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SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

from Joseph Nicholas

As most members of the BSFA will now be aware, this is my penultimate issue of *Paperback Inferno*, and Andy Sawyer will be taking over as its editor the moment the June issue is out.

There are two reasons why I'm relinquishing the post: one personal and one practical. The practical one is that after six years — I was elected to the BSFA Council at the Easter 1979 AGM and produced my first issue in August 1979 — I think enough is enough; one editor can only do so much before he goes stale and begins to recycle the same old ideas, and it's to avoid the possibility of such stagnation and ennui (which we've brushed all too closely at least once before) that I'm stepping down to make way for someone else with fresh new ideas.

The personal reason is simply that editing *Paperback Inferno* takes up a fair amount of my time and energy, leaving little over for anything else — which is particularly acute considering the additional pressures on my time generated by my involvement in the local CND group and the local Labour party. Meaning that I wouldn't mind some free time all to myself for a change...

Reviewers and correspondents should continue to send material to me until the June issue is out; they should then write to Andy Sawyer at 45 Greenbank Road, Birkenhead, Merseyside L42 7JT. Publishers, on the other hand, should redirect review copies to him with immediate effect.

It's been a good six years — but for now, let's get on with the issue!

GUEST EDITORIAL

THE FAIR HANGING — Martyn Taylor

Why read science fiction?

For myself, I read it because in no other field does the contemporary English author seem permitted to address seriously topics neither historical nor banal (with the possible exception of live drama, in which field ideological soundness appears to play a very real part...). It is the only genre in English fiction today which is unafraid of imagination. It is the only area of English fiction where I can pick up a book expecting to fly, for the English literary establishment has grown self-obsessed to the point of narcissism. I quote in support of this assertion Martin Amis, famous son of a famous father, and no mean scribbler himself: "I think the novel is moving more and more closely to what life is like, and that is why it's so autobiographical at the moment. I am not a particularly autobiographical writer, but I notice that the only thing you trust is something you have been through". (By which token you can write trustworthily about murder only if you are Jean Genet...) This malign legacy of Hemingway's extravagent personality could explain the decline in the sales of the English novel, but is it what we, the readers, want of our fiction? Or is it what the post-Bloomsbury literati — writing about themselves, publishing themselves, and reviewing themselves — need to bolster their fragile self-esteem? According to the 1984 Booker Prize short-list it would appear that egocentricity does rule, okay.

But is that really the case? Or does the novel which addresses itself to the widest aspects of human society still have a place? If we look at the winners of that same prize of recent years we find evidence that even the high table of English literature cannot entirely ignore the power of imagination. In no way can Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children be described as writing about writers and writing. As for Thomas Keneally's Schindler's Ark, the life and work of an exotic ghetto dweller during World War 2 is hardly the autobiography of an Australian novelist, is it. J. M. Coetzee sprinkled his manifestly unautobiographical and absolutely unconcerned with the processes of fiction The Life And Times Of Michael K with techniques and allusions which have more in common with the likes of Ballard and Dick than they have with, say, Greene (who is honourably excepted from the self-obsession indictment and has no more won a Booker than he has a Nobel, which ought to be comment enough on either award).

Which brings us to the auspicious year of 1984, in which the Booker Prize was handed to an exercise in prim narcissism a la mode in the face of the universal (except among those luminaries who made up the judging panel) favourite, Empire Of The Sun, whose author needs no introduction to readers of English science fiction, and the unbelievably excluded Nights At The Circus by the cheerfully "SF-friendly" Angela Carter. (Talking of her work, she has said: "You could read them as science fiction if you wished — though a lot of the heaviest analysis has come from the SF critics".) Ironically, Empire Of The Sun is autobiography — of a sort — and adds still more point to Ballard's remark, when reminded of the seeming incongruity of the suburb in which he lives: "Yes. It's a very good place to work because I'm reminded every moment of the day what the alternative to the imagination is".

The alternative to the imagination is the sterile denial of life which manifests itself in the contemporary English novel.

Science fiction transcends all that, doesn't it. Just take a look at the typical SF novel, brimming over with imagination, style, panache, excitement, sense of wonder unrestrained... Sorry, I had to vomit there. The majority of SF novels seem to be written by semi-literate Americans who wouldn't recognise imagination if it stood up and bit them on the bum and who have no more intention of flying than has Ayers Rock.

If that is the case you may well ask why I read the stuff. Well, there are always the likes of Wolfe and Disch, Priest and Crowley to breathe life into the leaden mix, but permit me to explain the harshness of this judgement. I write this not as an "ordinary reader", someone who would no more take down a book without the expectation of enjoyment than go to a Barry Manilow concert. I am wearing my "critic" hat. My view of my obligation as a critic is that I ought not to review the work of authors of whom I harbour strong views one way or the other. To review a book in the expectation of writing a panegyric or a hatchet job is a betrayal of the critic's duty to the author and his own readership. It is something I am loath to do, and so the books I get to review are "cold", as though I took them from the shelves blindfold. Which means that I get to see a greater proportion of the dross than you, dear reader...

There is a school of thought which holds that we reviewers are only concerned with the "high art" type of book. Not so, say I. The self-respecting critic ought to be able to turn his or her hand to books which set out to be no more than ripping yarns as effectively as to deep and meaningful metaphysical explorations of the meaning of Life, the Universe and sexual congress with domesticated animals. For myself, I have no objection whatsoever to reading and reviewing a book which has no aspiration other

than straight escapism, so long as I feel the author has done his or her best to give me a reason for satisfaction had I actually paid money for the book. "High style" is not everything. There is a place for the "mere" entertainer as well as the great artist.

There is a problem, though. Like everyone reading this I am an SF enthusiast — you would not be a member of the BSFA were you not an enthusiast — and I do not doubt that I now require a bigger hit of sensawunda to activate the saliva glands than I did when I was, say, fourteen. I hope I can make allowances for that when I take my critic's hat down from the hall-stand. Certainly, the authors who write for their enthusiasts are either poor, know a member of the Arts Council Literary Panel, or are called Stephen King. So the critic must be aware of the marketplace in which the authors hope to sell their wares, and that awareness forms a part of the mechanism by which, if an author plays fair with me, I'll do my best to give him or her a fair hanging...er, hearing.

What do I look for in a novel? If it is an SF novel, ideas; what Brian Aldiss has called the "What if..?" factor, the hallmark of the SF novel as distinguished from the novel belonging to any other genre, or none. (Which is not to say that every novel with ideas is SF. The most idea-laden novel I have read in years is Umberto Eco's The Name Of The Rose, which not even my eclecticism can pin down as SF.) I hope to find original ideas, or novel insights — a hope all too often disappointed. On the other hand, ideas are not everything. There are authors who can make the reinvention of the wheel entertaining — John Sladek, for instance. The idea is important, but so is treatment. Content is form, and form is content.

Here I must state a prejudice. I am intolerant of bad writing. By "bad writing" I mean obviously incorrect grammar outside passages of vernacular dialogue, clumsy and otiose construction, thesaurea for its own sake (yes, I am talking about Stephen Dondaldson), the sort of faults which a twelve-year-old ought to be able to list. Not that my objections are limited to such pikestaffs. Perhaps it is a little too much to look for wit and elegance in a genre as relentlessly vulgar as science fiction, but I have the right to expect technical competence in a novel published for profit. As a reader, I object when such competence is absent. As a critic, I regard it as my duty to point out such flaws to anyone who might be considering paying money for the book in question. (And before anyone cries out that the ideative content of SF mitigates such failings, I would remind them that I have already admitted my enthusiasm for SF. The failings I mean are not those which keep the author from standing beside the likes of Austen and Trollope, but those which would cause embarrassment to the newest recruit to the Budleigh Salterton Tuesday Afternoon Retired Gentleladies in Reduced Circumstances Writing Circle.)

We in the SF field are fortunate in that we have a guide to good writing. It is called the Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine rejection slip. Is there an author in our field who does not possess a copy of this valuable document? Yes. Mr Asimov himself. Certainly, Foundation's Edge flunks every single test within that guide. Yet the novel was bought in its millions because to the billions of people to whom Dick, Ballard, Wolfe, Lem, et al are not even names science fiction is Asimov. How tragic that they should have their impression of contemporary SF formed by an example of superannuated, recycled, redundant junk. Of course, in our commercial world, can anyone be surprised that Asimov and his publishers decided to take the money and run whatever the "qualities" of the work? That novel was marketed as a commodity, in which "quality" was not a consideration.

So what is the response of the critic in the face of such a book? Impotence, because in the face of a brand name like Asimov the words of critics are irrelevant. No critical praise will increase the sales of such a commodity, and the sales guaranteed by the brand name render the product immune to critical opprobrium. Personally, I think that Foundation's Edge ought to have been subject to prosecution under the Trades Descriptions Act.

But the fact is that authors do exist in a commercial world, and must eat. They have their furrows and they plough them. It is a perverse critic who looks to — say — Harry Harrison or Bob Shaw for metaphorical flights of fancy and extreme poetic language. They are both craftsmen storytellers, and there is nothing whatsoever amiss with their satisfying the demands of their audience. Neither do I find it objectionable for an author to identify some empty niche in the marketplace and seek to fill it, as Robert Silverberg did with Lord Valentine's Castle. What I do regard as unacceptable in an author — and this is something I am reluctant to forgive at any price — is work which is obviously less than their best. The author is under a permanent duty to give of their best. The reader deserves nothing less. If that is a pretty poor best...fair enough, we can leave it at that and part friends. The next reader might find the book just nuts. The fact is, however, that there are a number of SF authors who regularly proffer work which falls a long way short of their best — Piers Anthony and Philip Jose Farmer are two who spring instantly to mind. Of course, there is always the possibility that the author cannot match previously inspired heights — even Dick was not at his Palmer Eldritch best all the time — and such are the financial exigencies of authorship that it is quite possible for works to be sent to the publisher when they really ought to have gone through the typewriter another time or two (as John Brunner puts it). What allowances the critic makes for this is a matter of personal taste, although I don't have much time for it. After all, the money I paid as a reader was not earned by leaving my work half-finished. What has disturbed me, however, have been recent examples of authors producing work of a standard so much inferior to their previous books that a reader could be excused for wondering whether there might be two authors of the same name, one of whom cannot write. Was the Gregory Benford who gave us Timescape the same man who co-"wrote" Find The Changeling? What does the critic do when faced with such a book; invoke the sacred name of the virtually unparalleled cameraderie between SF authors and their readers, or give an honest opinion?

If a review is not honest it is worthless. To encourage an author to believe that anything less than his or her best is acceptable is a betrayal of the critic's duty (and also a betrayal of that aforementioned cameraderie). After all, there is always the author's next book to re-

store their reputation. That said, however, one must wonder at the morality, let alone the business acumen, of publishers who are prepared to push out manifestly substandard work. One can understand a "take the money and run" attitude when the author is a brand name like Asimov, but someone like Gregory Benford is hardly a brand name at all (is hardly a literary name at all outside SF circles) yet has, hopefully, many more novels inside him that will need to be sold to readers disappointed by substandard work. Has the pressure of immediate profit grown so heavy that future sales must be disregarded? Let the publishers exploit previous success by all means, but the fact is that while pushing dross may boost this year's profit and loss account it will wither next year's.

So what, then, is the purpose of the critic? It is to measure the work in question against some template of ideative content, literary style, craftsmanship, "buzz quotient" (objectively poor work can still raise a frisson of pleasure), and simple enjoyment. That template will always be the personal possession of the critic, and it is the function of the editor to ensure that the person who receives the book for review will not hold up a template marked War And Peace to The Voyage Of The Space Beagle. Reviews are not carved upon tablets of stone (whatever some reviewers may believe, or readers seem to think). Integrity is the watchword, which is why I will always do my best to give any book a fair hanging.

Or should that be hearing?

REVIEWS

Stuart Mallory — DRAGON HUNT THROUGH AVALON (Daw, 253pp, $3.50)

Reviewed by Helen McNabb

Yes, well — Arthurian legend is always a good bet; there are lots of people who will buy anything about King Arthur, in the same way as there are lots of people who'll buy any sword-and-sorcery or any high-tech multi-world story. So Mallory has decided to try an amalgam of all three.

I can't decide whether he sat down and thought that since each sub-genre makes money he'd put them together and make even more money, or whether he was challenged to pull three subjects out of a hat and then write a novel to incorporate them. Whatever it was, this is the result. Arthur, Launcelot and Merlyn are taken to Avalon, which is actually a gate through to other worlds; the Lady of the Lake is an alien placed there to recruit suitable candidates for other-world adventures. The three men gleefully take to forcefield armour, abandon the "thee" and "thou" of Arthurian times for modern American slang, and set off to slay the dragon, encountering battles, scantily-clad females and comic interludes at suitable intervals. After the successful slaying of the dragon, they return to the Lady of the Lake, who asks them if they're ready for their next adventure. "'Right on,'" says Merlyn. Personally, I found the novel right off, but there's no accounting for tastes.

Kenneth C. Flint — CHAMPIONS OF THE SIDHE (Bantam, 277pp, $2.95)

Reviewed by Judith Hanna

The tale of the Second Battle of Moytura, where the Fomorians and the Tuatha De Danaan fought for possession of Ireland, is told in the Lebor Gabala, the Irish "Book Of Invasions", and it is indeed a fabulous story. Kenneth Flint seems to think that by almost straight reuse of its plot and characters he can capture its magic, and by making the monstrous and mysterious Fomorians a high-tech race he can give it a sci-fi twist into the bargain. Wrong! Exotic names are no more than trappings, plot is a set of variations on standard and much-used themes. The fascination of legend, more even than most other forms of literature, lies in fathoming what the style of telling suggests about how the teller and the listeners, at that time and in that culture, view their world.

Flint reveals (besides a bad case of adjectivitis) a quite understandable desire to escape from a nasty mechanical world into a magical, heroic other-world — without any serious belief in either magic or heroism. The popularity of this sort of fantasy is evidence that many readers share this dilettante nostalgia for an imaginary past. Yet serious belief, however extravagantly or humourously it is expressed in the stories that survive, is the essence of the sources the fantasy genre plunders. What has made The Lord Of The Rings an enduring classic is Tolkien's serious belief, backed up by scholarly understanding — and it should be noted that Tolkien had too much respect for the original legends to think that simply retelling them at great length would add anything to them.

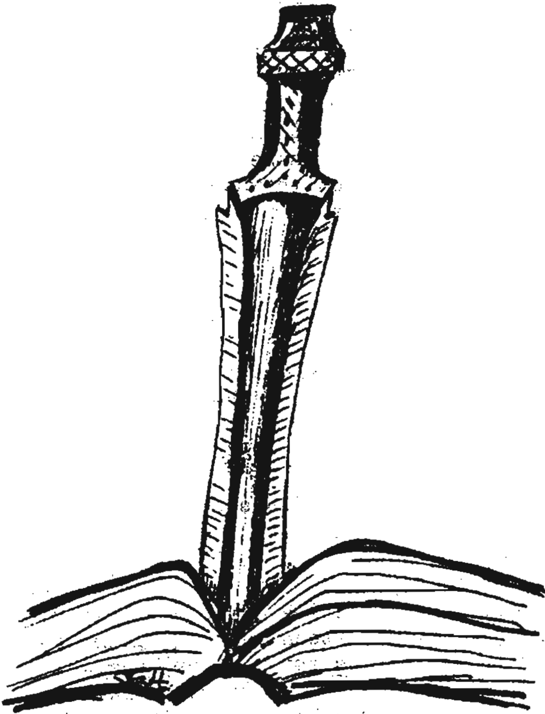
Champions Of The Sidhe, weighing in at 277 pages, is the second volume of a trilogy. It is less interesting than the original legend, which occupies only a few pages.

Harry Harrison & Leon Stover — STONEHENGE: WHERE ATLANTIS DIED (Granada, 352pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Stonehenge: Where Atlantis Died is a perfectly readable piece of historical fantasy — provided you don't think about it.

The plot runs like this. The great civilisation of the early Bronze Age Mediterranean is Atlantis, based on the two islands of Crete and Thera (Santorini). Atlantis not only rules the seas, it has an economic and technological stranglehold on the rest of the "known world" because it has access to tin, to combine with copper to make bronze weapons. Mycenae is the centre of an up-and-coming political power which needs bronze. Prince Ason, son of the king of Mycenae, journeys to the island of the Yerni (Britain) and works a tin-mine there. With the help of an Egyptian architect, Inteb, who happens to have travelled there with him (and whose name is spelled wrong in the cover blurb; hardly an auspicious start to the novel), he builds Stonehenge in an attempt to unify the warring Yerni tribes. He is then attacked and captured by an Atlantean raiding party. Atlantis, however, is doomed to die by fire and water: the volcanic island of Thera erupts spectacularly and Crete is wrecked by earthquake and tidal



wave, leaving Mycenae to move in on the power vacuum.

This sounds like the bones of quite a passable story, doesn't it? But unfortunately the bones are all that's there. There is only the most cursory attempt to differentiate the societies depicted. The names may be changed, but the underlying feeling remains the same. And the authors patently don't have a feel for Bronze Age heroic culture. Compare the passage below, from the Tain Bo Cuailnge (translated by Thomas Kinsella), one of Harrison's and Stover's quoted sources, to the passage which follows it, from Stonehenge: Where Atlantis Died:

> "You'll find no harder warrior against you — no point more sharp, more swift, more slashing; no raven more flesh-ravenous, no hand more deft, no fighter more fierce, no one of his own age one third as good, no lion more ferocious; no barrier in battle, no hard hammer, no gate of battle, no soldiers' doom, no hinderer of hosts, more fine. You will find no one there to measure against him — for youth or vigour; for apparel, horror or eloquence; for splendour, fame or form; for voice or strength or sternness; for cleverness, courage or blows in battle; for fire or fury, victory, doom or turmoil; for stalking, scheming or slaughter in the hunt; for swiftness, alertness or wildness; and no one with the battle-feat 'nine men on each point' — none like Cuchulainn."

> "'I am Maklorbi,' the bull-chief from the northern teuta said, climbing to his feet. 'I have marched a hundred and a hundred miles to be here for this banquet, and have brought a hundred men. I have more heads over my door than a hundred men can count. I have killed a hundred warriors in battle. I will make the first cut of the meat.'"

They are both examples of heroic boasting. One is a debasement of the other, a mockery of the honour that lies behind the boast.

Stonehenge: Where Atlantis Died is basically a novel about killing. I kept on reading through the slaughter, waiting for something interesting and exciting to happen. Then I realised that the killing is supposed to be interesting and exciting. Not much else does happen, really.

This novel also makes the point that "people" are actually men. There is one named woman character in the novel, Naikeri, daughter of a Yerni chieftain. She exists to be Ason's lover, to hand out plot coupons, and to whinge about all the killing (and be spurned and rejected for her pains). This is a Tain without Emer or Derdriu or Medb or Scathach or Leborcham; no women warriors, no women druids or poets or powerful queens. Grr!

Oh, yes, and it's archaeologically inaccurate as well. I really don't fancy the idea of a Stonehenge decorated with stuffed cows, and the reason for its construction given in the novel doesn't seem at all plausible to me.

Verdict: could do better. By a long way...

A. E. Van Vogt — NULL-A THREE (Sphere, 215pp, £1·95)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Ah well; what dusty pulses does the very name Van Vogt quicken in the breasts of old-time fans, etc. etc.. A Campbell discovery who never fitted the Campbellian mould, with more pulp melodrama than engineering logic, Van Vogt was certainly one of the great names of Astounding's "Golden Age", up there with Heinlein and Asimov. But a great deal more exuberant — where Asimov had mere interstellar empires, Van Vogt had decadent interstellar empires, complete with scheming princesses, mad scientists and slaves being stripped, lashed, bound and gagged (although not necessarily in that order); where Asimov had lone heroes saving the universe, Van Vogt had lone superheroes; and where Asimov had the science of psycho-history, Van Vogt had a whole range of loony sciences, usually ones which strove to incorporate into themselves most if not all of the normal sciences. "Nexialism", for example, in The Voyage Of The Space Beagle, and "General Semantics" in The World Of Null-A.

The World Of Null-A is perhaps the one SF novel that everyone has read but no-one has understood. It is, supposedly, a dramatisation of the central concepts of the "science" of General Semantics: the meaning of meaning, and the idea that what you know is less important than how you know it. (Or, as the Encyclopedia Nichollia has it: "a confused and confusing psychotherapeutic system which, like Dianetics, promised to focus the latent abilities of the mind".) To remind us how sublime a dramatisation it was, there's a plot summary of it in the introduction to Null-A Three — a plot summary which makes it sound even more beserk and improbable than Damon Knight's famous 1952 demolition of it. I mean, what has all this space operatic crap about Games Machines, extra brains and tree houses on Venus got to do with the meaning of meaning, for God's sake?

The sequel, The Players Of Null-A, was even loonier, featuring titanic space battles and people transmitting themselves across thousands of light years at the twitch of a brain cell. And now we have a further sequel, Null-A Three, which I swear kept me up until 1·00 am one morning trying to work out what on Earth was going on.

Meaning no plot summary from me, but I doubt that a plot summary would make much sense any-

way. As others have pointed out before, Van Vogt's narrative structures are not entirely rational, but are instead analogous to the sudden shifts and inversions encountered in dream sequences. Illogical, preposterous, even downright stupid, his plots represent less the examination of a particular premise than a deep-seated drive for quasi-adolescent wish-fulfillment. And pretty damn silly even on that level, with his characters performing cortical-thalamic pauses and taking twenty-decimal mental photographs of their surroundings and transmitting themselves across thousands of light years at the twitch of a brain cell...and, every time they land on Earth, carrying on as though it were still the mid-1940s.

Given that Van Vogt wrote The World Of Null-A in 1945, and that he and every other Astounding author of the period seemed incapable of visualising a future that didn't look like 1945 (except shinier, and with more twiddly bits) — and also that all writing is to some extent a product of its cultural and social milieux — this isn't very surprising. Particularly when, for the sake of consistency, the Earth of Null-A Three has to be the same as that of The World Of Null-A — but for a modern reader the quaintness of a twenty-sixth century world in which people wear suits and ties, travel in limousines, eat in cafes, consult wristwatches and collect keys from hotel clerks is simply too quaint. Nor is the quaintness helped by two additions which serve only to point up the forty-year gap between 1945 and now — firstly, the revelation that the destroyed Games Machine can be reactivated by the installation of a collection of chips the plan of which is sketched on a scrap of paper napkin, which presumably means that the small skyscraper in which the Machine was housed must have had an awful lot of empty space; and, secondly, the introduction of video games, which jar even more than the chips because they're mentioned so much more often. (The video games also provide a moment of unintentional humour due to the fact that General Semantics prevents its practitioners from ever assuming anything about their surroundings; they must instead deduce everything from observation. Thus, at one point, a character deduces — taking a paragraph to do so — that a video gamer scores points for shooting down the enemy.)

And to cap it all, Null-A Three isn't even well-written. "He did a sort of energy diversion within his mind"? Good God.

Null-A Three is, in sum, quite ridiculous; 215 pages of literal nonsense, and an example — if it is an example of anything at all — of a type of SF novel (and even of a type of SF author) whose time has long passed. The remnants of a previous generation may proclaim otherwise; but, forty years on from the tail-end of Astounding's "Golden Age", it seems obvious that the aforesaid tail could only have been plucked from a dodo.

Paul Preuss — BROKEN SYMMETRIES (Penguin, 333pp, £2·95)

Reviewed by Edward James

The obvious comparison, and one that all critics will make (or will have made), is with Gregory Benford's Timescape. And, oddly enough, the comparison is a useful one. Like Timescape, it is concerned with scientists at work and, like Timescape, it deals with them plausibly and effectively. But the emphasis is very different from Benford's. The scientific problem is not at the heart of the work; instead we have no more than a standard thriller plot.

The problem, of course, is that there is very little entertainment in watching scientists at work. It was for that reason that Benford himself concluded, in "Why Is There So Little Science In Literature?" (in Nebula Award Stories 16, edited by Jerry Pournelle), that "straight" novels about science don't work; the true literary vehicle for science is SF. Thus Broken Symmetries is, in Benford's sense, not about science at all; it is, rather, about scientists. Scientists fit into the structure of an ordinary novel because they are human (just) and because they are subject to human passions and problems. The problems that Preuss's characters are dealing with are consequently much more humdrum than those of Benford. They don't inhabit a run-down and disintegrating Cambridge (although one of them has happy memories of cycling along the Backs), but a high-tech and high-life Hawaii, the world of Dallas rather than Dune. And Preuss's science is also rather more believable and acceptable than Benford's; it revolves around what is only a minor extrapolation from contemporary particle physics. Preuss's subatomic particles don't travel through time; they merely have an unfortunate (and much delayed) tendency to explode. This, incidentally, is giving nothing away. Penguin's design team have decently decided to portray the culminating explosion which terminates the novel (and several thousand inhabitants of Hawaii) in considerable detail on the wrap-around cover. The only thing we have to worry about is why the explosion should have taken place there. Still, who wants suspense anyway? Perhaps Penguin ought to issue identikits of the murderers on the covers of their whodunnits too.

Preuss is the first of the authors listed in "Algis Budrys's Ten Most Promising New Science Fiction And Fantasy Writers" in Mike Ashley's The Illustrated Book Of Science Fiction Lists, and to the best of my knowledge this is the first time he's been published in Britain. I've missed his two previous US novels. Does this one suggest that Budrys was right? I'm not sure. It was well written, the characters were interesting, the setting and the jargon immaculately researched. But I was vaguely disappointed. Have I become so hardened that I expect SF disasters to have rather more than three times the killing power of Union Carbide's factory in Bhopal? Have I become so escapist that I do not expect my SF to be set in a world which is to all intents and purposes the same as the one in which I live? Apart from the close co-operation between Japanese and Americans at the jointly-built particle accelerator in Hawaii, the story could as well have been set in 1983. If I had not learnt from Budrys that Preuss considers himself to be an SF writer, I would have classed Broken Symmetries in the genre of near-future technological disaster novels — a genre not on the whole written by SF writers nor, perhaps, read by SF readers. Preuss is not much interested in extrapolation or speculation (although an interesting suggestion for a real SF novel comes in the epilogue), nor even in science; the novel is primarily about the tensions among scientific researchers, about the normal staples of novelists: love, jealousy, ambition, sus-

pense. Read it as a thriller, or even as a novel about scientists. But it's not SF.

Terry Pratchett — THE COLOUR OF MAGIC (Corgi, 238pp, £1·75)

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

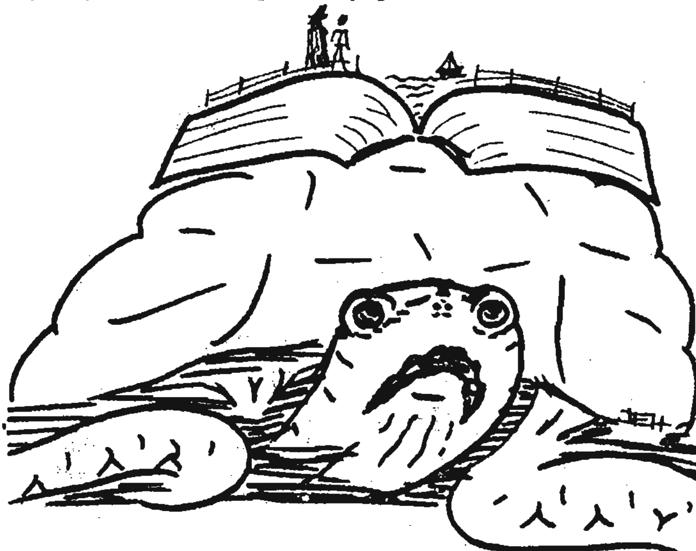
Humour is not one of the noted hallmarks of the heroic fantasy genre. Perhaps the sound of laughter militates against the suspension of disbelief necessary to it. Certainly, nobody would look to Tolkien or the like for a belly laugh (although the suspicion must be that Moorcock laughed a hell of a lot when he wrote Elric et al). Funny fantasies are not common (about as common as funny SF...) and it is names like Charles Sheffield and Christopher Stasheff which come to mind, hardly great practitioners of the literary art.

From the foregoing, you may have gathered that The Colour Of Magic is a funny novel. The first paragraph sets out the stall most appropriately: "In a distant and second-hand set of dimensions, in an astral plane that was never meant to fly, the curling star mists waver and part..." Try saying it in a Peter Graves "he-man" voice and you'll begin to get the picture. This goes on a few lines later:

> "There was, for example, the theory that A'Tuin (the world turtle) had come from nowhere and would continue at a uniform crawl, or steady gait, into nowhere, for all time. This theory was popular among academics.
>
> "An alternative, favoured by those of a religious persuasion, was that A'Tuin was crawling from the Birthplace to the Time of Mating, as were all the other stars in the sky which were, obviously, also carried by giant turtles. When they arrived they would briefly and passionately mate, for the first and only time, and from that fiery union new turtles would be born to carry a new pattern of worlds. This was known as the Big Bang hypothesis."

This is of course about as subtle as a boot in the crotch, but Pratchett goes about his work with considerable verve and is as shameless as he is relentless in pillaging all sources for jokes.

The storyline involves a tourist and his reluctant guide, a failed wizard who knows but one spell, which will probably put an end to the



space-time continuum when he dies and it escapes. Typically picaresque, their journey involves close encounters with Death (literally), heroes, dragons real and imaginary, the fence at the edge of the world (very necessary when you think that this world is flat), and astronauts. Twoflower, the tourist, is so much the innocent abroad that he makes Candide seem like a rake while Rincewind, the wizard, exists in a state of permanent terror for his life — which is hardly surprising when, among other delights, they encounter a dead wizard who isn't (and bears more than a passing resemblance to a malign Slartibartfast) and a monster so terrible that nobody is even prepared to speak its name.

One of the factors which sets The Colour Of Magic apart from most novels of the genre is its author's utterly irreverent attitude towards magic:

> "In short, spell books leak magic. Various solutions have been tried. Countries near the Rim simply loaded down the books of dead mages with leaden pentalphas and threw them over the Edge. Near the Hub less satisfactory alternatives were available. Inserting the offending books into canisters of negatively polarised octiron and sinking them in fathomless depths of the sea was one (burial in deep caves on land was earlier ruled out after some districts complained of walking trees and five-headed cats) but before long the magic seeped out and eventually fishermen complained of shoals of invisible fish or psychic clams."

Perhaps a copy of this novel ought to be sent to British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. As I have remarked, Pratchett takes his jokes wherever he can find them, but it ought not to be assumed that he simply peddles other people's jokes. He is inventive, often hilariously so, and is joyfully profligate with his humour. There may not be a laugh in every line, but not a page went by without at least a grin appearing on my face.

The cover blurb mentions three novels and one author, Peter Pan and the obligatory The Lord Of The Rings (do you think telephone directories would sell better if they put "the most inventive fantasy since The Lord Of The Rings" on them?). I presume that the copywriter has read neither work. Similarly, I presume that he has never read Jerome K. Jerome because the only links between that august humourist and Terry Pratchett are that they both use the English language and have the facility to make me laugh. The third novel is, of course, The Hitch-Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy, and it has to be said that there are strong echoes of Douglas Adams in The Colour Of Magic; but Pratchett is far less parsimonious with his jokes and the link is much more on the level of Rincewind's "Assume the worst, then even if you're surprised you'll never be disappointed" attitude to life. I am sure that Rincewind carries a pack of dominos about his person and often looks overhead for the huge foot about to come down.

A review of a novel like this is largely superfluous. Analysis would be futile. All I can say is that I enjoyed it immensely. My family enjoyed it immensely. Since receiving it I have seen a number of copies vanish from the shelves of my local bookshop, and I expect that all those good people enjoyed it immensely. So if you want to enjoy yourself immensely and have a good snigger at the tropes of this genre so

close to all of our hearts, you know what to do.

David Langford & Roger Peyton — THE DUMAREST COMPANION (Daw, 151pp, $2.50)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

The Hornblower Companion, The James Bond Dossier, The Sherlock Holmes Scrapbook, The Saint And Leslie Charteris; all these titles — and many, many others — bear witness to the huge market which exists for "biographies" of fictional heroes. In fact, characters such as Hornblower and Sherlock Holmes have been "brought to life" by dedicated, not to say, fanatical, readers. The same phenomenon obtains in the SF and fantasy genres, with such biographical and historical volumes as A Look Behind "The Lord Of The Rings", The Conan Reader, and The Universes of E. E. Smith. Now E. C. Tubb's most famous creation, Earl Dumarest, has been subjected to the same analysis.

E. C. Tubb (1919 -) sold his first SF novel, Saturn Patrol (as by "Kim Lang") in 1951, and he has since maintained a prodigious output of no-nonsense action-adventure entertainments, the best of which are probably Alien Dust (1955), The Space-Born (1956), Moon Base (1964) and Death Is A Dream (1967). Much less noteworthy are his novelizations of the dreadful Space 1999 TV series (Breakaway, Rogue Planet, etc.), although he later redeemed himself by writing the more "realistic" Earthfall (1977). But Tubb has scored his greatest (commercial) success with the "Dumarest" series, which began — quietly enough — in October 1967 with The Winds Of Gath (Ace Double H-27, backed with Crisis On Cheiron by Juanita Coulson).

"Earl Dumarest is an archetypal hero; the 'man with a mission' who wanders here, there and everywhere on a 'heroic quest'. But it would be wildly overstating the case to compare him with Homer's Odysseus. He is more like the Kirk Douglas Ulysses, in the 1955 film of that title," writes Langford, before going on to explain the object of Dumarest's search and the reason behind his headlong flight: "Dumarest is looking for Earth — the planet on which he was (supposedly) born and which is now generally considered to be a myth... He is being pursued by the Cyclan (or should that be 'Cyclamen'?), hive-minded cybernetic intellects from whom he has stolen the mysterious 'affinity twin' — of which more anon".

Langford delves deeply into the background of Tubb's imaginary future universe; from Gath to Elysius (The Terra Data), from Hive (Derai) to Teralde (Jack Of Swords), from Scar to — well, take your pick. He gives special attention to the regimented, science-mad world of Technos on which Dumarest first learns of the Original People who hold the planet Earth as an object of veneration. The Dumarest novels make up a template series, the individual volumes of which give Tubb repeated opportunities to create new situations within a well-established fictional framework. Moreover, Dumarest himself is seen to change slightly with each succeeding episode, becoming more knowledgeable, more flexible, more human.

But Langford also argues that the Dumarest series is now in danger of collapsing under its own accumulated weight unless Tubb does something to shore up the whole tottering structure. The cracks in the basic rationale are beginning to resemble lunar rills. For instance, great play has often been made with the facts that (a) Earth harbours "a strange form of life" (Cyclans?), (b) it is still being visited by spaceships (hence Dumarest's original escape), and (c) that the Sun's co-ordinates are known to the Cyclan. But the logic-dominated Cyclan have yet to lure Dumarest to Earth, where they could trap him at their leisure. How much longer can even loyal "Docmies" accept this nonsensical behaviour.

There is also something which Langford terms the "standard Dumarest plotline", which runs as follows: Dumarest is dumped upon yet another planet where clues to Earth's location may or may not be found. He is either weak from travelling "Low" passage (steerage — "doped, frozen, and ninety percent dead") or impoverished from travelling "High" passage (first class, with subjective time slowed by drugs to make the journey seem shorter). In either case he has to earn more money to pay his onward passage, and so enters the contests in one of the gladiatorial arenas which seem to litter the galaxy, quickly becoming local champion. Then a beautiful, and often red-haired, girl either buys him outright as a "slave" or employs him as a free-lance bodyguard. She eventually turns out to be working for the Cyclan, one of whom duly arrives to grab Dumarest, who manages to escape before it has finished calling him an asshole (or whatever).

An oversimplification, of course, especially when applied to the later, more complex novels; but there's many a true word spoken in jest. Langford also deals with these primal elements of the Dumarest "formula": sex and violence. Most of the women who get involved with Dumarest, even the good and innocent ones (Kalin, Lallia, et al), come to sticky ends — sometimes quite literally. And Zenya is the ultimate female "baddie": "A wanton... Amoral, warped by the society in which she lived, the inbreeding which had accentuated weakness. A bitch in every sense of the word, yet beautiful, as all such women were" (Zenya, 1974, page 152). So far as violence is concerned, Dumarest metes out death and mayhem like Spillane's Mike Hammer or Don Pendleton's "Executioner", most often with cold steel (knife-fights are a trademark of this series).

The indefatigable Roger Peyton has compiled a full bibliography of all the Dumarest novels to date, covering both the Ace years (The Winds Of Gath, 1967, to Veruchia, 1973) and the Daw years (Mayenne, 1973, to Symbol Of Terra, 1984) and giving details of their variant editions. He has also drawn up detailed plot summaries of each volume in the canon, pointing out the similarities between certain early Tubb novels (The Stellar Legion, Hell Planet, City Of No Return, etc.) and many of the Dumarest novels. Did you know (Michael Caine accent) that a character named "Dumarest" appears in a Tubb short story entitled "Vigil" (Galaxy, November 1956)? Not many people know that...

In his admirably concise Foreword, Bob Shaw pays tribute to E. C. Tubb as "...the compleat professional, whose total commitment to the bedrock principles of SF — action, excitement, fun — makes him a sovereign remedy for smart-ass 'seers' such as — well, never mind. I look forward with pleasure to reading The Dumarest

Companion, Volume Two". Members of the newly-formed Friends Of Dumarest Society will surely echo these sentiments. (By the way, rumour has it that Dino de Horrendeus recently bought the film rights to all of the Dumarest novels. The mind boggles. "Sci-fi fans, they-a gonna love Doom-a-rest. Why? Because I give-a them no crap, that's why. I have here a great adventure — even more better than my King Konk.")

C. C. Burette — MASTERS OF INWORLD (Denovo Press, 128pp, $2·95)

Reviewed by Dave Langford

It isn't often that you close your advance copy of some skiffy novel and think, "Bloody hell, this is it. This is the new direction for SF. The area of a whole decade's fresh exploration has just been outlined in a few daring strokes." Of course I could be wrong (the last three times I had this thought, the book didn't even make it into paperback, spurlos versenkt) — but at risk of greeting 1987 with a well-egged face I predict that Masters Of Inworld will be remembered as a turning point in the history of SF awards.

At first glance the plot elements may seem routine. Telepathic sex with a variety of cetaceans...dizzying excursions into cyberspace within the protagonist's self-aware pocket calculator...a trek across the surface of that incredible, galaxy-spanning Klein bottle known as Inworld, where magic works...emotional problems of a doomed cyborh space-pilot unable to have normal sex since orgasm propels him and his ship on a multi-lightyear jump...harmless, cuddly pets which on exposure to radiation spawn terrifying, kilometre-long sandsnakes...maps, computer-generated graphics, and a long glossary detailing the clickspeech of the enigmatic alien Neppat. The actual writing, with its echoes of Robert Heinlein, Piers Anthony, Alan Dean Foster and Philip E. High, is entirely adequate to the author's ambitions.

So where's the special originality? In production and distribution, which make striking use of the latest technology. Each copy is in fact individually produced by laser printer, personalised with the prospective owner's name: in a bold adaptation of the "fighting fantasy gamebook" approach, you, by name, become the protagonist. (The first time I recall this notion being mentioned, by the way, is in Disch's Echo Round His Bones, 1969. Burette goes one better than Disch by, apparently, having two basic texts of his novel: male and female readers/participators are accomodated with equal ease, even in the slave bondage scenes.) This really does promote reader identification: I found myself heavily involved in the moral conflict surrounding my — the protagonist's — decision to incinerate a mob of repellent alien "peace protesters" bent on sabotaging the galactic war effort by insidious propaganda.

Even this gimmick is not the true innovation. The present edition is for obvious reasons available only by mail order — but towards the end of the year Denovo Press plan a distribution of several thousand complimentary copies of Masters Of Inworld. By special arrangement, these attractive, personalised books will go to every member of the 1986 World SF Convention (to be held in Atlanta, USA) — with the author's and publisher's compliments. The Worldcon membership is, of course, responsible for voting the Hugo awards.

I may be wrong in thinking this a turning-point in the history of the award. It may be quite without significance that the most idealised and spiritual character in Masters Of Inworld, a guru who teaches the protagonist to utilise the cosmic "Dyne", is named Hugo. Wait for the award ceremony at the end of next summer, and we shall see.

Arnold Hagan — LAZARUS 9 (Penguin, 208pp, £1·95)

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Just before Christmas, I was invited by a British Telecom salesman to a Saturday lunch in private box at Manchester United football ground, followed of course by a football match. "Football isn't my game, unfortunately," I said in refusal. "Oh, you'll enjoy it," he replied, it'll all be data people." (I didn't go.)

Here's a novel that is designed to appeal to data people like me, with the fundamental premise behind the story being straight out of a data security textbook. To guard against calamities such as computer failures, power cuts, or programs going beserk, we protect our critical computer files by taking copies of them at regular intervals. These copies are kept in a safe place and only brought out if disaster strikes. We then erase the faulty files from the disks where they reside, and restore the preserved files from the backup tapes. In a database environment the records held within each file are linked to one another in what can be very complex relationships, and the restoration process recreates these linkages exactly. Once it is complete, the database is restored exactly as it was at the point of backup, the snag now being that everything that has taken place since the backup is missing as if it had never been. Our next task is then to duplicate every event or transaction that took place between the point of backup and the point of restoration to recreate the database as of today.

Imagine then the technology that allows us to do this to people, to create an information store that holds details of every cell of a man or woman at an exact moment in time, and to be able to use that information to restore to life (in an artificial body) a person who has died for any reason. All their memories between the point of backup and the point of restoration would have been lost irreplaceably, so the information gap would have to be made up by themselves, aided by educational procedures where required.

In Roger Zelazny's Isle Of The Dead, the "Recall Tapes" of the six people who figured most in the life of a man of immense wealth and power are stolen from Earth and the people recreated into an environment of suffering in order to trap and destroy the novel's protagonist. The idea is not therefore new; the difference here is that the principle of "Restoration" has become the corner-stone of our society in the early years of the next century, and even minor aspects of daily life are affected by it. For instance:

1. Everyone is entitled as a right to a "Transcription" once per year by the "National Transcription Service". The wealthy and important use private Transcription Services at much more regular intervals. (Every airport has a

private Transcription Centre for travellers to use before a flight.)

2. Convicted prisoners have their Transcriptions destroyed and lose their rights to Transcription for a number of years.

3. Before performing operations, surgeons have a Transcription of the patient made. This has the good effect of eliminating risk, and the bad effect of encouraging more experimental operations.

4. Games in the same vein as "Rollerball", in which professionals or members of the public risk their lives, have virtually superseded less dangerous sports. Each match or contest is of course preceded by Transcription.

Each Transcription Centre, National or private, is linked to a Central Transcription databank where are Transcriptions are stored. Like Zelazny's novel, subjects have an implant which monitors brain activity and notifies the Centre when death occurs. The Restoration process can then begin. Each Restored subject receives a re-orientation course before re-emerging into the world to resume his or her life, the amount of re-orientation material required depending on the length of time between Transcription and Restoration.

Why have I spent so much time dealing with the framework of the novel, and said nothing at all so far about the story? There are two reasons: firstly, I found the setting an order of magnitude more interesting than the plot; and, secondly, there isn't much plot anyway, once the author has said everything there is to say about the processes of Transcription and Restoration. Paul Catt (nine lives, get it?) is a private investigator in the Mike Hammer mould, not successful enough to afford more than his annual Transcription despite his risky line of work. Paul (let's call him Paul II) awakes to find himself undergoing Restoration, nine months of his life missing. The investigation that Paul I was following has led to his death, apparently in an accident. Paul II refuses to believe in the accidental death of his predecessor, and pursues the trail doggedly through the thoroughly believable high-tech world of the 2010s. The plot is a pot-pourri of elements from Raymond Chandler, Mickey Spillane, et al, with beautiful girls, corruption in high places, and a neatly rounded conclusion. Like Paul I, Paul II meets a sad end, but fortunately has the foresight this time to provide Paul III with video recordings and computer files to enable him to pick up the threads and crack the case.

Any religious implications from the title of the novel in the Restoration process are sidestepped by the author, who is interested only in the technical aspects. Restoration is an inevitable consequence of death except for the very aged and the terminally ill for whom the medical science of the day has no cure. The moral consequences of the process, particularly in the changes in social attitudes caused by the elimination of accidental death, murder and suicide, are not explored overtly. The novel says simply that if this situation existed, then that would happen; judge the good and bad in it for yourself.

To sum up, then: an excellent example of a classic science fiction plot — introduce a major new factor into our society and portray the changes brought about by it — but let down by a weak and inconsequential story-line with the usual cardboard characters. Still, you might like it if you're one of the data people.

Roger Zelazny — EYE OF CAT (Sphere, 188pp, £1·95)

Reviewed by Helen McNabb

Eye Of Cat is good. It's not easy or even very comprehensible without some of the background filled in ahead of reading it, but it is good.

Zelazny has gone to mythology for the basis of the novel, as he did with This Immortal and Lord Of Light, although the mythology he's chosen may be less familiar to European (and possibly even American) readers than the ancient Greek and Hindu/Buddhist traditions of the other two novels because this time the colour and atmosphere, the motivations and the character of the hero, are Navaho Indian. I read the novel through once, damned my ignorance of matters Indian, got a tome from the library entitled Navaho Religion, read that, returned to Eye Of Cat and began to appreciate the amount Zelazny has put into it.

The hero is a full blood Navaho Indian hunter and tracker called Billy Blackhorse Singer who has lived for 170 years thanks to medical advances and the time dilation caused by space travel and has returned to Earth to an almost reclusive retirement from which he is summoned to protect a political bigwig from a crazy Stragean, an alien metamorph. Cat, of the title, is a Toglind metamorph caught and put into a zoo of alien animals by Billy fifty years previously; uncertainty about Cat's sentience drives Billy to the zoo to discover that Cat is both sentient and telepathic, and in return for Cat helping to destroy the Stragean Billy bargains his own life: Cat has a week to hunt and kill him but if he survives a truce will be declared. This is the real story: the pursuit of Billy by Cat and what Billy discovers about himself during the hunt. The plot is complex, the various strands woven together like (to be fanciful) a Navaho rug full of significant colour and meaningful patterns which can be analysed separately but whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. There are Navaho stories about Coyote and other gods interpolated seemingly at random, but the randomness is deceptive; nothing has been left to chance and each element adds something to the overall effect, like a Navaho sandpainting in which the exact placing of each element is vitally important.

Some knowledge of Navaho mythology is essential to an understanding of the novel. Zelazny peppers it with little Navaho stories, but to understand them you need to know that Coyote represents chaos, that a chindi has great potential for evil, that songs and chants are integral to the Navaho. Understanding of Billy and his character is impossible without understanding of these things; how he comes to terms with his chindi and what happens to everyone else is what the novel is really all about. It's quite possible to read it with no knowledge of the mythology and find it an exciting story, but so much would be missed that you'd do better to find a good space opera instead. I understood much more the second time around, but I still don't fully understand the ending and I'm aware that I'm constantly missing certain allusions; I need to know more about the Navaho before I read it again.

Is it fair, though, for a writer to expect so

much homework from his readers? After all, Eye Of Cat is a work of fiction, not a piece of scholarship. But I found it interesting and worthwhile, making me read something I might not otherwise have done, giving me a glimpse of a genuine alien culture and language. It is well written, experimental in places; the characterisation is generally good; it is entertaining and original; the SF and the mythological elements are equally important to the storyline; but other than very superficially it is not an easy novel. It's up to the reader to make the effort to get out of it what it has to offer, because what it has to offer is considerable.

Brian Aldiss — THE HORATIO STUBBS SAGA
(Granada, 670pp, £3·50)

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Of the very special place Brian Aldiss occupies among contemporary authors there can be no doubt. He writes with a vigour all too rarely found in the company of such lucid prose. He is an intelligent and very often thought-provoking writer, and that intelligence always informs his writing. As though all that were not sufficient to consign him to the penman's garret he also writes science fiction. He is an adornment to our culture in general and we SF enthusiasts are the richer for his existence whether or not we like his work.

Once I was a Brian Aldiss fan. I can recall the day I ceased to be a fan and became an admirer only, the day I bought the Corgi edition of The Hand-Reared Boy. Then (and to a certain extent even now) I harboured the suspicion that it was an attempt to garner some well-deserved cash with a cheap and meretricious piece of titillation. Good luck to you, I thought, but I didn't like the novel. For a start it didn't titillate me, and it still doesn't. I just don't get off on the aseptic masturbation of little boys. I am unashamed to admit to being a romantic. I like to read about human emotion and I don't like the emotion in The Hand-Reared Boy, which is relentless self-obsession. The hero, one Horatio Stubbs, has but one concern throughout the entire novel — beating his meat, and if he can persuade some female to substitute her vagina for his fist so much the better. Despite his petit bourgeois compulsion to wrap it all up in mists of romantic love no complaisant female has any human reality for Horry. He is utterly selfish, no more capable of comprehending real love than of forgetting his rampant prick for long enough to give it. For Horry there is only one real human being in creation, and he's holding him. He is a wanker in every sense of that multifaceted word.

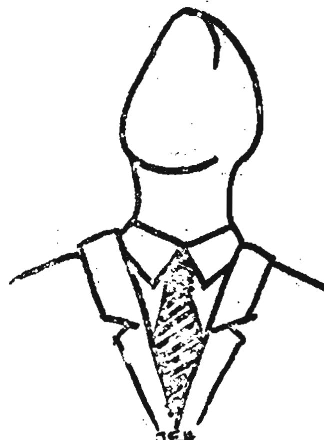
Fourteen years on, I have had the opportunity to re-read the novel, and I still find it a bleak and bitter tale into which — as in all three novels in this omnibus volume — Aldiss only rarely allows his literary style to intrude (the main narrative reads very much like expletives undeleted memoirs in a tabloid newspaper, with all that implies for "fine writing") and when he does allow his fancy to fly, however briefly, the monosyllabic coarseness of the rest of the work is shown up in even starker light.

A Soldier Erect and A Rude Awakening, the second and third novels in the "saga", see our minor public school prig injected into the rude and licentious soldiery on whose shoulders fell the task of showing Jojo where he got off. The years and the geographical switch do little to make Horry more attractive — it isn't much of a feat to be a little less mindlessly xenophobic as most of his fellows. He is a mean, spiteful, selfish bastard, and never is this shown more than in the conclusion when, Blighty bound, he leaves the Chinese whore he has half-heartedly convinced himself he loves with the parting present of having it away with Margey's chief rival. It is in an uncharacteristic burst of honesty that he admits to himself that he enjoys Katie Chae more than he ever enjoyed Margey for the simple reason that she treats him like the animated meat he always subconsciously regarded Margey as being.

Rude and licentious soldiery in the Orient is of course Leslie Thomas country, and I wonder how many bought the novels — and will buy this volume — in the expectation of finding such work? But Aldiss isn't trying to do a Virgin Soldiers. He has essayed something considerably more subtle and deeper-reaching than the appearance indicates. We meet Horry as a mean and nasty little boy and leave him a moderately less mean, not really nasty and considerably larger boy. He might look like a man and he may have done a man's work but inside he is a boy and, what is more, he has the wit to know it, somewhere under that thick-skinned bluster of the Englishman among the lesser races. That knowledge is the poison in Horry and it is the skill of Aldiss to disguise this unpleasant portrait so that we will probably not recognise ourselves.

I like Horry in the way I like, say, Dennis Thatcher. Not one bit. He's a dishonest, canting, sentimental philistine determined always to run away from himself. You'll meet him in golf clubs, rugby clubs and saloon bars up and down the land. He is everything I dislike in a man and by the end of this volume Aldiss has me sympathising with him, wanting to understand him. Now that is authorship of a very high order. As I said at the beginning of this piece, it was these novels which put my status as a Brian Aldiss fan to the sword. They have not reinstated me as a fan. To be a fan you must like the work, and I do not like these novels. On the other hand, they have only deepened my respect for and admiration of him as a writer.

There is one ironic feature of this volume, however. Rather than Aldiss's subsequent SF works being marketed on the strength of these novels, they have been reissued under the "Aldiss" logo to which we have become accustomed on the Helliconia novels. Is that justice, or is that justice?



Carlos Orfila Nunez — BY-WAYS ON THE SHINING PATH (Backwoods Books, 576pp, £4·95)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

This is a double first for me. Before this book arrived through the post I had heard of neither the author nor the publisher. The publisher appears to be one of the small operations, like Salamander, Carcanet and Bloodaxe, which have been springing up very impressively over the past couple of years. And, in the light of the Arts Council's current disregard for literature, are likely to disappear just as rapidly in the near future. In this case it would be a major disaster, since Backwoods seem to have a bold and innovative approach that is obvious from their initial list. Concentrating exclusively on translations from European and South American literature, they are offering a previously unknown novel by Brecht, a collection of short stories from Nikos Kazantzakis, a volume of poetry from Nabokov that was apparently written even before he went into exile, and this novel.

Nunez, as I said, is a new name to me, and this novel, first published in 1981, is apparently the only work of his to see print so far. Nevertheless, his impact on South American literature is clear from the fact that this volume is complete with a brief, one-page introduction by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and a twenty-page preface by Jorge Luis Borges. Both praise the novel almost to excess. Marquez finds in it echoes of the fantastic elements in Shakespeare's comedies and Goethe's tragedies. Borges, on the other hand, highlights the strong realism of the novel, and places it very firmly in the contemporary Latin American tradition.

After such a curtain-raiser, of course, it would be a surprise if the novel itself did not prove something of an anti-climax. Indeed, I found the first hundred pages or so very slow and heavy-going until, almost imperceptibly, I became aware of what was going on. Nunez is a writer of almost too much subtlety. At no point does he actually tell the reader what is going on, leaving us to draw our own conclusions from the often ambiguous clues that are scattered throughout the text.

What we are presented with is a small peasant village in the remote Andes of the writer's native Peru. It is a poor place, almost entirely removed from the twentieth century, and the largely Indian population scratches a meagre living from the barren soil. Much of the novel is taken up with a minute examination of their day-to-day struggle for existence, written in a beautiful and vivid prose, but which is almost too heart-rending to be taken in such concentrated doses. In particular, we are caught up in the lives of the Baptista family — mother, son and two sisters — as they face such everyday occurrences as love, loss, hunger and anguish. I think that this must count as one of the most remarkable group portraits in modern literature.

Yet the crumbling adobe of the village and the parched fields that surround it are also crossed and recrossed by the warring factions that divide Peru today — the guerilla forces of the Sendero Luminoso ("Shining Path") rebel movement, and the military forces of the government. The two are presented as being indistinguishable in their fanaticism and casual cruelty.

Both groups, villagers and warmakers, play out their destinies upon the same stage, yet hardly seem to affect each other. When the two do touch — a wounded rebel sheltered and tended by one of the two Baptista sisters, then betrayed to the government by the other; a neighbour tortured and killed by members of the Sendero Luminoso — it is with a sense of shock and unreality that seems wrong. After all, it is the lack of interaction that should seem unreal.

Then, slowly, you realise that though the two sides occupy the same territory they are not actually in the same world. Nunez himself does not use the term, and I suspect that he would strongly disapprove of it, but I can think of no better way of putting it than to say that one of two is actually in the land of Faerie. And it is not the one you might expect.

The current style of South American literature has been given the soubriquet "magical realism". It is intended to betoken a heightened sense of the real, but in the case of By-Ways On The Shining Path the painstaking reality of the text actually disguises a flight of startlingly original fantasy. Those who, like me, have found the dividing line between fantasy and reality too crudely drawn in too many novels will welcome the freshness of Nunez's work. There is almost no dividing line here; novel and reader slip back and forth between the two, often without any awareness of the transition, and in such a way that the two become inseparably intertwined. The denouement of the principal love story in the real world is absolutely dependent upon events in the land of faerie. The escalating war that rages in the fantasy land could not reach the conclusion it does without intervention from reality.

This is a remarkable novel, by turns touching and very funny, yet in the end it is the sheer scale of Nunez's imagination that leaves me gasping in admiration. There are few undisputed masterpieces in the history of literature, but this novel is surely destined to take its place among them. It is a tremendous novel that I cannot begin to recommend strongly enough.

Alberto Manguel (ed.) — BLACK WATER: THE ANTHOLOGY OF THE FANTASTIC (Picador, 967pp, £4·95)

Reviewed by Judith Hanna

These are not fantasy stories: the "fantastic" is a different genre, one consciously literary rather than popular. In his brief Foreword, Manguel draws the distinction thus: "Unlike tales of fantasy (those chronicles of mundane life in mythical surroundings...) fantastic literature deals with the impossible seeping into the possible, what Wallace Stevens calls 'black water seeping into reality'".

The great theorist of the fantastic is the structuralist Tzvetan Todorov, who defined it as "the hesitation experienced by a being who knows only natural laws, faced with an apparently supernatural event". Ambiguity and paradox are the essence of the fantastic, catching the reader between the "uncanny", which can be explained away rationally, and the "marvellous", which admits no natural explanation. Todorov also asserts that the fantastic is essentially a nineteenth century genre, that in this hurly-burly smartarse century it is no longer possible

to build up to the essential hesitation in the reader. It's true that these stories do share a curiously old-fashioned tone, uniformly reasoned and gravely punctilious in narration. But the seventy-three stories making up this collection include as many written this century as last: here is proof that the fantastic is not as dead as Todorov declares it.

The list of authors includes many famous names: Tennessee Williams, L. P. Hartley, Flann O'Brien, Rudyard Kipling, Saki, Wells, Verne, Ray Bradbury, Ursula LeGuin. Latin American names are prominent: Borges, Bioyo Casares, Calvino (born in Cuba), Cortazar, Silvina Ocampo, Pinyera, Quiroga (and Manguel himself is an expatriate Argentine). This is fitting, because it is in Latin America that much of the liveliest and most original modern fantasy (in its broadest sense) is being written. The stories chosen are good (at least, those that I have read are good); but if there are few disappointments then, equally, there is an absence of high spots. This evenness, together with the number of stories, makes it difficult to pick out individual works for comment.

Although it's not the way to review it, picking out a story here and there at random is the way to read this book; this is a volume for dipping into and coming back to. It's a sad fact that a surfeit of excellent fiction is more indigestible than the equivalent wordage of banality; the banal doesn't demand that you allow the time to chew it over mentally, like a cud. As Sue Thomason pointed out in Paperback Inferno 44 (October 1983), the banal tends to be so insubstantial that you can bolt a whole thick volume in one sitting and still be left looking around for something to read. The stories in Black Water are not banal, although their urbane tone mimics banality: "These parasites of feathered creatures, diminutive in their habitual environment, reach enormous proportions under certain conditions. Human blood seems particularly favourable to them, and it is not rare to encounter them in feather pillows". (From "The Feather Pillow", by Horacio Quiroga.) It's the matter-of-fact narration of horrible or inexplicable occurrences, the tone of "this is what happened, whether you can believe it or not", which produces the hesitation between the uncanny and the marvellous that Todorov pinpointed as the essential feature of the fantastic.

It's almost impossible to pin down a genre in a neat definition, because the best stories of a genre are always those that play games with whatever formulae, boundaries or guidelines might have been previously laid down. Bearing in mind that whatever might be said to characterise a genre can amount to no more than a generalisation, a sweeping description without any prescriptive force, it might be interesting to compare and contrast the fantastic with and against other genres. Doing so, it seems to me that the fantastic lies closest to mystery (or detective) fiction, with common or Lovecraftian horror as its gross and vulgar cousin. It has a little in common with science fiction, less with fantasy.

The essence of the fantastic is mystery, which must remain unsolved and insoluble. The narrowness of the gap between cerebral detection and the fantastic is clearly pointed up in G. K. Chesterton's "Father Brown" stories, in which Chesterton constructs a puzzle that seems to require a miraculous or mystical explanation until his dowdy clerical detective with down-to-earth scepticism advances the unmagical, rational solution. Until the solution is set out, we are in a "fantastic" story; only after the solution is unfurled onto the page does the tale become one of detection. Also verging on the fantastic is that classic puzzler, the "locked room" mystery, which sets up an impossibility: a murdered body where no one could have got at it to commit the murder, or if they had could not have got away. No one except a ghost, perhaps. Or some kind of spirit. Or magic. A locked room puzzle that remains unsolved belongs to the fantastic.

Both detection and the fantastic depend on law and order. The rule of law and order, in both social and natural realms, is explicitly reaffirmed by the detective's inevitable neat wrapping-up of the "mystery". Whatever hints of the strange and unknowable the writer may have thrown in to complicate the puzzle all boil down to human greed, hatred, deception, overstepping the social convention "thou shalt not kill", and not being allowed to get away with it. More than most brands of fiction, detection depends on its ending for effect: because we know that there is a perfectly rational explanation coming, the detective mystery or crime does not really challenge our faith in law and order. The "mystery" is just a conjuror's illusion, and as we follow it we try to catch the sleight of hand, to second guess the writer. As a puzzle, it's less demanding than a crossword because even if we don't pick out a single clue we are still presented with the full solution.

The fantastic, by contrast, does challenge law and order by denying any neat solution to its mystery. The ending does not reaffirm natural law and familiar order but calls our faith in them into question. If we all had perfect faith in one indisputable, monolithic world view, then creating a story which questioned it would be simple enough. But, given half a chance, most of us will at least half-believe in anecdotes about ghosts, telepathy, strange coincidences, and will earnestly analyse dreams for an arcane message. To achieve an ending that leaves us questioning our faith in a rational world, the writer of the fantastic has first to reaffirm our belief that rationality and order do rule the world, or at least that world where the story is set. This, I suspect, is one reason for the "old-fashioned" feel of these stories — it's easier to nostalgically believe that years ago were more ordered, more rational than either the present is or the future will be. But whereas the neat ending of the detective story retrospectively does much of the work for its writer, the non-ending of a fantastic story — left up in the air as a question mark — requires of the writer the tricky task of lulling us into acceptance of the world we ought to believe in, persuading us of it so strongly that the writer can pull the carpet out from under our feet and leave us hanging, still more than half believing in the illusion of a rational world. The fantastic is thus the subversive inverse of detective fiction.

While the solution of the detective story draws us into the social world, the non-solution of the fantastic story leaves us staring at the world of nature, which science exists to explain. I've been arguing that the fantastic must, initially, create an illusory world which, so it convinces us, runs according to rational

and knowable rules. That is also what SF exists to do. But from this world-building the fantastic veers off into its own subtle-as-quicksand territory of denying the rule of reason and science. This is ground that SF could, and sometimes does, venture onto (for example, Chris Priest, Lem's Solaris). Thus the small overlap between these two genres, each a separate development of the speculative impulse.

Lucius Shepard — GREEN EYES (Ace, 275pp, $2.95)

Reviewed by Dave Langford

Once upon a time (1968-1971), Terry Carr edited the Ace SF Specials, wangling some strange and wondrous novels into print. Trying to recreate a phenomenon rarely works (what was that about bathing in the same river twice?): I had mixed feelings about Carr's 1984 relaunch of the Ace Specials, perhaps because his Universe anthologies seemed to have become "sameish". I always was a lousy prophet.

In the event, four Ace Specials bulked large in the Nebula recommendations: William Gibson's Neuromancer, Kim Stanley Robinson's The Wild Shore, Howard Waldrop's Them Bones and Lucius Shepard's Green Eyes, the latter two missing the final ballot. Green Eyes deserved to be there.

It's a novel to be read rather than summarised: the plot has a satisfying shape more intricate than the straight-line progression one expects from a first növel. At each new turn, hardened fans will think they see the trick of it and stride confidently for the exit...but somehow the path has given an unexpected wriggle into novelty. Impressively unpredictable: this guy has an original mind.

The initial premise is science fantasy, approaching the zombie myth rather as Matheson tackled the vampire or Blish the werewolf: ectoplasm coaxed into the test tube. In a flourish of pseudoscience, decoctions of graveyard bacteria revivify the newly dead by "transcriptional processing of the corpse's genetic complement". Brief synthetic afterlives run rapidly into a green stop-signal as the bioluminescent bacteria consume the brain, burn down the optic nerve: "green eyes". The scene is set for our "zombie" protagonist's escape from the experimental necropolis...for strange talents of perception and healing which tie in with the zombie transformation (Shepard skirts the common pitfall of boosting such abilities into dull omnipotence)...for the logical intrusion of voodoo cultists with their own rancid theology and an understanding born of "tradition" rather than "science", if in this case there's a difference.

Such drastic foreshortening does Shepard an injustice. Though never tedious, his telling is lush, leisurely and oblique, moving surely between rational and irrational facets of a world seen through green eyes. "The wind unnerved her. Despite her rational understanding of it, charged ions, vacating air masses, she had the feeling it could carry the paper bearing her explanations off to a realm where explanations were no longer relevant." The plot itself spirals into that realm, yet somehow still hangs together.

Flaws? Of course. As Randall Garrett said, "a novel is a prose work of some length that has something wrong with it". Shepard's flood of imagery can overwhelm, leading to murky passages in the final third of the novel. As early as page 8, a "zombie" therapist's written report features such clinical stuff as "Green fireballs lodged in their eye sockets, their minds going nova with the joy of a lifetime crammed into a few minutes": intended to convey the therapist's loss of control, this merely indicates the author's. By and large, though, Green Eyes is triff.

Bogstandardovich Mub — THE SHRIEK OF DIVINITY (Avon, 103pp, $2.50)

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Afficionados of really hard SF will need no introduction to either Polish academician Mub or his mechanical hero for all events, Capacious Turd the Decca Navigator. In The Shriek Of Divinity, Turd, who has hitherto been the protagonist in a large number of stories exploring the further reaches of quantum mechanics, existential philosophy and the shelf-life of brookwurst, has his ultimate encounter. He meets God. As might be expected from a writer such as Mub, God is anything but the infinitely kindly if slightly irascible, immortal, ineffable, omniscient bearded old codger with a natty line in designer bedsheets as depicted in the Judaeo-Christian tradtion. The God met by Turd is a machine and Man is truly made in the image of God.

Turd is of course a coarse-grained, foulmouthed cosmic detective of such incompetence that he makes Clouseau look like Sam Spade. On the other hand, he is lucky, improbably lucky. If he tossed a two-headed coin and called "tails" he would win. Whether the win was worth the game is another matter...

One of the regular features of Mub's work is impenetrable plotting. The Shriek Of Divinity sets new standards, even for Mub, of labyrinthine incomprehensibility, so much so that I that sometimes wondered whether "Bogstandardovich Mub" was not in fact a nom de plume of a psychotic computer in the Faculty of Physics at the University of Gdansk. Even if he is human, Mub must surely make use of a powerful database to keep track of the endless Moebius intertwinings of character and plot. At one point even Turd confesses himself baffled, something this vain, pompous little machine has never done before. He also mentions the literary techniques of William Burroughs, which may be significant.

By the time I reached the end of this very short volume, my brain hurt, although all was redeemed on the very last page in which we are spared any future stories about Turd. Drawn into interdimensional space Turd tinkers, as is his wont, with something he didn't ought to tinker with, and as a result the space-time continuum is abolished. It is at this point that God appears to Turd and informs him that the entire cosmos is comrpised in each individual and, since he is the last individual left after his accidental extinction of Creation, doesn't he think he ought to do something about making amends. Whether any sane human being would want to live in a universe created from Capacious Turd the Decca Navigator is a topic on which I prefer not to speculate.

Devotee though I am of Mub, this one is for insomniacs only.

ALSO RECEIVED

Keith Roberts — THE FURIES (Penguin, 220pp, £1·95): his first novel, and now a desperately dated one, following too closely in John Wyndham's footsteps to have much to commend it beyond its prose style and its slightly less cosy feel.

Michael Moorcock — THE GOLDEN BARGE (New English Library, 189pp, £2·50): Moorcock's first novel, written in 1958 but unpublished until 1979, now reprinted twice by NEL; the story of a man pursuing an elusive golden barge down an endless river, a plot structure intended to illustrate the essential futility of searching for meaning outside oneself (at least according to Moorcock), and with an introduction by M. John Harrison remarking rather unnecessarily on the themes, allusions and even names that appeared in Moorcock's subsequent fiction. Dull? Not at all; those who haven't read The Golden Barge should do so immediately. (And would someone please tell me why I keep thinking I've written a similar notice to this at least once before?)

Robert Silverberg — LORD OF DARKNESS (Bantam, 613pp, $3·95; Corgi, 613pp, £2·95): "Shogun in Africa," says Graham Andrews, adding that "it started out well enough, but soon bogged down in wild situations and fantastic coincidences".

Frank Herbert — DUNE MESSIAH, CHILDREN OF DUNE, GOD-EMPEROR OF DUNE (New English Library; 222pp, 380pp and 454pp respectively; £2·25 for the first, £2·95 each for the other two): umpteenth reprints with vile new covers by one Gerry Grace — I mean, at least Bruce Pennington's stuff had a certain atmosphere about it... There's also Heretics Of Dune (508pp, £2·95), which will be reviewed in full in the next issue.

Anne McCaffrey — DINOSAUR PLANET 2: THE SURVIVORS (Orbit, 283pp, £1·95): well, I suppose it's one way of keeping a series going — stick some of the characters from the first book into suspended animation, then bring them out again a generation or so later to replay events all over again. And aren't the pterodactyls that populate this planet just sublimated dragons anyway?

H. P. Lovecraft — H. P. LOVECRAFT OMNIBUS 1: AT THE MOUNTAINS OF MADNESS (Granada, 301pp, £2·50): a volume (the first of a projected series of three, it would appear) containing both the title novel and The Case Of Charles Dexter Ward, plus the introduction from the original Panther edition of At The Mountains Of Madness referring to stuff that will now presumably appear elsewhere. Not that it matters much, for who can read Lovecraft's ridiculously overwrought stories in this day and age?

Sharon Baker — QUARRELING, THEY MET THE DRAGON (Avon, 267pp, $2·95): extraordinary fantasy novel of quest and escape which is largely taken up by a homosexual relationship between the two male protagonists in which the younger man keeps wanking off or trying to wank off the older every dozen pages or so. A fantasy in more than one sense of the word, doubtless.

E. C. Tubb — THE TERRA DATA (Arrow, 172pp, £1·75): after Graham Andrews, what is there left to say...

LETTERS

Very few letters this time, no doubt due to the delayed distribution of the previous mailing. But here's ALLAN LLOYD:

"I feel that Brian Aldiss was justified in objecting to Mary Gentle's review of Greybeard. The novel was concerned not with the reason for the sterility of the human race but with its effects on the ageing population and it was unfair to condemn it on that basis. In Inferno 48, Jeremy Crampton was very unkind to Kim Stanley Robinson's The Wild Shore for similar reasons. That novel examined the adolescent experiences of a group of characters in a primitive society with echoes of a former glory in the ruins about them. It is an adventure novel with touches of Mark Twain about it, and I found it a highly promising first novel. Crampton dismissed it because he does not believe that people could ever rebuild after a disaster of a nuclear war, and because it does not take account of the nuclear winter theory.

"I know that you and many of your reviewers belong to CND and I sympathise with many of CND's aims myself (although I am not without fears for the consequences of unilateral nuclear disarmament), but using book reviews as platforms for anti-nuclear propaganda is very unfair to authors who wish to use the conventional post-nuclear scenario as a metaphor for the breakdown of our society.

"It is one of CND's main propaganda arguments that there will be no survivors after a nuclear war, and the nuclear winter theory was seized upon with glee to back up the disarmament case. However, it is only a theory; maybe true, maybe not, and each side continues to produce its own expert witnesses. Until it is categorically proven, then it is valid to write SF stories in which it may not be true. Otherwise, if we do assume that a nuclear war means the end of the human race then we have to condemn all SF works with a post-nuclear setting — but is it fair to criticise Walter Miller's A Canticle For Leibowitz, Angela Carter's Heroes And Villains, Edgar Pangborn's Davy and many of Philip K. Dick's novels merely because they are set in societies which are recovering from nuclear disaster?

"As Aldiss says, science fiction works best as metaphor, and it is on that level that it should often be judged. It is too easy for a book review to turn into a sermon about the reviewer's own beliefs while ignoring what the author is actually saying."

In the first place, the only way in which the nuclear winter theory could be "categorically" proved would be by fighting a nuclear war and seeing what happened: an obviously absurd method of proof, and one I'm sure you didn't intend. But — in the second place — the nature of the scientific method is such that nothing can ever be proved, categorically or otherwise: as per

Karl Popper's doctrine of falsifiability, scientists can only attempt to disprove theories by putting them to the test and seeing whether there's any data for which they can't account or any prediction that they can't fulfill; if the weight of accumulated evidence supports rather than refutes a theory, it is regarded as "not disproven". Thus to refer to a theory as "only" a theory is meaningless — would you level such a charge against the theory of evolution, for example?

I'm conscious, though, that this is to respond only to your lesser point, and to avoid your main one: that reviewers should reply to an author's intentions rather than use the review as an excuse to air their own views. Yes; this is undeniable, and in a perfect world would always be the case. But one has to take account of the fact that no reviewer approaches a book absolutely cold: certain expectations will have been aroused, certain assumptions formulated, a certain mood generated — generated as much by the book itself (and by the book's author) as by the outside world in which the act of reviewing is taking place. Thus, to take a particular example, it's almost inevitable that in the current international political climate a review of a new post-nuclear novel such as Robinson's The Wild Shore will have something to say about both contemporary nuclear concerns and what account the novel takes of them. It's also inevitable that older novels, such as A Canticle For Leibowitz and Greybeard, written at a time when we knew less than we do now about our nuclear prospects, will tend to be "reinterpreted" in the light of current concerns; that although the novels' and the authors' intentions will be forever unchanged, the responses of the reviewers — and of the readers — will change with the times. As they will for every other novel, whether it touches on the nuclear question or not.

This is of course to repeat some of what Mary Gentle said in her letter in the previous issue, and from it you'll gather that I have some sympathy with her point of view. This doesn't mean that my defence of it is absolute; as editor, I have to seek a balance between the author's and the reviewer's intentions, weighing each potential "sermon" on its merits. It's something of a dilemma, I admit, and one on which anyone is welcome to comment.

On to less weighty matters, with CHRIS BAILEY:

"Nothing much to say about Inferno 52 other than to offer a personal endorsement of the letter from 'Vincent Omniaveritas' in which he puts forward the theory of a new American 'garage band' school of writers. In a review in Vector 122, I noted vaguely that 'something is happening in America' but couldn't pin it down. 'Vincent' provides some useful pointers — the energy and the reinterpretation of genre from within genre, and the inclination to stay within it.

"The first novel by one of these writers, Green Eyes by Lucius Shepard, is a case in point. He has a knockout of an idea, sets it up neatly, and then runs away from it, scurrying off into the safety of the genre undergrowth. But why, oh why, did the massed (?) voters of the BSFA nominate for the Award the only duff story he seems to have published during 1984? 'Salvador' and 'The Night Of White Bhairab' are both superior to 'The Man Who Painted The Dragon Griaule'; and Edward James recommended 'A Traveller's Tale'."

Well, actually, of Shepard's three contributions to F & SF last year, I much preferred the one that made the ballot: a strange idea, with a great deal of atmosphere and originality, well executed and very memorable. "Salvador" and "The Night Of White Bhairab", by contrast, struck me as all too typical of the horror stories that appear in F & SF, with only the difference of their settings to mark them out from the others.

But mention of Edward James's column brings us to DAVID BARRETT, responding to the Norman Spinrad quotes therein:

"Yes, there is a difference between British and American SF, and it's becoming more and more marked. Too many American authors, including Asimov and Heinlein, are still following the routes laid down by Asimov and Heilnlein twenty or thirty years ago. It strikes me that new British SF, on the other hand, is being written by people who have grown up on the usual diet, have contributed to a greater or lesser extent to fandom, and have outgrown the Star Wars mentality that still thrills our transatlantic friends. In short, they're much the same as the rest of us in the BSFA and, as Paul Kincaid says later in Inferno 52, they're looking to the borderlands, and beyond the borders, of what SF is 'supposed to be about'.

"I would happily limit myself to an all-British diet is only sufficient books were published. They aren't because a publisher's priority is to make money; publishing is a business, not a charity, and British publishers think (I believe wrongly) that they will only make a profit from the tried and trusted giants of American SF. So they neglect the home pool of talent. Two or three years ago, Chris Priest had nothing in print. The Affirmation was one of the most brilliant 'borderland' SF novels I have ever read, yet I understand he had problems getting it published — it didn't have spaceships and rayguns, did it? I really wonder how publishers can be so naive, so incredibly outdated, so conservative. 'It's what the public want!' they cry, conveniently forgetting that the public don't actually have a great deal of choice since it can't buy what isn't on the shelves, isn't given the opportunity to buy paperbacks by British SF writers. Next time you're in a bookshop count how many books there are by Coney, Cowper, Garner, Hodder-Williams, Holdstock, Kilworth, Langford, Priest, Roberts Shaw and Watson. Have they written the occasional more-than-passable SF novel? Or two, or five, or ten? Then where are they? Out in the cold, that's where, while Asimov, Heinlein, Herbert and McCaffrey are nice and snug (and smug?) and taking up all the space on the shelves instead, with more individual titles each than the sum total of all the copies of every title of all the above."

Contentious stuff, that, with parts of which I strongly disagree and to which I long to respond; but time presses and space is short (and I took up more than enough of the early part of this letter column as it is). Next time, then, when others will doubtless be rushing to reply as well.

WAHF: Kevin McVeigh and Vincent Omniaveritas.

"FIRST LET ME INTRODUCE THE BAND THAT WILL BE PLAYING TONIGHT."

PHILL PROBERT -- CHAIRMAN. Phill was born in the year of the dissipated kipper and has worked at Andromeda Bookshop. He has been involved with four previous Novacons and was chairman of Novacon 13. He is the artist behind Zoltan and edits Hot Waffles.

EUNICE PEARSON -- PUBLICATIONS. Eunice describes herself as a Sensuous Chocophile and is devoted to the noble art of chocolate consumption. When not eating chocolate she edits a few fanzines,Calaban,Brigante,Egregious,Hybrid, Gloria Mundi and Ichthyosaurus. She is in 4 Apa's and has been involved with three Novacons.

MARTIN TUDOR -- HOTEL LIAISON. Martin's hyperactive activities have included: helping to run Seacon '84 and Novacon 14 and increasing circulation of his fanzine 'Empties' to the 400+ mark. He is the founder of the MiSFiTs and can be seen moving at Mach 2.

GRAHAM POOLE -- REGISTRATIONS. Graham was at the original Novacon ! A prolific faned in the late seventies and was at the 1977 Eastercon at the De Vere,though he can't remember much about it other than himself running around in a gorilla suit.

LAWRENCE LAMBOURNE -- SPORTING EVENTS. Lawrence has done one fanzine 'Wet Beavers' and has been wanted from the Hit squad ever since ! He is an unassuming gentleman whose snooker abilities will be ideal for Novacon this year.

CAROL PEARSON -- ARTSHOW. The more sensible member of the Pearson family. Likes quiet music and has an artistic temperament. She is a student of enviromental studies and is in the Women's Apa.

KEVAN WHITE -- FILMS. Baby-face White first attended Novacon 10 and has been a gopher ever since. Despite that problem, this year sees his first time on a Novacon committee.

We are planning this year's Novacon to be hopefully the best ever. However we need one vital ingredient:- YOU !! If your appetite has been whetted, then fill in the form below and send it off with a cheque or P.O. to the address on the form. And we will look forward to seeing you there.

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NOVACON
Fifteen

1st - 3rd November 1985
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GUESTS of HONOUR:
Dave Langford
James White

It is a sobering thought that it all started fifteen years ago, with a virtual unknown in the GOH spot, and an attendance of something like 73-and-a-half fans (One couple had a baby there -- no, not as part of the programme, they brought it with them.) and everyone was sure that it would be a one-off (the con, not the baby) and November conventions were a ridiculous idea.
Ah, yes, I remember it well.

-- JAMES WHITE.

I'd been hoping for a while that someone would try having Novacon in the De Vere (we enjoyed the 1975 and 1977 Eastercons there), so am also cheered by your venue.
I've already started to draft a Novacon speech tentatively entitled "Nominalism, Epistemology and Cognitive Estrangement : the Existential Resonancces of Big-Breasted Nurses in the Fictional Paradigms of James White". Should be good for a reprint in FOUNDATION.

-- DAVE LANGFORD.

GUEST SCIENCE FICTION AUTHORS, SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY FILMS, LIVELY TALKS, ART SHOW, FAN PROGRAMME, BOOK ROOM AND A WHOLE LOT MORE. COME ALONG AND BE A PART OF THE FUTURE.

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