture entirely in its own terms. Because there is no outsider to explain things to, there are no direct explanations of things which are obvious or commonplace to the characters. There is never a clear description of the alien race, for example, but there are constant indirect descriptions: "She refolded her mantle" (as part of her body, not an article of clothing); "Fully upright, not letting the least hint of pressure leak from his tubules"; "My eye's not keen"; "His mandibles chattered with excitement". We are never directly told that this culture is based on animate tools, not inanimate ones, but cities are composed of huge trunks and branchways; "briq", "barq" and "junq" are not merely types of boat but also types of animal; familiarity with many inanimate technologies, such as fire and electricity, develops (to us) surprisingly slowly. The effects of this mind-set reverberate through the whole epic.

For epic it is. The protagonist of the story is not any of the individuals whose lives and intellectual discoveries we read of in a series of linked episodes which span some thousands of years. It is the species, the culture. The story told in The Crucible Of Time is the story of the development of a particular strand of scientific thought from astrology through astronomy towards spaceflight; that single strand which might preserve the species from the imminent, inevitable destruction of its increasingly untenable planetary base. Ice age, radiation plague, meteor bombardment, destroy civilisation after civilisation, city after city. Again and again, vital information is lost. Do they make it? Read the novel and find out.

But is it a good novel? Yes, I think it is. There's lots of individual drama, and lots of carefully-worked out background detail, lots of ideas and lots of action. I found the linguistic device used to represent alien artefacts in English rather irritating, but linguistic credibility is perhaps the hardest thing to achieve in such a work. The aliens must be simultaneously represented as talking English (to that we can understand them) and talking alien (their own language, their own concepts: at least their language does appear to be sound-based). I guess that the "alien words" in the novel are not meant to be taken as actual samples of the alien speech, but are meant to represent alien words and/or concepts for which the nearest English equivalent is something like the English word suggested by the "alien word". This is an interesting way of handling the problem of alien speech, but perhaps one doomed to failure or at least inconsistency. However, it detracts very little (if at all) from the main thrust of the narrative. Brunner has managed (again) to pro-

duce a novel which is both exciting and thought-provoking. Recommended.

Lawrence Watt-Evans — THE CHROMOSOMAL CODE
(Avon, 204pp, £2.50)

Reviewed by Nigel Richardson

Cover illustrations often account for many a reviewer's dislike for a novel long before they actually turn to the first page, but I'd like to say that the cover of The Chromosomal Code had the opposite effect than usual on me. I mean, how can you feel anything but admiration for a cover that shows what might be the last man on Earth fleeing across an icy wasteland pursued by a giant alien spaceship, clutching as he runs a box of Sugar Frosties? Carl Lundgren, I salute you for this new concept!

The Chromosomal Code is fast-fiction, the literary equivalent of a Big Mac: you know that it isn't good for you, will be forgotten about the moment you've finished it, and definitely won't improve your social standing, but you can't help liking it at the time. It's readable, fairly snappy once you've got past the dismal opening pages, and has a few clever little touches where it recognises the absurdity of the whole thing and uses this absurdity to good effect rather than just blustering dourly on through. It doesn't take itself too seriously, aims straight for the renowned "read on the train and discard" category and, best of all, it's short and to the point. No frills, no pontificating, no sequels. To be blunt, it may not be good but at least it isn't bad.

The plot is the old standby of one-man-against-the-world, or against half the galaxy as it turns out. To say any more would be to give too much away — as the back cover blurb almost does — which wouldn't be fair as the novel is little more than plot. It owes as much to the thriller genre as SF, with the hero hiding and escaping and trying to find out what it's all about. Why do the aliens want him? What will they do to him? What will they do to the world if they don't get him? Will he have to save the world? That's the sort of novel this is, and while a steady diet of such stuff would be hard to recommend an occasional dip into the old "Crash! Bang! Pow! Sock!" school of SF does make a welcome change every now and then, just like the aforementioned Big Mac. After all, a diet of caviar would soon pall — or so I'm told.

Isaac Asimov — ASIMOV ON SCIENCE FICTION
(Granada, 384pp, £2.50)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

I don't quite know how to approach this book. I read a fair amount of Asimov's fiction, with some pleasure, in my earlier years, and even now I wouldn't deny his crucial role in the development of Astounding's "Golden Age"; but I believe that, as with Heinlein, his continued success has long since gone to his head, to the extent that he now feels himself qualified to pronounce upon absolutely everything regardless of his actual competence to do so. Hence, no doubt, his 200-odd books... "I am a prolific writer," he states in the introduction to "The Prolific Writer"; and then, in the article itself goes on to say: "To be prolific means that you must be

able to write quickly, facilely, and without much concern as to what improvements you might possibly introduce if you took enough time. That is precisely what you don't want to do if your interest is in writing well". Indeed!

This is of course to quote at random, and possibly out of context to boot; but no matter where one opens the book, potentially damning quotations come leaping out. For instance: "Of late I have taken to the preparation of science fiction anthologies, which is perhaps a sign of literary senescence, though I like to think of it, rather, as putting my mature wisdom and expertise at the service of the science fiction reading public" (page 29). And: "I even have the gall to lecture people on style in writing, though I often say I know nothing about such matters. What irks me, however, is that others sometimes say I have no style. I may say what I please about myself but that doesn't mean I yield the right to others" (page 63). And this: "These days, one of the great purposes of the meetings of members of a subculture is the handing out of incestuous awards to members, from members, by members. We can regard this phenomenon with mild contempt and a smile of superior amusement until such time as we ourselves get an award. Then it becomes very important" (page 278). Arrogance, complacency, hypocrisy... admirers of the man contend that his egomania is merely an inverted joke about his modesty, but if so it's a joke that's gone on far too long.

But then the above has nothing to do with SF, the book's ostensible subject-matter -- but then again, neither has a good third of its contents. What on Earth is the point, for instance, of all this stuff about why science fiction is called science fiction and how it should be written? "To me, though, 'speculative' is a weak word. It is four syllables long and not too easy to pronounce quickly" (page 27). "And yet, though the phrases may be memorable, though the swing of the sentences may be grand, though the moods and emotions may be effectively invoked -- the story may be just a little hard to understand" (page 64; but six lines later): "Don't get me wrong. It is not necessarily important to understand something at once. In fact, brooding over a well-written mosaic of a story and re-reading it may, little by little, illuminate you" (but he saves himself at the end of the paragraph by adding:) "If you have the time for it". As if you hadn't guessed, these editorials are straight reprints from his own magazine. Now those of you who haven't read it will know why it's so awful.

His comments on science fiction itself (when he eventually gets around to making them) are laden with contradictions -- on page 112 (and again on page 203), he contends that Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is the first true SF novel, but by page 184 he's changed his mind and contends that Edgar Allen Poe should instead receive the accolade -- and as fabulous as his editorials. Fixated on the "Golden Age" of the forties, he seems incapable of understanding that the world has moved on since then, rendering obsolete The Gospel According To Campbell and removing from Campbell's brand of SF the right to be called "modern" any longer; and when discussing the non-Campbellian SF that has appeared since the forties he demonstrates a total inability to comprehend it in other than Campbellian terms. Thus Daniel Keyes's Flowers For Algernon is misleadingly described as con-

cerned with the notion of surgically-enhanced intelligence when in fact it's concerned with the effects of the experiment on Charlie Gordon; Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four is denounced for its unworkable methods of social control, its inability to imagine a plausible future society, its recycling of Stalinist ideology, and even its Newspeak, all of which is utterly irrelevant to the novel's thrust and message (and in fact the whole piece conveys the strong impression that the novel scares Asimov shitless: he ends with some sub-McCarthyite hysteria about the death of free enterprise capitalism being the death of civilisation); Soviet science fiction in general is patronised for failing to exactly follow the same "evolution" as American magazine SF; and so on and so on.

This book is junk, in other words -- a travesty of criticism, unmitigated drivel from beginning to end. That it should be passed off as some sort of guide to science fiction is simply absurd.

Jack Vance -- LYONESSE, BOOK 1: SULDRUN'S GARDEN
(Granada, 436pp, £2.95)

Reviewed by Judith Hanna

Lyonesse is characteristic, even quintessential, Vance: quirky, vivid, incident-packed. It's a grab-bag of fairy-tale motifs shaken together and just tumbled out onto the paper: cruel father King Casmir locks away disobedient Suldrun, lots of magical artefacts, stolen child Dhrun, handful of fairy gifts, child-eating ogre, attack on wicked would-be wizard's (Faude Garfilhiot) impregnable castle Tintzin Fyral. The hero is called Aillas. Lots of exotic-sounding names picked up from here, there, and invented. Little structure to the complicated plot, little pacing to the piling-on of incident, story zigging and zagging at whim on its way towards one of those punchlines Vance uses for endings. Lacking such a punchline, Lyonesse doesn't so much come to an end as just stop. "What now?" asks the Epilogue. Will Vance write a sequel? Probably -- this is only Book 1, after all.

This is another Vance story (The Eyes Of The Overworld, for example) about prancing through a land of marvels with an eye to loot, pillage, rape and torture. The tale slows down for loving descriptions of tortures and executions. All fiction is in part fantastic, in part borrowed from reality; the question is which aspects of these to emphasise. In Vance's work, what there is of the Good simpers smarmily, and what there is of the Beautiful gives off a tiny rattle. It's only the torments, crimes and perversions that carry conviction.

Sigmund, mein freund, when you've finished with Herr Bosch, come and take a dekho at this Vance guy.

Alan Dean Foster -- SPELLSINGER (Orbit, 352pp, £2.50)

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

I have always seen Alan Dean Foster as a writer who started off with great promise with novels such as Icerigger, exciting unpretentious adventures in the space operatic tradition, and who then lost his way with novelisations of screen-

plays like Alien and awful books about the Star Wars characters. He has become a hack, concerned only with volume of output and not quality.

To see, therefore, that he had turned his hand to writing a sword-and-sorcery novel came as no surprise. Spellsinger is "Volume One of a stunning new fantasy series" which will, as they say, run and run...

What does surprise me is the presumption that people want to read yet another series of tales about about a modern-day American plucked in some mysterious way from his everyday surroundings and transported to a mediaeval world where magic reigns and where he and only he can save that world from an indescribable evil.

Jonathan Merriweather is a Californian graduate student about to present his master's thesis on "The noble-sun king relationships of the Incas 1248-1350". He is smoking a joint and as high as a kite when he is removed by magic from his dormitory room to a Rupert Bear world of human-sized animals who also dress, talk and live like humans. The good wizard who has worked this spell is not an old man with a flowing white beard, long robes covered with mystic symbols and a tall pointed hat but a turtle with a shell full of drawers containing his magical requisites.

The novel is dedicated to, among others, Jimi Hendrix, and Merriweather is the bass guitarist in a rock band. His idols are Led Zeppelin, Procol Harum, Deep Purple and The Moody Blues, and he entertains a tavern-full of animals with "Eleanor Rigby". Once he has discovered his talent as a "spellsinger", he conjures up transport for his party by singing a medley of Beach Boys dragster songs. This leads me to believe that the manuscript dates from the sixties, when it was probably written as a Tolkien pastiche, but had to wait for publication until Foster became a "name".

To publish this in the same year as Delany's thought-provoking Neveryon stories, years away in time and development from his first published fantasy, The Jewels Of Apor, shows just how wide the fantasy field is. But then to compare Delany and Foster is equivalent to equating Midnight's Children with King Of The Kyber Rifles because they're both about India. In any case, Spellsinger is not even a complete novel in its own right. It consists purely of scene-setting, the formation of an ill-assorted fellowship, and the start of their quest to save the mammalian world from conquest by a race of insects. It does not end at any natural break, but leaves the protagonists in mid-adventure on the last page.

The second volume of the series has already been published in the USA, so presumably the public liked Spellsinger enough to keep it going. Here also, enough people will probably buy it, and make Foster plenty of pounds as well as plenty of dollars. It is of course undemanding Lowest Common Denominator fantasy, competently written and reasonably well paced, but without any original ideas or proper characterisation. There is, I fear, no hope that the following novels in the series will be any better.

One day someone will publish a fantasy novel without a map filled with names like Sloomazayor-le-Weentli and Yul-pat-Pomme, but this is not the one. Spellsinger is no worse, however, than most of the novels published in this genre, and if you like Piers Anthony's "Tenth" series

you'll probably like this. It requires no ability to appreciate the thought of structuralist philosophers, and despite my opinion of the novel as a whole I confess I did like both the Marxist dragon and the listener to "Eleanor Rigby" who knows people who keep other people's heads in jars by the door but never their own faces!

Philip K. Dick -- TIME OUT OF JOINT (Penguin, 187pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Helen McNabb

"As I was sitting in my chair
I knew the bottom wasn't there,
Nor legs nor back, but I just sat,
Ignoring little things like that."
(Hugh Mearns, Verse And Worse)

This is a useful, satirical introduction to Idealism for the non-philosopher. "Esse percipere" (to be is to be perceived) is the basis of the philosophical theory of Idealism propounded by Bishop Berkeley in the eighteenth century, which states (briefly) that things only exist when there is someone there to see them, so that when (for example) people leave a room the furniture ceased to exist until someone re-enters. This explanation simplifies the theory down to the bare bones, but is sufficient to add insight to Time Out Of Joint because the link between words and reality is one of the ideas which Dick is exploring through the situation he creates.

The protagonist is a man called Ragle Gumm, who has a growing feeling that things are wrong with his world. Superficially, he is living in the pleasant, cosy world of the 1950s, with his sister and brother-in-law; they are nice middle-class people in a nice middle-class suburb although Gumm earns his living, unusually, by consistently winning a newspaper competition called "Where will the Little Green Man be next", which involves spotting the exact place where the little green man will land when Earth is invaded. But there are moments of disquiet in Gumm's existence; on occasion, his objective reality fades away leaving only a slip of paper saying "soft drink stand" or "door" in place of the actual object so that, like Bishop Berkeley, he begins to wonder what actually does exist and to doubt the workings of his own mind, to doubt his own sanity. He is somewhat reassured when other people relate distortions of reality which have happened to them, but although he is happier about his sanity he is less happy about the world he is living in. He has a growing feeling that he is the centre of a complex plot, a feeling confirmed when he overhears a radio conversation about himself, and sets out to discover what his wrong with himself and his world -- and proves to be more competent at it than Hamlet.

The rest of the couplet from which the title is taken,

"The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,
That I was ever born to set it right"

is very apposite, because Ragle Gumm's unique talent for seeing patterns is shown to be vital to Earth's continued existence, so much so that even his insanity is pondered to, and to an extraordinary degree. To say any more would be to give away too much of the plot, which would be a shame because the resolution of Gumm's work on the competition, which he is beginning to think

is futile, and his belief that he is the centre of more than just his own private universe, augmented by the philosophical speculations, makes enthralling reading.

Not that the novel is absolutely perfect. I found the end hurried, as though Dick had had enough of his creation and wanted to resolve it. The scene-setting of the world of the 1950s is done in detail and at leisure, catching an abiding feeling of security, comfort and hope and written with deep affection; whereas the ending, although it clears up most of the plot details, doesn't have the at times lyrical writing of the earlier portion, which I found disappointing. Also, there are some holes in the story -- the set-up in Old Town, where Ragle Gumm lives, is not fully explained, nor how many people there are living there and the extent of the brain-washing they have undergone; in addition, Mrs Keitelbein keeps appearing too conveniently and has such enormous influence that she seems to be a deus (or dea?) ex machina rather than a believable character. (Although she is one of the few characters about whom that can be said; most of them are real enough to be living just down the road.) I can't help feeling that Dick was more interested in the philosophy and the theoretical background than in the plot he devised to carry his ideas, but the novel could have many more holes in it than it has and still be one of the best I've read in ages. I read it in a sitting and would recommend it to you heartily.

Robert Asprin (ed.) — THIEVES' WORLD (Penguin, 221pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

I looked at the contents page and saw that the book was an anthology of eight sword-and-sorcery stories, with an accompanying essay "The Making Of Thieves' World" at the back. I turned straight to the essay. It makes interesting reading. A bunch of writers, known and unknown, get together at a convention and decide they'll each write a story set in a world which they'll collectively design. Enthusiasm mounts. Ideas and alcohol flow like, well, like ideas and alcohol at a good convention. I was impressed. My appetite was whetted.

So I turned to the stories. And finished the book, an hour or so later, wondering where all the fun and sparkle had gone, and why I felt so bored... (Moral: don't read the back of the book first.)

Obviously, then, this was an idea that didn't work. There are several reasons why not. One



is the problem familiar to the watchers of TV serials — when several writers are working on the same project, the demands of continuity allow little in the way of character development. This is bearable for forty minutes once a week, when memory has the chance to soften and elaborate the bare skeleton of the previous episode; it is not bearable eight times over in the space of a single book. Any one of these stories would have been interesting enough on its own, but together, far from complementing each other, they actually suffer for the company they keep.

And the continuity is not all that continuous. Sanctuary, the town where all the stories are set, reads like a town designed by a committee, which of course it is. And not even a real town, but a stage set, or one of those gold-rush boom-towns where impressive screens of false frontage conceal the poverty of the one-storey hovels behind them. Reading Thieves' World brought home to me how important atmosphere and background are to good sword-and-sorcery; not plot, not characters, but atmosphere. Also how individual a quality it is, unique to every writer worth the paper they've written on. The fabric of background detail may not be what holds my attention in a story, but how I miss it when it's not there! There are holes in this tapestry you could put your fist through.

Finally, the stories themselves are not all that special (although, as I said, I probably think less well of them than I would have done had I met them in different company). Three days after reading the book, the only ones that retain their individuality are Poul Anderson's neat (but unoriginal) piece of geometrical magic and Marion Zimmer Bradley's rather sombre tale of a wizard's hidden weakness, in which the final twist will come as a surprise only to those who have never read any Bradley before.

By all means buy this book if you like sword-and-sorcery and can ration yourself to reading one story a week. Otherwise, stick to witnessing author's flights of imagination first-hand at your next convention. Live butterflies are much, much nicer than dead ones.

Jefferson P. Svycaffer — NOT IN OUR STARS
(Avon, 222pp, \$2.75)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

You thought Doc Smith-style slambang action-adventure space opera was dead? Think again:

"Admiral Michael Devon. Battle hero. Brilliant strategist. Iron commander of the flagship Philomena and a Concordat starfleet of hundreds. His mission: quell the exploding rebellion in the Outreach — and regain control of the twelve-world Industrialised Zone."

And that's just the back cover blurb. Here's the flyleaf teaser (a space battle):

"Beams burst forth, straight-line lances containing hundreds of trillions of watt-seconds of energy. The targets moved, and the speed of light actually began to seem slow. A beam struck a ship squarely on an armour plate. Three metres of plastic-ceramic-titanium honeycomb was chiselled out of the plate. Engines produced multiple trillions of watts of power, which was hungrily consumed by drives, guns, support systems. Every ship

tried to avoid being where the next beam would pass."

Not enough for you? Try the beginning of Chapter 12 (the marines are going in):

"Using almost surgically precise missile fire to deliver fractional kiloton warheads, Michael made certain that the collateral damage was kept to a minimum. He did not unleash the multi-megaton city-shattering weapons; those were for enemies, not for one's own rebellions citizens."

Or the first line of Chapter 3:

"For years John Burt had been known to his crew as 'Two-Pistol John'."

According to a recent issue of Locus, Swycaffer is busily manufacturing a series of these things, and has even sold another two or three of them.

Good God.

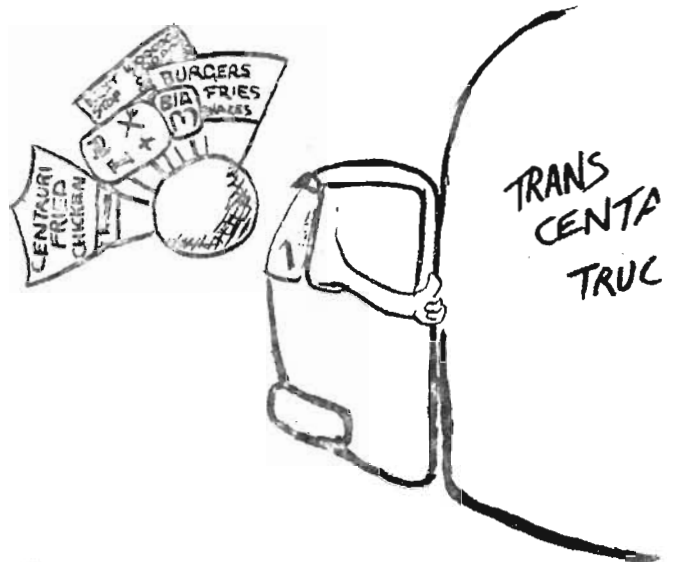
G. J. Cherryh — MERCHANTER'S LUCK (Methuen, 208pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Take one young man who isn't quite what he seems to be. He seems to be a lying, scheming, cheating, thieving, conniving trickster. He is the last living scion of a noble trader family who were all murdered by pirates. Why he chooses to behave in this odd fashion when it must be easier for him to get by just being what he is never gets made clear. Put him on Viking, a trading station, where he is down on his luck, broke and on the look-out for crewmembers. So what does this lying, scheming, etc. do? He tries to pick up a member of the biggest and heaviest trading ship in port is all he tries to do, and in a bar where he can't afford the cover charge either. Just how he has survived so long pulling strokes like this is never made clear to us, any more than we are given a good reason why Allison Reilly falls for Ed Stevens's gaunt, emaciated charm and takes him to bed, picking up the bill too. Smitten by love, if not good sense, our hero follows her ship, "Dublin Again", to Pell in a spectacularly foolhardy manoeuvre which should have killed him but doesn't because he's the hero and has another 150 pages to negotiate. Pell happens to be in the Alliance (or is it the Union?), and on this station outwith all their usual trading grounds he is bought out by "Dublin Again" because Allison Reilly is tired of playing 21st fiddle with no hope of playing 20th. Loaded up with military cargo and given a stern if cryptic talking-to by a military lady, our hero sets off for cold and lonely Venture with only Allison and some cousins off "Dublin Again" for crew and company. (All the crew of "Dublin Again" are called Reilly -- all 1300 of them -- which must make for an interesting phone book.) Just outside Venture they are met by (you guessed it) the pirates. After some stiff-jawed heroics, our hero is slowly bleeding to death when over the event horizon comes our military lady in her ship "Norway", hard on the heels of "Dublin Again", and another two trading ships. It was a dastardly trap all along, with our hero as bait. Still, they all live happily ever after, with Ed Stevens able to reclaim the Kreja name.

If that ending seems all too familiar -- the

cavalry galloping into sight or the King's Navy appearing round the headland -- my initial reaction was "Mercy sakes alive, looks like we got us a convoy". Merchanter's Luck? Trucker's Luck is more like it. This story could be planted lock, stock and over-the-engine cab on the Midwestern highways and not suffer one jot. They are all in there -- combines, independents, hijackers, bent coppers, plaguey bureaucrats, fancy rigs, the lot -- and given Cherryh's never less than workmanlike storytelling it all bowls



along merrily to its pre-ordained climax, with enough spicing of sex, violence, politics and psychiatry to keep the sauce interestingly piquant. I can't pretend that I understood all the politics, or their significance -- I suspect that had I read Downbelow Station all would be much clearer, but I haven't and here lies a substantial flaw in the work. Cherryh seems to assume that readers of Merchanter's Luck have read Downbelow Station and therefore don't need to be told everything they might need to know to make sense of it because the information is contained in the previous novel. A somewhat dangerous assumption, I would suggest, and Merchanter's Luck certainly suffers the lack of a few thousand words of judicious background.

I do have two real quibbles, though. Cherryh has her hero illicitly use the bank account of the Wyatt's Star Combine to fund his activities, confident that as long as he puts back what he has taken by the end of the financial year then nobody will be any the wiser. There has obviously been a major change in business practice between now and then, since the first principle of business is to know exactly where your last penny is at any given moment and the second is to make sure that it is earning its keep -- which doesn't mean lying around in some safe bank account in the back of beyond waiting to be misappropriated by some plausible conman. (Just shows you, doesn't it, the spiritual benefits of space travel.) My second quibble is that this novel is being marketed as "A Downbelow Station Novel". Downbelow is mentioned once in the text and has nothing whatsoever to do with the story.

Nevertheless, these are only quibbles. Merchanter's Luck is a reasonably exciting adventure story told briskly and without many frills -- rather reminiscent of Papa Heinlein on a better day. It may not be the best novel ever written and it certainly won't alter anyone's life, but if you want a few hours of escapist romance then you could do very much worse.

Charles Platt — DREAM MAKERS, VOLUME II
(Berkley, 300pp, \$6.95)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

From my own limited experience, I know that interviews can be peculiar things — regardless of the circumstances in which they're conducted, the trick is always to get the subject to talk about what he or she really wants to. Naturally, the interviewer should be seeking to draw them out on such matters, to phrase the questions in such a way that the subjects are "persuaded" to talk without realising that they have been; but at no time (and I've been guilty of this myself) should the interviewer attempt to force his or her own concerns onto the subject, try to dragoon them into discussing what is currently uppermost in the interviewer's thoughts.

I say this because it seems to me that, at certain points in this book, there is an imbalance in favour of Platt rather than his subject. One of my main complaints about the first volume (also known as Who Writes Science Fiction?, reviewed in Vector 102) was that, although Platt stated in his introduction that as the person conducting the interview he could hardly be read out of the picture, there was still too much of him in the book: the sense, in many of the interviews, was that his subjects' words were not being reported verbatim but were filtered through his opinions of them, made manifest in such cases by the large amounts of linking material either summarising or explaining their remarks and/or surroundings. Such linking material has been kept to a minimum in this second set of interviews, but there has instead been a change in the nature of the questioning — although still seeking to persuade his subjects to discuss themselves and their concerns, Platt also seeks their response to one of his own: the current spate of (admittedly quite dreadful) generic fantasy that now floods the bookshops and seems to be outselling SF. His questions about it occur and recur with such frequency that I began to wonder at his motives — was he unsure of his own explanation for the phenomenon and looking for a more concrete answer, perhaps? Searching for a consensus amongst SF writers at large? Trying to mobilise support for a campaign against it? Yet none of the answers he receives are particularly startling — authors and readers are getting lazy, people in general are beginning to distrust science, the gloomy state of the real world is engendering a drift into wish-fulfillment escapism — and tell us nothing that we don't already either know or suspect. There's no point to it all, in other words; it's simply a distraction from the real business of the interviews — getting the subjects to talk about what matters to them.

And in this he succeeds admirably. Sometimes he's helped by the natural garrulity or loquaciousness of his subjects — Piers Anthony, for example, rattles on about himself and his work at such a rate that in order to keep him on course Platt has to interrupt him several times, not always successfully — but mostly it's because, fortuitously or not, he has the knack of asking exactly the right questions. The interview with Jerry Pournelle, for example, not unnaturally devotes a fair amount of space to the latter's views on militarism and the supposed inevitability of war, and when asked whether military preparedness might not be a self-fulfilling prophecy his answer is to pull a revol-

ver from under his desk, set out his "rules" for gun control, and state that thanks to the vigilance of him and his neighbours the area in which he lives has the lowest crime rate in Los Angeles — an incident that, for me, sheds rather more light on Pournelle's personal philosophy than his fiction has done. (Later in the same interview, Pournelle admits to the rumour that he was once a member of the Communist Party, giving as his excuse for joining it — albeit not in quite as many words — that it was the macho thing to do. A typical Pournelle reason, no doubt — but the Communist Party! Boggle boggle boggle...) Poul Anderson, pushed into naming which of his books he thinks is his best, replies to the effect that he hopes it's the one he was then working on (Orion Shall Rise); when asked what it's about, he makes the interesting observation that if Western technological civilisation experiences a hiatus of any kind then it will have difficulty getting going again, not because knowledge will have been lost but because rich natural resources will have been used up — not a startlingly original observation, but still not quite the sort of answer you'd expect from such an enthusiastic supporter of the infinitely expanding future as his fiction makes him out to be. And in his interview, Jack Vance, discussing the political thrust of his work, vigorously denies being right-wing and refers with disdain to "some British fellow, evidently left-wing in his political opinions" who sent him a copy of an article demonstrating, on the basis of some of his fiction that he is — and if this isn't Mike Dickinson's "Romance And Hardening Arteries" from Vector 95, I'll be amazed.

One might surmise from this, however, that Platt has plumbed the hitherto uncharted depths of his subjects, brought back a cargo of information about them that will come as a revelation to us all — but this, of course, is not the case. Almost everyone in the book has been interviewed at least once before; most SF writers seem to talk incessantly about themselves anyway; and, rather contradicting the book's subtitle (probably tacked on by the publishers) — "The Uncommon Men And Women Who Write Science Fiction" — most of them seem thoroughly ordinary in their outlook and upbringing. They read omnivorously and voraciously from an early age, felt isolated from their peers at school, discovered SF as a new way of looking at the world — what fan hasn't gone through some variation of this? The only difference here is that these "fans" were more determined than the rest of us to translate their desire to write SF into the actual writing of it, and have succeeded in doing so. (Cause for some small celebration, perhaps — would that the rest of us had the necessary perseverance.)

There are, even so, one or two oddballs. Theodore Sturgeon, for example, is so spaced out that he thinks his invention to hold a book's pages open so that he can read without tiring his arms, consisting of a bent coat-hanger and two paper-clips, is the height of technical ingenuity. ("I realise that I am not, after all, in Wonderland. This must be Looking Glass Land, because the man sitting opposite me...can be none other than the White Knight. At any moment, he will demonstrate an upside-down cookie box that keeps the rain out," says Platt, indicating what he thinks of such nonsense.) Or there's Andre Norton, who is so confused that she can denounce certain unspecified female fantasy

writers for inserting gratuitous homosexuality into their books mere seconds after urging the inclusion of Jacqueline Lichtenberg in Dream Makers Volume 2 — and then, demonstrating a credulity that would be laughable if it wasn't true, go on to discuss the supposedly ancient but in fact completely fake "religion" of Wicca and the "success" of some members of same who have managed to breed a unicorn "out West", her "proof" of which consists of a tuft of hair cut from its mane. Good God... But then no one can possibly be as deranged as Robert Anton Wilson, who wrote the Illuminatus! trilogy as a self-confessed joke but who has since written some "non-fiction" works seeking to "prove" its validity, and whose interview suggests he half-believes in UFOs and Erich von Daniken as well.

Then there are those who say something which is not as obviously idiotic as the foregoing but which on closer examination reveals a certain ignorance of the real world, or at least the real world beyond the confines of the continental United States. This includes, for example, Larry Niven's cure for inflation, which is simply to stop printing money until people get used to there being less of it about: "It'd be fourteen dollars for a steak, and nobody would have the fourteen dollars, until the butcher finally decided that the government really meant it, and would not print any more money, at which point he would lower the price of steak to seven dollars. That would end inflation." Indeed! (Ah, but in ignorance there is bliss...) But why, if he thinks this is the solution, has he not asked himself why governments have not taken it up? Or there's Janet Morris's stupid claim that "The Soviets poured all the initial seed money into the European peace movement, to try to freeze the 'balance' of theatre weapons in their favour", which reveals a quite staggering degree of anti-Soviet paranoia (if the USSR were really that strong, wouldn't the USA have lost the "fight" decades ago?), a wholesale ignorance of the contemporary nuclear disarmament campaign (damned if we Europeans are going to lay down our lives just so that the US may escape unscathed), and an inability to grasp the most basic of facts about nuclear weapons (as E. P. Thompson, historian and founder of IWD, has pointed out, when both superpowers have enough in their arsenals to destroy Europe 30 times over, what does it matter that one can do so only 14 times to the other's 16?). She even has the gall to follow this claim with the remark that "people don't go after information themselves, they believe what they hear" — and for someone who prides herself on her breadth of learning and ability to find things out for herself, this is so rich as to border on hypocrisy. In his interview, Harry Harrison makes explicit reference to the average American in terms which, if there was any justice, should serve as a chastening reminder to the likes of Niven and Morris.

Not every interview is as illuminating or as thought-provoking as this. of course — as with the first volume, the quality and depth of coverage is very variable. Either Platt or his subject has an off day, or they fail to click in some fashion, or the ground they cover is so familiar as to render the piece rather boring; and, in general, the shorter interviews are the most dispensible — particularly those conducted by mail with L. Ron Hubbard and by telephone with Arthur C. Clarke, the inclusion of which contradicts Platt's statement in his introduct-

ion that he didn't want to do telephone interviews with certain writers he couldn't reach in person because such would convey nothing of the atmosphere of the places where they live and work. But, overall, Platt is to be congratulated on this book: on the range of writers it covers, on the inclusion of certain writers (Alvin Toffler, William Burroughs, D. M. Thomas) not normally thought of as falling within the SF canon (and of two editors, Donald Wollheim and Edward Ferman, who provide a very different perspective of it), on the arrangement of the interviews within the book (so that comments made in one can refer back to comments made in an earlier piece — and for this reason the book is best read straight through rather than, as one usually does with such a volume, dipped into at random), on his ability to get his subjects talking, on the crispness and accuracy of his descriptions (and in some cases their subtlety — without ever actually saying as much, or coming anywhere near it, he manages to convey Larry Niven's self-centred smugness and complacency in a way that will be hard to beat) — on almost everything about the book, in fact. It's by no means (and it's not intended to be) a sternly critical work designed to give us the last possible word on the writers it covers, but it is a generally excellent collection of interviews. Buy it, and enjoy it.

Ian Watson — CONVERTS (Granada, 191pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Nigel Richardson

Here's a funny thing: a comic novel by the metaphysical, political, and increasingly prolific Ian Watson. Of course, "comic" means different things to different writers, and while Watson has referred to Converts as his "slapstick" novel this doesn't stop him from speculating about God, parallel time-streams, DNA mutations and evolution, amongst other things. And even when he is dealing with some of the daftest notions ever to grace a respectable SF author's work he still has the reader wondering if it's safe to take the novel at face value.

Converts is a remarkably silly work that starts well, falls apart in the middle and just about comes together in a reasonable finale. Watson's prose is as frantic and as prickly as ever, but it is also a good deal looser and more relaxed than it used to be, and while the ideas are a little tamer I was able to read the novel in one sitting without getting lost, confused or bored.

The story begins nice and simply: the Spon-



see (after cover) (10)

sor, a "financial superman", wants to become a physical superman and has developed a virus that "triggers" a person's DNA, metamorphosing him or her into the next stage of human development. The process works fine when tested on rats and chimps, but when used on people they each develop in a different manner, some sprouting wings, some turning into sprites, some into masses of eyes. "The subject becomes what he really wishes to become, deep down in his soul... Man as metaphor," as one character puts it. Group personalities come about, group take on group, things fall apart and farce breaks out. The Sponsor -- now renamed Ariel to match his new body -- decides that the whole world should evolve, whether they want to or not, and...well, things get a bit confused here, with people turning into chairs and dogs and trees and God knows what. It all reaches a point, indeed, where God has to intervene in the crazed excesses of evolution; although this is no God you've ever come across before, even in Watson's previous work.

More Goulart than Sladek, Converts didn't make me laugh, but I did smirk once or twice (which may not be a pretty sight but is a recommendation of sorts). Token criticism? "Bosom"

is not a synonym for breast. A woman has a bosom, not plural bosoms. Unless, of course, she really has been messing around with her DNA...

Elizabeth Scarborough -- THE HAREM OF AMAN AKBAR
(Bantam, 265pp, \$2.95)

Reviewed by Judith Hanna

Three wives set out to rescue their pretty husband who has been turned into an ass. Well, yes, he was one before, but only metaphorically. Much trickery, some fighting in which our heroine acquits herself well. Wicked Emir, almost helpful djinn with misogynist leanings, King Sani and the Peri Queen with their cohorts of quite unhelpful and unfriendly shape-changing Divs all complicate the plot; but a Saint's sweaty head-cloth, always taking the right-hand path, mother wit and mother-love lead to a happy and even more complicated ending. Robust and cheering adventure.

Jack Chalker -- TWILIGHT AT THE WELL OF SOULS
(Penguin, 304pp, £2.50): fifth and last in the unreadable "Well World" series.

LETTERS

The controversy (you surely know which controversy by now) rumbles on, although I suspect that its end may now be in sight. Let's hear first from GENE WOLFE (whose letter, as predicted, reached me just too late for inclusion in the previous issue):

"This is my last response. It's discouraging to see how little impression my protests have had on your readers.

"Sue Thomason doesn't even understand the point of disagreement, which is not what literary theft is or whether such theft can sometimes be justified, but the advisability of calling a living author a thief in print upon debatable grounds. Chris Bailey says he can call T. S. Eliot a plagiarist; leaving aside the propriety of the accusation (which will interest Chris and Sue much more than it interests me), Eliot has been dead for nearly twenty years. He cannot bring an action for libel, as a living author can. K. V. Bailey worries about Eliot's borrowing Sanskrit from the Upanishads, a concern that should make Sylvie and Bruno feel right at home.

"All three letters give me the impression that these correspondents, however unconsciously, consider all authors dead. That is not the case; whether or not they are willing to accept it, there are living, breathing authors walking the earth today, men and women they may someday meet at a party or in a courtroom.

"I ask them to consider seriously, if only for a moment, how they would feel if they were called thieves in the pages of some publication -- researchers who stole another researcher's findings, students who stole supplies from another student's desk, or neighbours who stole milk from the house next door. I ask them to consider how they themselves would react."

After a long pause for thought, I finally entered the fray myself, writing directly to Gene Wolfe in response to the above points and sending copies of both his and my letters to each of the other three participants. My response first (slight abuse of editorial prerogative, but it

did have some influence on what the others wrote):

"Firstly, I don't think any of the three correspondents have missed or misunderstood your point about plagiarism -- Sue Thomason may not have acknowledged it directly, but I think she was at least taking it into account; K. V. Bailey referred to it as "a morally and professionally indefensible practice" in the very first sentence of his letter in issue 50; and Chris Bailey remarked on its legal ramifications vis-a-vis the US and the UK. I think this latter letter also contains (albeit somewhat cryptically) an indication of why the three have responded so differently to the word 'plagiarism': the old business of cultural differences. For myself, I take the point that you're making (as I acknowledged in the letter column of issue 50), and would at no time seek to accuse an author of theft unless the evidence for it was very strong (i.e., overwhelming). But then I don't think that Sue herself was directly accusing Crowley of theft -- indeed, she acknowledged that he made specific references to his resources, which is not at all the same thing as deliberately trying to pass the work of another off as one's own.

"Secondly (and following on from the earlier point about the above three correspondents not having missed or misunderstood your point), I think that -- as their letters make clear -- they're concerned to discuss the nature of authors' borrowings rather than just the fact of those borrowings. After all, we all borrow from others to some extent: I couldn't write criticism, for example, if I hadn't read Frye and Scholes and Marx and etc.. Neither Sue Thomason nor K. V. Bailey could have written the letters they did if they hadn't read the sources they cited. None of us could write anything if we hadn't read (say) the Bible, Shakespeare, and the unknown Sumerian scribe who penned Gilgamesh some six thousand years ago, for the simple reason that these (among others) happen to be

the basic building blocks of our literary culture. As Sue said -- a comment I quote because I agree with her -- none of us is producing anything that is completely new."

Sue, either still in the process of moving house or struggling to re-orient herself now that she has moved, hasn't yet replied to the above two letters; but the other two did. CHRIS BAILEY:

"I think it is clear that for Gene Wolfe it is the very act of deploying the word 'plagiarism' with relation to a living writer that is the offence. The reaction of the British contributors has been to query exactly what plagiarism is.

"Cultural differences' again, but let's make a stab at explaining them. In the USA, it is Independence Day that is America day and that indicates the spirit which to me seems to run through the history of American literature, a literature which is a true expression of its people's ideals in that it is concerned to kick over the traces of inherited ideas, to express fresh ideas in a new way. It puts a premium on being independent and unfettered by antecedents. In Britain, we peel back the layers of our literature and despairingly wonder where it all came from. It seems to go on for ever, like geological strata.

"I'm not suggesting that these are considerations we carry constantly at the front of our minds when discussing our shared literatures but they may help inform our deepest responses and explain our various reactions to the word plagiarism. One really doesn't see the word used in Britain that often and I'm not sure that I've ever seen it used in anger in the context of British publishing. (I'd be interested in reading what anybody involved in British publishing or journalism might have to say.) There is a lot of pastiche, though -- for example, somebody's just written a third Alice book -- a mild form of 'plagiarism' which people seem happy to regard as a function of wit, no more and no less.

"I would employ plagiarism with reference either to word-for-word cribbing (and claiming as one's own) or to the theft (and claiming as one's own) of 'ideas-become-fact', for example a mathematical formula or scientific discovery. I wouldn't apply it to the grey area of literary idea, where I agree with Joseph's neat expression -- 'an idea, once set down in print, ceases to be the exclusive property of its originator and becomes instead the common property of all who read the book'. Nor would I use it in an accusatory manner as regards a 'blender' of literature -- Eliot is a plagiarist, *sc.* practitioner of collage.

"Still, for Gene Wolfe it is enough simply to unsheathe the word. He mentions 'researchers who (steal) another researcher's findings', etc.. He admits no ambiguity. We (British) have been hampered in the discussion by seeing no such hard and fast definition, but I've learned a lot in exploring the boundaries of all that the notion of 'plagiarism' implies. See referred to Alasdair Gray. What does Gene Wolfe make of this British writer who, as Sue says, calls himself a plagiarist, admittedly 'knowingly' as a device in Lanark, but nevertheless acknowledging his own inability to divorce himself from the common store of words and ideas?"

And K. (for KENNETH) V. BAILEY:

"Gene Wolfe is in this correspondence only in-

terested in the one issue: not what shades of meaning can be attached to the word 'plagiarism' on this side of the Atlantic, but simply that if plagiarism can mean -- and legalistically does mean -- the intentional and underhand purloining of another person's work in order to pass it off, without any attribution, as one's own then, as he puts it, the 'advisability' of attaching that label to any author's work has to be considered most seriously. Fair enough; I for one would agree without reservation that if this strict legalistic concept is applied Gene Wolfe's counsel is perfectly sound.

"What Sue was equally concerned with and what drew me and Chris Bailey into the correspondence are the quite fascinating questions of influences, conscious and unconscious, the uses of pastiche and parody, and the literary contexts of allusion and quotation. That Gene Wolfe is little concerned with all this (but why should he be?) is evident from his misunderstanding of what I said about Eliot and the Upanishads. This wasn't in the course of considering plagiarism at all, but what Sue Thomason calls cultural elitism.

"In issue 50 of Paperback Inferno there is in Nigel Richardson's review of Hilbert Schenck's A Rose For Armageddon an example of perceived derivation: 'Halfway through, I realised that it is damned close to being a novelisation of Eliot's "Little Gidding"'. If this is so, the fact that Eliot is not a living author (Gene Wolfe suggests that we 'consider all authors dead') has a certain relevance, but does not necessarily in principle affect the legitimacy of such derivations. I haven't read the novel, but the quoted epigraph seems to point to what it draws on -- though the reviewer thinks perhaps acknowledgements might be more clearly stated. Putting review and plot summary together, however, it would seem to me that Schenck is deriving and borrowing from something which has (to use Sue's phrase) 'become part of the general culture'. It needs time for myths, novels, poems or whatever to achieve this status, which is a reason why the work of dead writers is drawn on more than that of the living. That of the living is more likely to be treated less respectfully by their contemporaries, made the subject of parody or satire. To give an example, Ronald Knox's marvellous 'Jottings From A Psychoanalyst's Notebook -- From The German Of Dr. Freud-Strawwelpeter'; and my own poem/parody 'The Great Rama' draws on Arthur C. Clarke (both broadcast and published versions acknowledged this).

"I think this correspondence has been worthwhile, however. Gene Wolfe has offered useful comment; more than that, it has served to open up in a lively way some important secondary issues -- secondary only from Gene Wolfe's point of view. I feel that arguments may rattle on subterraneously. I see that Sue in reviewing Marion Bradley's The Mists Of Avalon in issue 50 says that many of the principal characters have been copied from T. H. White -- but then his characters were, if not exactly copied, 'translated' from Malory; so we are literally back where we started!"

Absolutely -- but if anyone else has anything to add to all this I'd prefer that they kept it as short as possible, because I think the subject has come to so dominate the letter column that it's in danger of driving out discussion of other matters.

Like my editing, about which MARY GENTLE has this to say in respect of her joint review of Warday and Greybeard in issue 50:

"I don't object to editing in the normal way of things, but I feel that in this case you have changed the tone of the review. I don't like the way it reads now.

"To pick out just one of the changes, I wrote of the greenham Common women that 'I will give them every assistance short of actual help'. This is a joke, Joseph. It may not be a very good one, but it is a joke. It sets a certain sardonic and cynical tone; it also serves to make a quite serious point about people's mental attitudes. I did not write 'every assistance short of actual physical help'. That is a manifesto or an apology, and I intended neither. Nor did I intend such a plaintive and pedestrian tone.

"I grant you that most of your alterations are in some sense trivial: a word here, a sentence there. But this is my way of getting my points across in a review. Maybe you think no one should make jokes about the nuclear problem. There are times when I would agree with you; but this is not one of them. I wrote that review in a certain sardonic tone because I wanted people to notice that tone, to be provoked by it; and they can't be if they can't read it. When I write 'What? But yes, dear reader, anti-nuclear propaganda is still propaganda', I want to address the reader directly, I want that tone to irritate them, I want them to be uncomfortable and therefore to think. When I write 'What do you think I am, a physicist? You tell me' that is qualitatively different from 'You tell me; I'm not a physicist'. The second puts the emphasis on me; the first puts it where I intended it, on the reader.

"There are other points I could raise. When I include an interrogative word, leaving it out alters both the tone and to some degree the meaning. Also, what I include in parentheses I don't want included out. These are minor alterations; it's the cumulative effect that matters."

All I can do is apologise. I thought that I was cleaving true to the time-honoured dictum that editing is a process that clarifies meaning, and that in making the changes I did I was clarifying your meaning; but it transpires that I have in fact censored you, changing your meaning, which hurts me as much as it hurts you. My aim at the time, though, was to exempt to even out what I then saw as a certain jerkiness in the flow of the review, in which the parenthetical asides and the direct addresses to the reader tended to drag the attention off at a tangent to the main subject. Thus I misread your aim.

On a slightly related subject, here's IAVE LANGFORD:

"I was surprised to find my top-of-the-head musings on Nancy Springer's The White Hart quoted by Sue Thomason in the letter column of issue 50 as a formal review. Please let me point out that when I did come to write a review proper, I paused to consider whether Springer's wondrous writing ability transcended the prevalence of 'traditional narrative elements' (Milfordese for clichés). The style being full of appalling bombast and fustian, the answer was no."

Yes -- bombast and fustian like this, for in-

stance:

"The news that Daccerin's men brought back from Myrden did nothing to ease Cuin's wrath: silver dragons, forsooth, and speaking stones! He could only think that he had some trickster warlock for a rival, and he boiled inwardly at the mention of him. Moreover, Pryce Daccerin seemed to be as much taken by Bevan as Ellid herself, and as much cooled towards Cuin. His wife, Eitha, a comely, peace-loving woman, went about her work with a puzzled frown."

Great Literature Of Our Time, doubtless. Responding to Paul Kincaid's guest editorial in issue 50 is MARK GREENER:

"I have no wish to attack his critical standpoint on the three novels he reviewed, but I cannot agree with his underlying premise. He claims that '(The novels) should provide some clues as to the state of SF, some suggestion where it is going', yet just prior to this he wrote 'This is the solid heartland where no one is in any doubt about labels, and where everyone knows precisely what to expect of any book'.

"His premise is that hard SF, the conservative 'middle ground' of the genre is where the innovation takes place. This is not so. The hard SF of Anderson and Benford and the fantasy of Eldridge are what people want and thus are by their very nature conservative. The styles and traditions of these novels have lasted for the past thirty years and will last for the next thirty. To say that the future of SF lies in this type of fiction is wrong. The future lies on the 'borderlands', the regions Paul ignores. (After all, the New Wave did not arise out of Asimov.) In addition, if 'everyone knows precisely what to expect', how can such fiction be innovative? Innovation arises from the unexpected, not the conservative.

"Then, at the end, having written the three novels off as dull, he says that 'it is sad that this seems to be only too true of the rest of SF as well'. What evidence does he provide for this? None. On the basis of three books from the conservative middle ground of SF and fantasy he pessimistically condemns the rest of SF as well. A hypothesis unsubstantiated is not worth the paper it is written on, and his leap in logic is without justification. Had he supported his premise by producing evidence from the entire spectrum of SF his argument might have held water; but although I find myself in agreement with his specific comments on the novels themselves I cannot agree with his extrapolations from them."

Good point -- indeed, even as I was typing up his guest editorial I found myself wondering at some of his assumptions...but since I've read so little SF over the past couple of years I don't possess the detailed knowledge necessary to comment meaningfully on the current situation. An open question to the readers, therefore: is contemporary SF really as bad as Paul claims (and as I suspect from reading the blurbs of the review copies that reach me), and if not then why not? Write soonest!

WAHT: Roy Gray (seconding Edward James's call for regular magazine reviews), Terry Broome (last issue's "T. Broome", pointing out that in fact his previous letter was one of praise for my lengthy anti-nuclear review in issue 49), and Alan Thomason.